

# Teen moms: Zuma's absurd notions must be challenged

The president's ideas on schoolgirl mothers are grounded in dangerous fallacies. For a start 'taking away' their newborns is both illegal and unconstitutional, writes **Katharine Hall**

**I**N a startling moment in parliament this week, President Jacob Zuma suggested that teenage mothers should be separated from their babies until they have completed their schooling. The idea is absurd, contrary to national policy and untenable in law — it could never happen.

Children have a constitutional right to parental or family care. The Children's Act makes it clear it is in a child's best interests to grow up in a family. They may only be placed in alternative care as a last resort.

Early childhood is a sensitive developmental period, when it is important for children to be with their mothers. Those working in the early childhood development sector — within and outside government — stress the "first 1 000 days" as a critical time to provide services and support.

The president seems ignorant of this. And his arguments are falsely premised and damaging.

His office quickly tried to contain the damage, saying that Zuma was not singling out girls, but referring to boys and girls.

But that's not the point. Zuma tried to retract the whole idea the following day in the face of widespread criticism, explaining that he was only referring to a previous suggestion he made in 2009, which was also criticised then. Nevertheless, the underlying points he makes provide an opportunity to clarify some misconceptions.

He claims that teenage pregnancy was something that did not happen in "earlier times" when traditional cultures were respected.

There is an assumption that teen pregnancy is an escalating problem. This is not true. The Southern African Labour and Development Research Unit at the University of Cape Town analysed birth history data across six large national household surveys spanning 25 years, and found that the percentage of women who give birth before the age of 20 had decreased from 30% in 1984 to 23% in 2008.

Other studies have found the same. Teenage fertility rates declined after the 1996 Census, and Department of Health data show no increase in the share of teenagers aged between 15 and 19 who attended antenatal clinics.

There is a huge difference between giving birth at the age of 19 and at the age of 15. Most "teen births" are to older teens — 18- and 19-year-olds. These are not "children" in terms of the constitution, although many are still at school. They are legally old enough to get married, so it is presumably acceptable for them to have sex and have babies.

Teenagers today are less likely to give birth than those in previous generations. The difference is that teen pregnancies used to be less visible, as the baby was often claimed by the mother's mother as her own child. Although stigma re-



**MOTHER AND CHILD:** Contrary to the president's views, teenage mothers are not an 'untenable burden' on society

Picture: JAMES OATWAY

mains, teen pregnancy is more visible now, and this is a good thing. It means that children can grow up knowing their own mothers, and young mothers can get the services and support they need to care for their children. Unless, of course, they are forcibly separated in the way Zuma suggests.

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Another difference is that more teenagers attend school now than previously. This may explain why schools claim to be experiencing "higher" teen pregnancy rates.

The South African Schools Act makes education compulsory until age 15, or the completion of Grade 9, whichever comes first. The act also permits pregnant teenagers to stay

in school, and to return after childbirth. Attendance rates are very high — in terms of percent in the upper 90s — during the compulsory schooling phase, after which there is a drop-off among both girls and boys.

Teenage pregnancy is not the main reason for school dropout. Pupils also drop out of school because of the poor quality of education, or household poverty.

There can be no question of "forcing" young people to finish school if they are over 15, as the law does not provide for this. However, it is well established that those who do finish Grade 12 have an advantage: they are more likely to find work. The returns to tertiary education are greater. So it is important to enable children to complete schooling and further education, while also improving the quality of education.

Social assistance grants are a constitutional entitlement, and are essential for supplementing income to poor households. At present, 16.1 million grants are disbursed every month, and there are plans to expand the social assistance programme further.

Zuma spoke of teenage mothers placing "an untenable burden on

society and the state's welfare bill". He also suggested that grants should be paid in vouchers, rather than cash, to prevent misspending, for example at hair salons.

The voucher idea has been suggested by the DA before, but it is patently misguided, and discriminates against women.

**The president's reference to spending grants on hairdressers is unfortunate because it reiterates an anti-poor sentiment**

Extended families, particularly grandmothers, have always played an important role in caring for the children of young mothers. Zuma complained that old-age pensions are "wrongly" spent on children. It is true that women's pensions are often spent on children in the household (and this is a good thing in the circumstances), but the pen-

sion only kicks in at the age of 60 and most mothers of teenagers are not that old.

Numerous studies have shown that the child support grant, while much lower in value, is generally "well spent", and it is associated with better educational, nutritional and health outcomes for children.

The president's reference to spending grants on hairdressers is unfortunate because it reiterates an anti-poor sentiment that those who are more informed, including policymakers in his government, have been trying to correct.

Zuma is the figurehead of a government that has committed itself to pro-poor policy and claims to take "evidence-based policy making" seriously. Surely it is unacceptable to those who work for him, and to society, when he publicly airs personal views that are uninformed, socially conservative and contradict the policy direction?

● Hall is a senior researcher at the Children's Institute at UCT

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