

# “Interfaith Brief on Teenage Pregnancy

*“We will walk every step with our Children”*

Southern African Faith Leaders Commit to Respond to Teenage Pregnancy

## 1. INTRODUCTION

We, the faith community in Southern Africa (African Traditional Religion, Baha'i faith, Christian and Muslim) view children as whole human beings who need to be loved nurtured and enabled to flourish as they define their space in society. As they grow in the faith community, they develop their own value system and identity that upholds collective generational identity. All our faiths emphasise the value of children. It is our responsibility to be a safe space and provide love and hope as children go through difficult processes and seek second chances.



Our sacred texts underscore the importance of children *“...kill not your children because of poverty - We provide sustenance for you and for them”*. (Quran 6:151). The Holy Prophet (S) said: *“Honour your children and train them well, you will be forgiven by Him.”* Bihar-ul-Anwar, vol. 104, p. 95. The Bible in Mark 9:37 states that *“Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”* *“It takes a village to raise a child”* is an African proverb that highlights the importance of children and how the entire

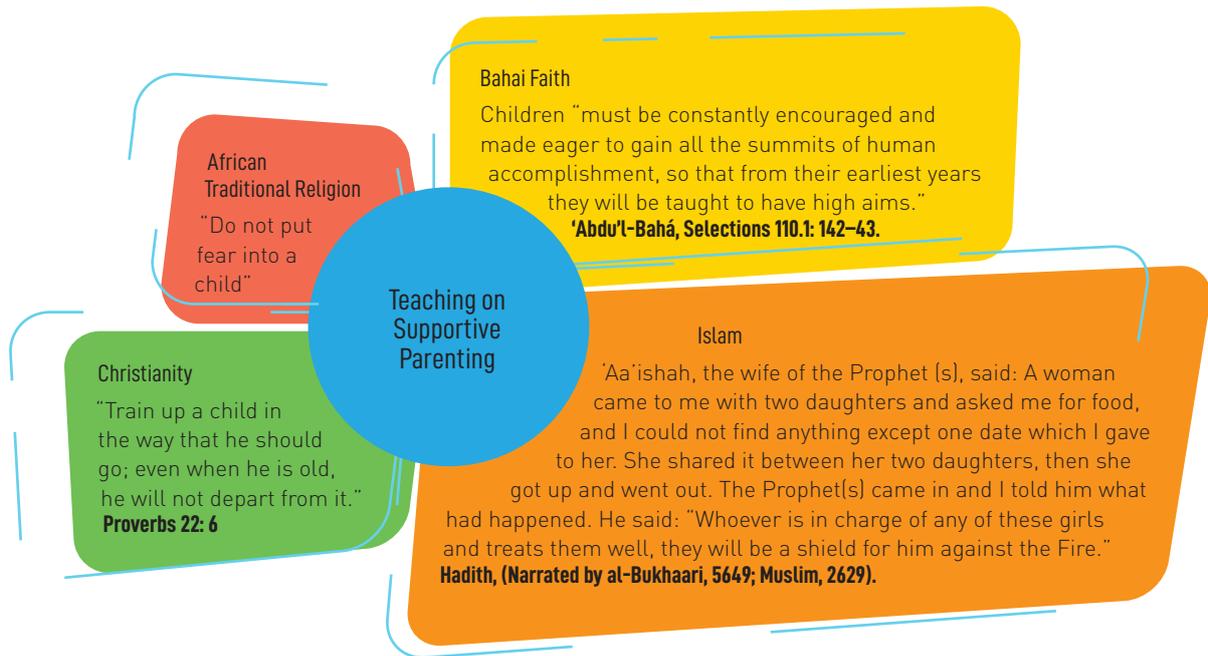
community is collectively accountable for children to experience and grow in a safe and healthy environment.

We acknowledge the challenge of the high incidence of teenage pregnancy (also referred to as adolescent, early and unintended pregnancy) in our region.<sup>1</sup> Data shows that approximately 100 000 babies were born to teenage mothers in 2017 in South Africa and in the Kingdom of eSwatini, teenage pregnancy stands at 16% amongst girls aged between 12 and 18<sup>2</sup> with limited or no access to HIV testing and counselling for girls below 16. In Zambia, the teenage pregnancy rate is at an all-time high at 29% and the child marriage rate stands at 31% of all children between the ages of 12 and 18.<sup>3</sup>

Whereas our communities have historically restricted our understanding of teenage pregnancy to the individual teenage girl (aged 13-19 years), we reassert our conviction that we are all, collectively, implicated in this challenge. Our daughters<sup>4</sup> in primary and secondary school, as well as in university, contend with unintended pregnancy.<sup>5</sup> Regrettably, many of our daughters die as they struggle with the challenges that come with unintended pregnancy. We are convinced that reducing the high rate of adolescent pregnancy and maternal mortality is critical towards meeting the Sustainable Development Goals,<sup>6</sup> especially SDG 3, to “Ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages.”

Our sacred texts and traditions compel us to surround our daughters (and our teenage sons who may be co-responsible for the pregnancy) with compassion, love, care and support. Therefore, we commit ourselves to re-evaluate our approach towards addressing teenage pregnancy in order to accompany our children more effectively. Our sacred texts are clear that we must invest in nurturing and guiding our children.

In this document we are talking about **“our”** children. This does not mean that we own the children, but that we take



responsibility for them. Children and young people still have independent rights. There is an old African saying "it takes a village to raise a child." 'Our' village is not local or even national, but global. When we speak of our children, we therefore see all children as our own.

## 2. PROMOTE PREVENTIVE APPROACHES INSTEAD OF PUNITIVE APPROACHES

*Then Jesus stood up again and said to the woman, "Where are your accusers? Didn't even one of them condemn you?" "No, Lord," she said. And Jesus said, "Neither do I."*

**John 8:10-11**

We acknowledge that we have not always empowered our daughters and sons with full knowledge and information regarding their bodies and how their bodies function. We have sometimes withheld information on sexuality in the mistaken hope that this will prevent teenagers from experimenting with sex. As a result, we have tended to place more emphasis on the fear of the consequences of pregnancy, than on availing sexual and reproductive health knowledge and services. In particular, we need to do more in order to enable religious leaders, parents, teachers, community leaders and other strategically placed individuals to collaborate with health service providers in order to be more supportive to our daughters and sons.

Even though our faiths are founded on love, compassion, tolerance and forgiveness, we have tended to lean more towards punishing and sanctioning our daughters who

fall pregnant. However, even this approach has not had the desired impact, as confirmed by the consistently high figures of teenage pregnancy in our families, schools, communities, nations and region. Recognising that teenage pregnancy is not about individual morality, but the outcome of a "systems failure," we undertake to be more proactive than punitive in our approach.



When a teenage girl falls pregnant, it is not so much about her "failure to control herself," as it is about our different institutions having let her down. These institutions include the government, the family, the school, the faith community, health service providers and the larger community.

We concede that we have not always been forthcoming in terms of providing life skills to our children. Yet, we have been quick to condemn them, thereby overlooking the fact that our systems may have failed. However, our teachings are consistent: as parents and leaders, we are called upon to guide our children effectively as they negotiate the journey of life. When they meet challenges such as teenage pregnancy, our task must not be to cast

stones. Instead, we are called upon to stand in solidarity with them as they negotiate the multiple challenges that must be addressed, collectively. We undertake to invest in understanding young people (for example, their struggles, dreams and aspirations) in order to provide more effective counsel and guidance. We are mandated to “listen with love.”<sup>7</sup>

Alongside the empowerment of adolescent girls and boys through the provision of accurate information, we undertake to challenge systems that enable teenage pregnancy. It is clear that the issue is not simply one of individual morality, namely, that ‘upright’ girls abstain and avoid pregnancy, while ‘sinful’ girls indulge in premarital sex and become pregnant. As we have learnt from the HIV epidemic in our region, matters are more complicated than this. We understand that structural factors, such as poverty, lack of gainful economic opportunities, lack of access to information, challenges of rural and urban development, not having access to health services and other factors make some girls more vulnerable to teenage pregnancy than others.<sup>8</sup> Overall, we are sensitive to the reality that teenage pregnancy is due to multiple social, economic and religious factors. Calling for the transformation of these factors will contribute towards addressing teenage pregnancy effectively.

### 3. OUR FAITHS PROMOTE SRHR KNOWLEDGE

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| <p><b>African Traditional Religion</b><br/>                 “Lack of knowledge is darker than night”<br/> <b>Africa Proverb</b></p>  | <p><b>Islam</b><br/>                 Say, “Are those who know equal to those who do not know?”<br/> <b>Quran 38:9</b></p> |
| <p><b>Bahai</b><br/>                 “Knowledge is one of the wondrous gifts of God. It is incumbent upon everyone to acquire it”<br/> <b>(“Tablets of Baha’u’llah Revealed after the Kitab-i-Aqdas” (Wilmette: Bahai Publishing Trust 1988), p. 39)</b></p> | <p><b>Christianity</b><br/>                 “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge”<br/> <b>(Hosea 4:5)</b></p>   |

### 4. COMMITMENT TOWARDS PROVIDING SUPPORT IN CONTEXTS OF TEENAGE PREGNANCY

*“We have young people in the Church, it is our duty to protect and guide these young girls”.*

**Hope Dunira**

As faith communities, we pledge to do more to empower families of adolescent girls who fall pregnant. We recognise that there is a lot of stigma and shame that afflicts the families of adolescent girls who fall pregnant. Further, we are aware of the impact of patriarchal values on the apportionment of blame. In many instances, the mothers of the girls are criticised and ostracised for the girls’ pregnancy. This is a gross injustice, as families, faith communities, schools, government and health service providers must all invest in preventing teenage pregnancy. Therefore, we do not accept the practice of blaming adolescent girls, women, mothers, and the families concerned. Our faith traditions are consistent in calling upon us to be champions of justice.



We are aware that our daughters who fall pregnant face numerous challenges. On the health front, there are often challenges relating to unsafe termination of pregnancies. Often, the fear of embarrassing the family and the faith community leads many of our teenage girls (sometimes supported by their peers) to resort to inducing miscarriages. Other health challenges include obstructed labour, uterus tear, as well as injuries and deformities to the baby due to lack of easy passage through the birth canal.<sup>9</sup> Besides issues relating to health, the teenage mother must also contend with other challenges. These include stigmatization (especially within our communities of faith), exclusion, economic dependence, lack of proper nutrition, lack of access to health services as well as developing mental health issues. Furthermore, in many instances, child marriage is a product of teenage pregnancy. Therefore, we recognise that we need to

deepen, and not withdraw, our pastoral support when our teenagers fall pregnant.

Theologies of solidarity with those in vulnerable situations constitute the very foundation of our faiths. We are called upon to become beacons of hope<sup>10</sup> in a world where many are quick to condemn our daughters who fall pregnant early on in their life journeys. Our value systems compel us to demonstrate love and compassion to our daughters in their hour of need. We will engage in the ministry of constant and effective accompaniment, ensuring that our daughters continue to enjoy fellowship and support from us. The punitive approach is counterproductive and not consistent with the compassion that we are called to live out.



We recognise that many families of our pregnant teenage girls experience a lot of pressure and stress. Notions of loss of family honour and diminished social standing often afflict them. This is more acute for parents who hold leadership positions within our faith communities. They tend to feel that their children have let them down and that this reflects badly on them. As healing communities, we will strive to surround the families of pregnant teenage girls with love and support.

We recognise that our daughters who fall pregnant in school need maximum support, not condemnation. They need more education, not less! Therefore, we support the re-entry policies that are being promoted by governments in our region.<sup>11</sup> This will enable them to complete their education and increase their opportunities of doing well in life. However, we are painfully aware that these re-entry policies are not always applied consistently. We will work towards ensuring that our own schools implement the re-entry policy and that the young mothers will be nurtured. We are convinced that our faiths promote the concept of giving people a second chance in life.

Similarly, we will review some of our policies and practices that tend to humiliate girls who would have fallen pregnant before marriage. We will seek to promote their dignity and integrity. Where we have developed more supportive policies and practices, we will enhance them and ensure their full implementation.

## 5. GENDER EQUALITY FOR GIRLS AND BOYS – FROM UNEQUAL TO EQUAL

*“Cultivate equal and peaceful gender relations”*

Imam Lawrence Tsuru

Our daughters do not fall pregnant by themselves. Boys and older men in our communities are responsible for the teenage pregnancies that occur. We are also aware that some of the pregnancies are the result of rape and even incest. In other instances, some men who hold positions of power and authority abuse and impregnate girls. Economic and social disadvantages as well as peer pressures predispose girls to trafficking, transactional and intergenerational sex. Thus, older men within our households, teachers, religious leaders, businessmen, public transport drivers and their associates, and others are often responsible for the pregnancies. This is due to the unequal distribution of power and resources in our families, institutions and communities.

Our response to teenage pregnancy necessarily includes our commitment towards gender equality and gender justice. Our sacred texts and traditions are rich reservoirs

### African Traditional Religion

“For the hen too knows what time it is, but leaves the cock to announce it.”

### Islam

“People, We created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should get to know one another. In God’s eyes, the most honoured of you are the ones most mindful of Him: God is all knowing, all aware.”

Quran 49:13

### Christianity

“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Galatians 3:28

### Bahai

“The emancipation of women, the achievement of full equality between the sexes, is one of the most important, though less acknowledged, prerequisites for peace.

The denial of such equality perpetrates an injustice against one half of the world’s population and creates in men harmful attitudes and habits that are carried from family to the workplace, to political life and, ultimately to international relations.

There are no grounds, moral, practical or biological, upon which such denial can be justified.”

Universal House of Justice (Compilation on Women, p. 91).

of declarations on gender justice. We cannot remain silent when an oppressive gender order increases the vulnerability of our daughters. We will speak out<sup>12</sup> against gender ideologies that continue to devalue our girls, including those that claim to be inspired by our sacred writings. Furthermore, we will challenge the double standards in our communities, where teenage pregnancy has been reduced to being a “girls’ only” issue. We will ensure that the boys, young men and older men are actively involved in addressing teenage pregnancy. Therefore, our approach towards responding to teenage pregnancy in our communities shall be based on the commitment towards the equality of girls and boys, men and women. This is informed by, and attested to, by our sacred texts.

## 6. MOVE FROM OBSERVATION TO FAITH IN ACTION

*“If you say you love God, you should consider loving your neighbour first.”*

Having analysed and appreciated the factors relevant to understanding teenage pregnancy, we hereby express our determination to act to contribute towards addressing the crisis in our families, communities, nations and the region. We recognise that our interventions are required at various interlinked levels. We will deepen our engagement, both internally and externally.

### Internally:

- Multiply current good practices and policies that protect and respect the integrity of our adolescent girls and women and support them when they fall pregnant.
- Develop and approve policies, resolutions and strategies that seek to promote gender justice in our institutions.

- Offer continuous education, dialogue and engage with faith actors about faith teachings and context.
- Provide holistic system of support for families, teenage mothers and fathers and baby’s welfare
- Utilise our sacred texts, traditions and teaching, alongside scientific evidence, to empower our daughters and sons.
- Actively promote life skills education and access to quality education and services relating to sexual and reproductive health and rights using different platforms (our schools and institutions, youth groups, “Health Expos,” and similar).
- Engage medical experts within our own faith communities to share knowledge and advice with our adolescents.
- Equip parents with communication skills to take the lead in sharing knowledge relating to human sexuality and referrals to health services.
- Initiate and deepen mutual learning amongst ourselves as diverse communities of faith.
- Strengthen our referral systems to ensure that our adolescents and youth interact more effectively with sexual and reproductive health professionals.

### Externally:

- Engage in advocacy to promote access to quality knowledge and health services for our adolescents.
- Challenge governments and other duty bearers to invest in effective recreational facilities for our adolescents.
- Partner with organisations / institutions addressing teenage pregnancy and gender-based violence.
- Ensure consistent implementation of re-entry policies in school for teenage girls who would have fallen pregnant.

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11. See for example, Colleen L. Morna et al., eds. 2018. *SADC Gender Protocol* 2018. Johannesburg: Gender Links.
12. See for example, “We Will Speak Out” coalition against gender-based violence, <https://www.wewillspeakout.org>

## Conclusion

*Our daughters are precious. We will strive to do all we can to support them, including when they fall pregnant as teenagers. As communities of faith, we will continue to invest in enabling them to access quality knowledge, information and services. In the event that our systems let them down and they become pregnant, we undertake to remain present in their lives in a supporting way. We will challenge practices and policies that threaten their God-given dignity. We will continue to promote positive masculinities where boys and men are responsible and become strategic partners in preventing teenage pregnancies. Motivated by our faith, strengthened by our experience and inspired by our vision of vibrant young people, we commit to be actively involved in responding to teenage pregnancies in our homes, schools, communities, nations and our region.*

THIS BRIEF WAS DEVELOPED BY THE FOLLOWING INSTITUTIONS:

