

"It Just Happened but It Was a Mistake"
- Deliberations of a Selected Group of Teenage Mothers in Durban

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Abstract. The high rates of teenage pregnancy in South Africa bears testimony to the failure of widespread efforts to curb HIV and AIDS, through advocating safe sex practices relating to abstinence, delaying sexual activity and condom use. This poses a further threat to gender equality as young mothers are often burdened with the responsibility of caring for the child which sometimes prevents them from attending school and obtaining the necessary qualifications to enter into the job market. Drawing from a study with a selected group of teenage mothers in a Durban school, this article shows that their experiences are situated within discourses of shame, pain and remorse. The stigma associated with teenage pregnancy and the high value attached to virginity is implicated in positioning youthful female sexuality as dangerous and in danger. These discourses work to reduce teenage mothers' agency and forces them to retreat into and to advocate constraining versions of femininity. The participants' reflections on their experiences of teenage motherhood indicate that they promote traditional versions of femininity that position young women as helpless victims and reinforces women's subordinate status in sexual relations. This paper argues that the experiences of teenage pregnancy are deeply gendered and that within limited available cultural repertoires, the learnings through the experience and the advice to others can compound gender inequalities and hence increase risk of unintended pregnancy rather than prevent it.