



# Babies for bling

## Are teenage girls having children to access grants?

**Rebecca Hodes,<sup>1</sup> DPhil**

**Elona Toska,<sup>2</sup> MSc**

**Lesley Gittings,<sup>3</sup> MPhil**

<sup>1</sup> *AIDS and Society Research Unit, University of Cape Town, South Africa*

<sup>2</sup> *Department of Social Policy and Intervention, Oxford University, United Kingdom*

<sup>3</sup> *School of Public Health and Family Medicine, University of Cape Town, South Africa*

This is a story that is often told: a young woman from a poor family has had a baby so that she can access the child support grant. Then, instead of spending the money on her family, she dumps the baby with her mother or aunt. She uses the grant to buy trendy clothes, beauty treatments and booze. The state has provided this young mother with money to care for her child, but she is wasting it on selfish luxuries.

Among nurses and social workers, alarm about the misuse of social grants is growing. For many health and social workers, it appears that young people are increasingly using grants for income, as a substitute for formal employment. Faced with high rates of unemployment, young people are unable to convert their educational qualifications into salaried work.

Frontline health and society service providers are concerned that social grants are providing a kind of 'cop out' for these young people, who now look to state welfare, rather than educational advancement or formal employment, as their main sources of financial support.<sup>(1,2)</sup>

As one senior nurse working in an Eastern Cape Day Hospital explained: 'Our community don't want to work ... Government pays R330 for the child support grant. A child costs more than R330, but it's the mentality.' (Anonymous senior nurse, Eastern Cape Day Hospital, 6 October 2014)

The allegation is that young women with few prospects for economic advancement are using their fertility as a means of profit. The child support grant is incentivising this reckless and

corrupt behaviour. For teenagers, this is particularly harmful. Pregnant learners drop out of school to care for their babies, and often don't return to formal education. They earn a meager 'income' from the grant, but end their formal education to care for their children.<sup>(3)</sup> Dropping out of formal education may close down these teenagers' best chance for a brighter future. And once they have dropped out due to pregnancy, it may be difficult to return.

### **Nurses' and social workers' perceptions**

Frontline providers, including nurses and social workers, witness this misuse of public funds, and it frustrates and angers them. Through providing services to these young women, including ante-

natal care, nurses feel that they are part of the system that allows, in fact rewards, irresponsibility. Because of the laws that protect women's rights – such as access to contraception and abortion – nurses must uphold patients' rights. But they can do little when patients appear to be violating their moral responsibilities as mothers and as citizens – neglecting their children, abusing state resources, locking their elderly families into another cycle of child care, and damaging their own futures.

The Mzantsi Wakho research study has documented nurses' accounts of the abuse of the child support grant by young women. The study, which focuses on adherence to medicines and sexual health among adolescents, is based in 170 neighbourhoods in the Eastern Cape,<sup>(4,5)</sup> and covers 53 health care facilities, including clinics, day hospitals and hospitals.

In addition to working with adolescents and nurses, the researchers have worked closely with social workers and the families of adolescents to understand the challenges confronted by each of these groups. The study has also engaged teenagers in and around their homes, or alternative spaces such as community centres and libraries, where they are more free to express themselves than they would be in classrooms or clinics.

Between 2012 and 2015, over 1 000 hours were spent speaking to nurses in the Eastern Cape about their work with teenage patients. To date, researchers have interviewed over 1500 adolescents about their experiences of health and social services.

Workshops and focus groups have encouraged teenage participants and their caregivers to use other forms of expression, rather than words. Through a range of participatory exercises (includ-



Figure 1: The 'Dream Consultation': A participatory research activity with HIV-positive teenagers. In this exercise, teen participants in the Mzantsi Wakho study modelled their perfect clinic consultation, from the perspectives of both health care workers and patients (Eastern Cape, March 2014).

ing drawings and drama), the study has explored how teenagers use health and social services in the Eastern Cape.<sup>[1]</sup>

In terms of the child support grant, our emerging findings revealed vast differences in what teenagers and adults believed and described. There were also powerful distinctions between what young men and young women thought about whether young women were having 'babies for bling' to profit from the child support grant.

### Contrasting claims

In focus group discussions with young men, young women were blamed for abusing the welfare system and exploiting their sexual desirability. As a 23-year-old man from Mdantsane described:

*'In these days teenagers at the age of 16 and 18 are getting pregnant just to*

*get the grant ... All they care about is having fun and nothing else ... Some of them get pregnant on purpose to get the grant money from government ... But now they use the money that was meant to feed their babies to have fun ... go to braai places and buy alcohol ... They say, "success is all about making profit", so by having babies, they are making a profit'. (Anonymous interviewee, Mdantsane, 28 July 2014)*

Young women were alleged to be using sex not for subsistence or survival, but to buy luxuries and fund a reckless lifestyle. The caregivers of teenagers echoed these claims. One grandmother explained:

*'The problem now with our youth is that they get out of hand ... They have many children which are going to be your responsibility as the grandmother. [The mother] will leave the kids with you and again wander the streets ... What*

<sup>1</sup>The study protocol was approved by ethics committees at participating universities, provincial departments of health and education, and participating facilities.

am I going to do with the house full of kids? ... I am the one looking after [my daughter's] kids. She takes the money and drinks it.' (Anonymous interviewee, Mdantsane, 24 December 2014)

While many adults and adolescents thought that teenage mothers were wasting the child support grant on luxuries, teenage mothers in the study disagreed. In interviews and focus groups, they described how these common claims clashed with their own thoughts and experiences. Through participatory research exercises, young mothers demonstrated how they used the child support grant to care for their babies. They explained the difficulties they faced in supporting a child on R330 per month, often in contexts of acute socio-economic deprivation.

In contrast to allegations of 'pregnancy for profit', young women described the financial and social challenges that

pregnancy and young motherhood entailed:

Interviewer: 'How is it to have a baby?'

Female participant I (age 19): 'Yho!'

Interviewer: 'It's difficult?'

Participant I: 'Yes, it's difficult.'

Interviewer: 'Why do you say it's difficult?'

Participant I: 'Because I don't have a life. It disturbs you as well. I'm supposed to be doing my matric but I'm not in school because of the baby.'

(Anonymous interviewee, Dimbaza, 19 December 2014)

The fear that girls will be 'left behind', will 'drop out' of the race for social transformation and demographic redress, that their futures are dimmer, holds powerful sway among both young men and women.

While motherhood was valued and aspired towards by teenage girls

and young women in this research, it was also balanced against other hopes for educational and professional advancement, and financial stability.<sup>(6)</sup> An interview with teenage girls revealed a focus on finishing school, and a fear that pregnancy would derail advancement:

Interviewer: 'Is it right for people to fall pregnant?'

Female participant II (age 16): 'No, you must learn first.'

Interviewer: 'And then you can fall pregnant?'

Female participant II (age 16): 'Then work first and have everything so that you won't depend on anyone.'

Interviewer: 'Oh okay, so before you get pregnant what will you have?'

Female participant II: 'A house and a car first.'

Interviewer: 'What do you want to be when you grow up?'

Female participant II: 'A doctor.'



Figure 2: How do you spend your grant? Using plastic chips, an adolescent mother maps out how she spends her child support grant. Food was the biggest expenditure, followed by nappies, transport to fetch medicines at the clinic, and airtime (a nominal R10) to communicate with her baby's father (Mzantsi Wakho participatory research exercise, Eastern Cape, October 2015).



Interviewer: 'Is there anything else you have heard about pregnancy?'

Female participant III (age 17): 'Yes. Some friends of mine said it is not nice to fall pregnant when you are still young ... and you will end up raising the child alone. A child will mess up your future.' (Anonymous interviewee, Mdantsane, 22 June 2014)

## Conclusions

The idea of 'dole mums' or 'welfare queens', has a global reach.<sup>(7)</sup> Research in South Africa continues to question the popular idea that teenage girls are having babies to access the child support grant.<sup>(8-10)</sup> While cases of young women using pregnancy for profit may be shocking and memorable for health and social services providers, large-scale studies indicate that this behaviour is relatively rare. Only a minority of teenage mothers, fewer than 20% in the mid-2000s, access the child support grant at all.<sup>(10,11)</sup>

Emerging research on the health effects of social grants show that rather than promoting risky behaviours, the opposite may be true. Findings from the Mzantsi Wakho study indicate that social grants are promoting protective behaviours among adolescents, including higher rates of condom use and lower rates of teenage pregnancy, rather than promoting harmful and risky behaviours.<sup>(12-17)</sup> Through supporting adolescents to stay in school, and by providing greater food security, social grants help to reduce the vulnerabilities that may lead to risky behaviours.

Clashing ideas about whether young women are having 'babies for bling' persist, tapping into suspicions about the abuse of freedom between genders and generations. These ideas remain popular because they resonate with broader beliefs that 'Born Frees' have not helped South Africa to reach its full democratic potential, and are using state resources for private advancement rather than social transformation.

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