

# Teen moms reject Zuma's idea

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"DON'T take my baby."

This was a plea made yesterday by many young mothers in Kimberley who, though they are teenagers, are adamant that they are capable of looking after their babies.

Teenage mothers yesterday expressed shock at sentiments that they should be separated from their children in order to complete their studies.

This follows a statement by President Jacob Zuma during his address to the traditional leaders that teenage mothers should be separated from their babies until they had completed their schooling.

"They must be educated by government until they are empowered and they can take care of their kids, take them to Robben Island or any island, sit there, study until they are qualified to come back and work to look after their kids," Zuma said.

Teenage mothers as well as pregnant teenagers in Santa Centre, Galeshewe, said yesterday that they were capable of taking care of their babies.

Stephanie Koopman, who has three children, said she was raising her children with the help of her mother.

"I had my first baby when I was 16 years old. I dropped out of school in Grade 10 and I am currently taking care of my youngest child, who is four months old. My mother helps me to raise the children. The father of my children assists me financially and I also receive a child support grant from the government for my three children," Koopman said.

Eighteen-year-old Evelyn Modise, who is pregnant but still in school, said her mother will also assist her to raise her baby.

"I am currently in Grade 10. I am planning on going back to school after I have given birth in July because I want to finish my matric. I feel it is my right to raise my child because I made it, so I should be re-



sponsible for it. My mother will assist me to raise the baby and I will look for a job after I have completed my matric," she said.

A 17-year-old, who is also expecting her first baby, said it was her duty as mother to raise her baby.

"I didn't get pregnant at someone else's expense. I need to carry the consequences of my actions. I dropped out of school at Grade 7. My mother only works on weekends, so there will be no problem raising the child."

She added that her 18-year-old boyfriend said he would maintain the baby.

"The father of my child dropped out of school in Grade 9... he is currently working outside the city but he will also assist in raising the baby," she said.

Childline Northern Cape said the remarks made by Zuma may cause more damage than good.

The provincial director of Childline, Naomi Edwards, said it was not in everyone's favour that the

## President faces massive backlash

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AS PRESIDENT Jacob Zuma faced another round of criticism in Parliament yesterday, a fresh wave of backlash raged over his utterances that teenage mothers be removed from their babies until they have completed their schooling.

Reiterating the controversial statements he made during his 2009 election campaign, Zuma said on Tuesday that teenage girls must be taken far away from their babies.

"They (teenage girls) must be taken away and forced to go to school, far away," the president said in his response to the debate on his address to the House of Traditional Leaders.

Zuma's statement drew criticism from children's rights and social welfare activist organisations. Katharine Hall, a senior researcher at the University of Cape Town's Children's Institute, said Zuma's utterances were absurd.

"The President's suggestion to remove the babies of young mothers from their care is clearly ludicrous and uninformed, presumably made in

jest to build rapport with traditional leaders he was addressing in Parliament," Hall said.

She added that the idea of separating children from their mothers was "inappropriate and unhelpful" because the legislation gives young women the right to return to their education after giving birth.

Zuma is known for his traditional views, which are often at odds with South Africa's constitution. In 2012, the Commission on Gender Equality ruled against Zuma for his statement that it was a problem in society for a parent to stay with an unmarried daughter.

Zuma, while acknowledging that his initial statement had sparked controversy, was unrepentant on Tuesday.

"The women protested, I want to take their kids away from them and blah, blah, blah."

"So I kept quiet, because I was saying in no way can you have young kids being mothers of other kids and young boys being fathers of kids - they know nothing of it."

The President said allowing teenage mothers to leave school early was an untenable burden on society and the

State's social welfare bill.

Hall said Zuma's statements were an indication of the general misconceptions about the trends in teenage pregnancy in the country.

"First, there is a widespread belief that teenage pregnancy is an escalating problem. This is not true. Fewer teenagers have babies nowadays than they did in earlier times," she said.

Lisa Vetten, a research associate at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research, said the President's utterances were appalling.

"It's shocking that the Head of State can make these policy pronouncements in contradiction to his government policy and programmes."

"It's most unfortunate that people scapegoat teenage girls for anything and everything that's wrong in the country. If he (Zuma) was to read research, he would see that teenage girls don't fall pregnant because they are bored, stupid or want to irritate their parents."

The DA called on Zuma to retract his statement.

Presidential spokesman Mac Maharaj said Zuma had not singled out girls for criticism.

mother and her child be separated.

"The comments made by the president may have been said in a positive light because he would like to see teenagers succeed in life, but this however doesn't mean it will be in the best interest of the child or the teenage mother. There is a need for mothers and children to bond. The statement is a double-edged sword because the advantage would be that mothers could concentrate

on their schooling. The disadvantage would be that the child would grow up without a mother - plus it will be easy for teens to have another baby because they will not be responsible for raising the ones they already do have," she said.

Edwards added that teenage mothers needed to be empowered and not punished.

"It is not a punishment to have a child... taking away the babies of

teenagers will be regarded as a punishment. Teen mothers need to be supported and equipped with parenting skills; they must be shown how to nurture and care for their children. These skills will enable them to parent and also not run away from their responsibilities. We don't want a society where there are absent mothers, because we already have a society with absent fathers," Edwards said.