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# **Too many rights? Reproductive freedom in post-apartheid South Africa**

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# Too many rights? Reproductive freedom in post-apartheid South Africa

## Abstract

*In this article, I explore contestations over the legislation and enactment of reproductive rights in South Africa. I argue that the public disapprobation surrounding teenage pregnancy relates, in complex ways, to broader suspicions about moral atavism among the polity. This is the sense that the democratic transition has dismantled established modes of social regulation, resulting in a rupture in the social fabric.<sup>1</sup> This article explores two elements of this idea: Firstly, that the legislation of democratic freedoms has licensed sexual promiscuity among youth. Secondly, that this sexual promiscuity is related to other forms of profligate consumption among 'Born Frees'. I contrast claims about the social damage wrought by the empowerment of women in the post-apartheid era, with the experiential accounts of young women themselves. I compare statements made by President Jacob Zuma about teenage pregnancy, with the ideas and experiences of young South Africans, and their older relatives. I explore how disputes over reproductive agency and sexual freedom have been refracted through different experiential prisms, coloured by gender and generation. I describe the political utility of calls for the greater regulation of young women's sexual and reproductive behaviours. Key claims arose from three years of primary research within the Mzantsi Wakho study, a longitudinal study which focuses on the health experiences of young people, caregivers, health workers and social service providers, in South Africa's Eastern Cape.*

## Introduction

During the second half of the 1990s, the South African government pursued an ambitious programme of legislative reform. New laws were written to reflect the democratic principles of the rights to health, education and gender equality. But in the first two decades of South African democracy, opposition to laws and policies promoting gender equality, both within the ANC and the polity at large, have cast doubt on the innate, practicable commitment to women's rights both government and the polity (Walker, 2013: 78). The scale of this opposition, and its manifold expressions – including in astronomical rates of rape and sexual violence (Gqola, 2015; Jewkes & Abrahams, 2002) – are in stark contrast to

formal commitments to gender equality. This article grapples with this apparent contradiction: the statutory commitment to women's rights in law, and their widespread, practical violation in South Africa.

The rhetorical commitment to gender equality, combined with pervasive, practical renditions of patriarchy, presents a paradox in South African political culture. Revealed in this paradox are the tensions between freedom and control, autonomy and submission, agency and authority – the political contestations of a society in flux. At its core, this is a conflict between different versions of citizenship and subjectivity, vying for ascendancy in a state in transition. That these struggles have been waged so bitterly in what Raewyn Connell calls the 'reproductive arena', reveals the deep social value vested in sexuality, motherhood and the family. Here, the struggles to control sexual behaviour and propagate certain kinds of future citizens are waged between state and public actors (Connell, 2012: 1677). The pursuit of sexual freedom and reproductive autonomy by individuals jostles with attempts by different moral authorities to order and regulate sexual and reproductive behaviours, including through the provision, or denial, of healthcare and social services.

This article explores two key themes: the evolution of national commitments to gender equality through law and policy, and popular understandings of the 'social damage' wrought by the legal recognition and enactment of women's rights.<sup>1</sup> Comparing statements made by President Jacob Zuma about teenage pregnancy, with the ideas and experiences of young South Africans and their caregivers, I contrast perceptions of the harmful effects of women's statutory empowerment with the accounts of young women themselves. I explore how claims about sexual profligacy and the abuse of democratic freedoms travel through different layers of social experience and response. I argue that disputes about gender and generation, imbued with new meaning in the post-apartheid era, are central to population contestations about sexual freedom and democratic citizenship.

The key claims in this article arose from three years of primary research in the Eastern and Western Cape. Between 2012 - 2015 I conducted interviews together with researchers on the Mzantsi Wakho study, with teenagers and their caregivers (principally grandmothers), in Khayelitsha, Mdantsane, Gomo, Duncan Village and Dimbaza. Interviews were conducted in English, Afrikaans and Xhosa, principally in the homes and leisure spaces of study participants. Focus groups, which allowed for greater engagement between, were conducted

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion on popular beliefs about of the 'social damage' wrought by South Africa's transition to democracy, see Posel, D., Kahn, K. & L. Walker. 2007. Living with death in a time of AIDS: A rural South African case study. *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health*, 35(69), pp. 138-146, p. 140.

with the caregivers of adolescents, with young men and women, and with a combination of young men and women. Combining this primary data with secondary sources, here I explore how young South Africans practice reproductive citizenship, both evincing and eschewing commitments to women's rights. I argue that popular responses to teenage pregnancy convey a deep-seated moral objection to sexual freedom, among young women in particular. I explore how the responses of young and old South Africans may be used to decipher the meaning of reproductive freedom and regulation for 'Born Frees' (the generation of young South Africans who have grown up in the years after the 1994 democratic elections), and for their parents and older relatives. The perspectives and experiences of participants from across the generational spectrum illuminate facets of post-apartheid existence, of the perceived changes that have occurred, and the continuities that persist.

Women's political organisation has a long history in South Africa, particularly when a more expansive understanding of this term recognises more fluid forms of engagement and association. Women's political organisation has flourished for many decades (through burial societies, *stokvels*, professional and religious groups),<sup>2</sup> and continues to do so in the present (Lee, 2009; Hassim, 2006: 7). However, prior to the late 1970s, women's political organisation was largely separate from mainstream party politics. Women's organisation held powerful symbolic value for political groups – both within the apartheid government and the anti-apartheid resistance movement – but was consigned in large part to the 'informal', domestic and social spheres.<sup>3</sup>

Shireen Hassim identifies two shifts in the South African political environment which changed the course of the women's movement, elevating feminist politics into the mainstream. The first was in the late 1970s and 1980s, in which resistance to apartheid assumed a mass character. During this time, political mobilisation flourished at a local level, women were drawn into politics through community organisations. Matters previously consigned to the domestic realm, confronted by women as wives and mothers, featured more substantively on the political agenda.

The second shift in the political landscape, garnering wider support for feminist politics, was in the years surrounding the 1994 elections, South Africa's

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<sup>2</sup> Canonical studies of women's social organization include Comaroff, J. 1985. *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press. and Marks, S. 1994. *Divided Sisterhood: Race, Class and Gender in the South African Nursing Profession*. New York: St Martin's Press.

<sup>3</sup> A growing literature questions the separation of women's organisation from mainstream party politics, seeking interconnections between the 'informal' and 'formal' spheres in the nexus of political power.

‘democratic transition’. Women’s rights advocates championed a commitment to gender equality within the anti-apartheid movement by strengthening connections between women’s struggles and nationalist struggles (Hassim, 2006: 28). Numerous writers have shown that feminism was perceived by many in the ANC – both within party leadership and within the broad-based ‘comrades movement’ – as a Western imposition, a divisive distraction within liberation politics (Hassim, 2006: 28-9; Sitas, 1992: 629-641; Seekings, 1991: 77-88). From the 1980s onwards, women’s rights activists within the anti-apartheid movement worked to reframe feminism as an ideology of political emancipation, rather than elitism. They recast feminism as a political ally and catalyst, rather than a ‘third force’ within the anti-apartheid movement. They did this in a way which resonated with popular understandings of women as wives and mothers, infusing deeply-ingrained social identities with new political possibilities.

As women’s organisations played a more powerful and influential role in mass politics from the 1980s onwards, its leadership confronted a dilemma: to pursue gender equality as its key commitment, and to confront continued allegations of sectarianism, or to merge women’s activism with the mass movement against apartheid. At a collective level, they chose the latter option, seeking to promote women’s rights but in ways that resonated, rather than clashed, with prevailing social norms. Recognising motherhood as the defining identity for South African women, women’s rights activists aimed to leverage greater political power through a strategic avowal of this identity,

South Africa has a chequered history of sexual and reproductive surveillance. Historians, sociologists and anthropologists have argued that colonialism, and particularly the civilising enterprise of Christian missionizing, disrupted established forms of sexual education and control, particularly among youth (Delius & Glaser, 2002; Bozzoli 2015). While it is crucial to historicise changes in sexual behaviours, and to situate these in relation to broader social dynamics, there is also an implicit danger of essentialising pre-colonial traditions, of characterising these as unable to withstand the battering rams of colonialism and Christianity. What scholarship about the histories of sex and sexuality over many decades in South Africa makes clear, is that perceived transgressions and their public revelation have long inspired attempts at greater regulation of sexual and reproductive behaviours. This is particularly evident in cases concerning supposedly illicit sexual and reproductive behaviours, and in their public exposure and critique (Ratele 2016; Hassim 2016; Hodes 2016; Hodes 2015a; Hodes 2013: 531-542; Klausen, 2014: 210-229). The sexual behaviours of young women were an intense source of public scrutiny and contestation during the latter decades of the apartheid era, whether in ANC training camps in Lusaka, or the ‘white suburbs’ of Durban (Armstrong, 2014). During the

democratic transition, reproductive regulation assumed a new public life in discussions about gender equality. The state's definition of reproductive rights, and its concomitant responsibilities to providing comprehensive reproductive healthcare – including contraception and abortion – were disputed.

As Hassim has shown, the passing of gender equality bills was due in greater part to the skilful politicking of a handful of key advocates, than to broad-based support within the ANC (Hassim, 2006: 200-201). Hassim scrutinises the legislative schedule for the first five years of democracy, in which the fundamental commitments of South African democracy were codified within law and policy. In this period of political remaking, advocates for women's equality lobbied hard to ensure that their objectives featured on the parliamentary slate. Despite their strategic politicking, gender equality bills 'languished' in draft form for years (Hassim, 2006: 200). The Bills were not included on the parliamentary calendar until late in the first session, and then only after concerted campaigning by women's rights advocates highlighted the National Assembly's neglect of gender equality legislation. To circumvent allegations that reproductive rights were not a political priority, the bills were hastened through parliament before the closing of the first session. Laws on reproductive rights – including the public provision of contraception, abortion and child support – evoked fervent public and political debate. Many regarded the laws as a political betrayal, at odds with a moral consensus about the social and sexual roles of women in South Africa. The laws were ushered through parliament, but popular resistance to many of their provisions has flourished (Hodes, 2016; Hodes, forthcoming). With a focus on popular responses to teenage pregnancy, resistance to women's statutory empowerment is explored below.

The era of democracy has not been regarded as an unalloyed benefit for public morality. Democratic freedoms have been associated with generational conflict, moral dissolution, and a sense of the erosion of tradition and authority (Gouws and Stasiulis, 2016: 6; Gouws, 2016: 45-53; Ratele, 2016: 136-148; Posel, Kahn & Walker, 2007: 140). The perceived harms of the democratic transition are replete in public opposition to gender equality, as a constitutional commitment and a practicable objective. This opposition is expressed in a multitude of forms, including the widespread practice of rape and sexual violence, the misogyny of many high-ranking political officials (both within the ruling ANC, and within various opposition parties), and the clamour of traditional leaders for the formalisation of patriarchal controls over their women subjects (Gouws, 2016: 44-52; Hassim, 2016: 213-224). The democratic transition is regarded to have ushered in a new era of profligacy, apparent in a heady amalgam of sexual and material excess. The appetites of youth, both for sex and for stuff (clothes, cell phones, cars), are understood as an expression of moral laxness, a 'breezy

licentiousness' among Born Frees (Steinberg, 2013: 497). Aspiration and transformation in the post-apartheid era have been expressed as the freedom to consume, and this unbridled consumption is connected, in the public imaginary, to new forms of sexual profligacy. It is apparent, in particular, in allegations of the sexual and reproductive excesses of young women.



*Figure 1: T-shirt slogans at a popular retail outlet in East London highlight trends in post-apartheid material culture. One states, 'Born in the 90s', appealing to young consumers. Another brands its wearer as a 'Material girl'. (R. Hodes, East London, September 2014.)*

While apartheid was, in its ideological essence, a project of racial domination, it functioned within a gendered dimension as well. Mark Hunter and Jonny Steinberg have both discerned a 'patriarchal bargain' as a key tenet of apartheid's social contract. In essence, apartheid authority was vested in white monopolisation of formal political power and economic control. Black men



participated in this economy because they had little other choice. However, as a mechanism of accommodation, they retained substantial economic and social power over black women. In the post-apartheid era, these economic and social controls have been symbolically eroded. Through analysing public claims about sexual and reproductive behaviours and democracy, the nature and significance of these perceptions emerges.

The historical record shows that women in South Africa have sought to control their fertility for centuries (Garenne *et al.*, 2001; Bradford, 1991).<sup>4</sup> The popularity and persistence of abortion and contraception among many population groups, and for as long as the written historical record allows, challenges pro-natalist assumptions (Hodes, 2013: 541). While teenage pregnancies are common in South Africa, so are practices to prevent or terminate conception. In recent years, teenage pregnancy has emerged as a national scandal, identified by the Department of Basic Education as a ‘moral panic’ (Panday *et al.*, 2012: 12). However, while Education officials are at pains to counter the opprobrium that surrounds teenage pregnancy, provincial education departments have acknowledged localised increases in teenage pregnancy, including at primary school level (Villette, 2015). Approximately 20,000 learners became pregnant in 2014, with copious media coverage of the negative consequences for young mothers and for society at large.<sup>5</sup>

In mid-2015, growing public interest in pregnant schoolgirls prompted a response from President Jacob Zuma, in which he called for pregnant teenagers to be separated from their children and sent away – perhaps to Robben Island – to complete their schooling. Zuma made these comments while addressing the National House of Traditional Leaders, a strategic choice of audience. The struggle between traditional authorities and local government authorities for legal control over their subjects has gained momentum in recent years.<sup>6</sup> Due in

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<sup>4</sup> For an account of consistent high rates of contraceptive use among South African women, see Klugman, B. 2003. Balancing means and ends – population policy in South Africa. *Reproductive Health Matters*, 1: 44-57.

<sup>5</sup> See the following articles for media coverage about the scandal of teenage pregnancy in the post-apartheid era: Irin News. Teenage pregnancy figures cause alarm. *Health Systems Trust*. Available at <http://www.hst.org.za/news/teenage-pregnancy-figures-cause-alarm>, accessed 15 September 2015; C. Payet. Teen, pre-teen pregnancies still rife. 12 July 2015. Available at <http://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/kwazulu-natal/teen-pre-teen-pregnancies-still-rife-1.1884094#.VfgvF4uA4ag>, accessed 15 September 2015; P. Ghosh. Babies Having Babies: Teenage Pregnancies Destroying Lives and Futures of South African Girls. 5 September 2013. Available at <http://www.ibtimes.com/babies-having-babies-teenage-pregnancies-destroying-lives-futures-south-african-girls-1402739>, retrieved on 15 September 2015.

<sup>6</sup> The debate over the Traditional Courts Bill is one example of the legal battle between traditional authorities and proponents of constitutional democracy. See Claassens, A. 2009.

large part to the advocacy of women's organisations in the 1980s and 1990s, the right to gender equality supersedes the right to cultural practices. If a cultural practice promotes gender discrimination, it is not guaranteed constitutional protection. However, from the late 1990s, a 'turn to tradition' in South African politics has gradually replaced the progressive commitment to gender equality with a defensive reverence for 'traditional values' (Walker, 2013: 90). As Walker has described, an 'authoritarian construction of culture' has increasingly been wielded as the incarnation of tradition, while gender equality and reproductive freedom are cast as foreign impositions, irreconcilable with an 'African' worldview.

Zuma's statements about teenage pregnancy argued for a turn to traditionalism, and sought an audience of allies among traditional leaders striving for greater control over their subjects. Zuma's comments on teenage pregnancy were reported by the South African Press Association as follows:

'He said by forcing teenage mothers to complete school before they were reunited with their babies, society would be correcting a trend of grandparents "using what is supposed to be their pension" to raise the children in question.

"We make you take care of your kid so that we don't have to give a grant...The reality is you have got kids with kids. They don't know how to grow a child, how to look after them. They have become a burden to grandmothers, to society. So why should we just sit and look?"

The president went on to say that teenage pregnancy was something alien to earlier times when traditional cultures were respected.

"There were no pregnancies of teenagers and people built families at the right time."

...He also suggested that welfare grants should not be paid in cash but in vouchers to prevent parents from mispending them.

"Should we give the money or should we have vouchers that are very specific, either to buy food or uniforms for the school or to pay for the schools – so that the money will not be used for anything except the needs of the child.

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Who told them we want this Bill? The Traditional Courts Bill and rural women. *Agenda*, 82: 9-22.

“It is a matter to talk about... because there is no mother who is going to take a voucher and go to this — what is this for hair? — A salon” (SAPA, 2015).

There are many facets to Zuma’s comments on teenage pregnancy. Two are examined below in greater detail. The first is that teenage pregnancy is without historical precedent in South Africa, its emergence as a social phenomenon indicative of waning social and moral control over the younger generation, and girls in particular. The second is that democratic laws and freedoms are being abused by young mothers, who are exploiting their reproductive capacity for material gain.

## **Teenage pregnancy: A practice without precedent?**

Teenage pregnancy has a long history in South Africa, the source of copious formal and informal social sanctions; modes of both punishment and support (Delius & Glaser, 2005: 29-36; Jewkes *et al.*, 2001: 733-744). Pre-marital sexual debut, impregnation and childbearing are common social practices, and have been so for many decades (Mkhwanazi 2013; Jewkes *et al.*, 2001: 733). In the 1990s, teenage pregnancy was regarded as a relatively common occurrence among young South African women (Jewkes *et al.*, 2001: 734). However, from the late 1990s, teenage pregnancy was increasingly construed as a novel phenomenon, an indication that those poised to best reap the benefits of gender equality and reproductive rights – young black women – were wasting this opportunity. Revelations about deviant behaviour among Born Frees – including drug use, unsafe sex and teenage pregnancy – tapped into broader, collective disappointments about the political transition, and stoked beliefs regarding the recklessness of youngsters who had betrayed the promise of social transformation (Swartz, 2010; Macleod & Vincent, 2014).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Swartz has described how the perceived failings of South African youth have tapped into broader, collective disappointments about the political transition. See, for instance, Chapters One and Two. A new research initiative has begun to challenge and reconfigure notions of unwanted pregnancy, reproductive decision-making and the substance and implications of gender norms among adolescents in post-apartheid South Africa. See, for instance, Macleod, C. & L. Vincent. 2014. Introducing a critical pedagogy of sexual and reproductive citizenship: extending the ‘framework of thick desire’. In Quinlivan, K., Rasmussen, M. & L. Allen (eds.), *Interrogating the Politics of Pleasure in Sexuality Education: Pleasure Bound*. London: Routledge.

In Zuma's comments on teenage pregnancy, he alleged that teenage pregnancy has no historical, experiential basis in African society. Through invalidating indigeneity and arguing that teenage pregnancy was without historical precedent, Zuma attested to a rupture with a moral past, arguing that democracy had brought with it the dissolution of values, in particular among youth. These claims resonate with the perception that democracy has unsettled the social order, disrupting the traditions through which authority and decency have historically been upheld.

At the source of debates about teenage pregnancy in South Africa is a contestation about biological capital. Young women, as the embodiments of post-apartheid promise and potential, are seen as squandering the prospects of freedom and opportunity endowed by the post-apartheid era. In the politicisation of sex, discerned by Deborah Posel and others as key facets of post-apartheid social life, teenage pregnancy has become emblematic of misspent youth among Born Frees. Young South Africans are aware of this perception: of theirs as the generation best poised to have realised the dreams of democracy, and of wasting this opportunity. In this research, young South Africans related their failure to realise the potential of educational and material advancement to the perceived loss of traditional values and social controls. Doom-saying about youth was connected again to a sense historical rupture, a casting aside of tradition with chaotic effect. As Aija, a nineteen year old in Mdantsane, explained:

'There's this thing that the youth of today is doomed. They know things that they are not supposed to know. People say that the youth are not meant to know things so as to keep up with the culture' (Interviewee 1, Mdantsane, 3 December 2014).

Here, the staggered wisdom of tradition has been replaced, in the post-apartheid era, with a pervasive yet fatuous knowledge. The acquisition of this knowledge has distorted the morality of South African youth, with rising rates of teenage pregnancy as one manifestation.<sup>8</sup> A focus group with young men in East London revealed these connections and highlighted the belief in teenage pregnancy as a post-apartheid phenomenon:

Facilitator: Why are girls becoming pregnant as teenagers?

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<sup>8</sup> There is a rhetorical connection between the acquisition and abuse of privileged knowledge among youth with political slurs against black academics alleged to use their elite knowledge to excoriate the ANC. Zuma has described the latter as black people 'who become too clever... they become most eloquent in criticizing themselves about their own traditions'. See City Press, 'Zuma scolds "clever" blacks', 3 November 2012. Available at <http://www.news24.com/Archives/City-Press/Zuma-scolds-clever-blacks-20150429>. Accessed 5 July 2015.

Kwakza: Because they are rebellious to the laws that are given to them by their parents. And when they reach teen stage they have peer pressure and influence by their friends, and end up pregnant.

Butho: Because the modern way of living is not the same as olden days, even their parents don't sit down with them and tell them what's right or wrong...

Tsotso: I think it's freedom and all these rights they are given. When they are told not to do something, they will say, 'I have the right to do that'. Even when they go out, they drink booze and the peer pressure gets to their mind. The influence of alcohol plays a significant role. She gets pregnant after that and regrets her decision, but it's too late.

Kwakza: To add on that these girls are spoiled by the government by giving them the grant. So they know that when they have a child they get money, money that they don't use for the baby. They buy Brazilian hair, so it's too much freedom they are given. (Focus group with adolescent boys, East London, 29 November 2014)

Here, democracy is related to the dismantling of respectability, the collapse of a social hierarchy, with a resultant loss of control, by elders over youth, and by men over women (Steinberg, 2013: 506; Hunter, 2011). The perception is that young women are exercising freedoms recklessly, and then cloaking their mistakes in the mantle of democratic rights. Moreover, the social grants system is incentivising this recklessness, encouraging young girls having children to generate income for frivolous pursuits such as new hairstyles. Pregnancy is identified as a source of material advancement, rather than the arch fulfilment of a women's identity and value as a mother.

## **Babies for 'bling': Pregnancy as profit?**

Allegations that young women are squandering money on luxuries, neglecting their national responsibilities as mothers, have a history in South Africa. These charges gathered ground at particular historical and economic moments, in which women were entering the labour force in larger numbers and had established a modicum of financial autonomy. Their entry into the labour force and acquisition of greater financial autonomy has, at numerous historical junctures, been shunned as a conduit for frivolous materialism (Hodes, 2015: 15-6).

In the post-apartheid present, a desire for material advancement, through access to the child support grant, is alleged to be incentivising pregnancy. Young women are believed to be having children to access the child support grant (a cash pay-out of R360 per month in October 2016), and then to be spending this on leisure pursuits and luxury items, such as beauty treatments and ‘designer drinks’. The post-apartheid media landscape has seen an explosion of images that glamorise high-end consumption, presenting luxury objects as indexical of empowerment and transformation.<sup>9</sup>

The media’s promotion of conspicuous consumption, and the frequent appearance of sexualised images of young women, is connected symbolically to growing sexual and material profligacy. Young women are blamed for abusing the welfare system, and of squandering state assets: both in the forms of social grants, and in their misspent biological capital. As a 23-year old man from Mdantsane described:

‘[I]n 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 of getting the grant money from government, because in their homes there is no one bread winner or maybe the sister is a domestic worker and she have to feed lots of people in the household. There are lots of kids in the house that are still in school, so they decide to have a baby as a source of income. 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 23, Mdantsane, 28 July 2014)

One of the claims here is that young women are exploiting their sexual desirability for material enrichment. They are using sex, not for subsistence or survival, but as basely acquisitive. In this sense, the public reaction to claims about teenage pregnancy relates also to a reaction against heady new fusions of unbridled consumption and sexual autonomy among young South Africans: the performance of ‘bling’.<sup>10</sup> This is connected, in the popular imagination, to an abnegation of responsibility. As is evident in Zuma’s claims about teenage pregnancy, young women are understood to be using their reproductive capacity

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of ‘aspirational programming’ on the SABC and the pitching of content towards audiences with higher ‘living standards measurements’, see Hodes, R. 2014. *Broadcasting the Pandemic: A History of HIV on South African Television*. Cape Town: HSRC Press: 151-2.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of how the ‘politics of emulation and aspiration’ relates to the ‘performance’ of ‘bling’, see Posel, D. 2013. The ANC youth league and the politicization of race. *Thesis*, 11(115): 58-76.

for material advancement, rather than selfless nation-building. Instead of embodying the ideals of post-apartheid freedom and transformation, investing their biological capital in a new generation of citizens, they have instead exploited reproduction for consumerist gain. Rather than realising the dreams of the post-apartheid future, for which their parents and grandparents had struggled, they have tethered their elders to another cycle of domestic labour and familial responsibility. Zuma made this claim in his speech about teenage pregnancy, and it emerged also in interviews and focus groups with teenage men and grandmothers. The young women in this study made resolutely different claims about their own reproductive intentions and the consequences of conception.

A grandmother explained:

The problem now with our youth is that they get out of hand... Some parents are complaining about their children... They complain about teenage pregnancy and they their children don't give birth to one child. They have many children which are going to be your responsibility as the grandmother. [The mother] will leave the kids with you and again wonder the streets... What am I going to do with the house full of kids?... I am the one looking after her [my daughter's] kids. She takes the money and drinks it. (Anonymous interviewee, 51, Mdantsane, 24 December 2014)

## Reproductive treason?

The idea of 'dole mums' or 'welfare queens', has a global reach (Richter, 2009: 94).<sup>11</sup> It is also common in South Africa, although research has consistently shown that there is no evidence to support claims that teenage girls are having babies so as to access the child support grant (Makiwane *et al.*, 2006; Solomon, 2013). Nevertheless, the idea persists, cutting a swathe across popular conceptions about youth and responsibility, and fears about the future. The fear in South Africa is related to notions that the young generation is betraying the promise of democratic freedom, and that it is using state resources for material gain, rather than social transformation. 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

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<sup>11</sup> The term 'welfare queens' gained popularity in the political lexicon of the United States when used by Ronald Reagan's in his 1976 presidential campaign. Douglas, S. & M. Meredith, *The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women* (Free Press, New York, 2005), p. 185.

women. Interviews revealed the fear that pregnancy, far from a means of material enrichment, had negative consequences for teenage mothers. It could mean that they had to drop out of school, and that meagre household economies would be depleted further. As a 19-year old male explained:

At school we were taught not to have sex, especially girls, because they can have babies and drop out of school and be left behind (Focus group with adolescent boys, East London, 29 November 2014).

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?

Akuhle: Yho!

Interviewer: It’s difficult?

Akuhle: Yes, it’s difficult.

Interviewer? Why do you say it’s difficult?

Akuhle: 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. (Interviewee 11, Dimbaza, 19 December 2014)

While teenage pregnancy was countenanced among previous generations, ‘Born Frees’ are alleged to have abandoned the strategies of secrecy and concealment that surrounded, and validated, pre-marital pregnancy. The coming of democracy, and the passing of laws that are seen to support or even incentivise teenage pregnancy through the provision of healthcare and social grants, are understood as licensing promiscuity. Pregnancy beyond the confines of sanctioned morality may be an assertion of corporeal autonomy for young women (Posel & Hardon, 2012: S1-S13). This may, in turn, be perceived as a lack of modesty and shame, a violation, and a collective injury. This sense of the collective shame caused by teenage pregnancy was echoed in this account of a 23-year old man:

‘Some girls get pregnant when they are young. I once saw this girl in the clinic and she was young. To think that she is going to have a baby while she is a baby herself, it’s embarrassing’. (Anonymous interviewees, interview 37, Dimbaza, 11 November 2014)



While motherhood was both a value and aspiration among the teenage girls and young women in this research, the value of motherhood was balanced against more immediate aspirations regarding education, professional advancement and financial stability:

Interviewer: Is it right for people to fall pregnant?

Dineo: No, you must learn first.

Interviewee: And then you can fall pregnant?

Dineo: Then work first and have everything so that you won't depend on anyone.

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

Dineo: A house and a car first.

Interviewee: What do you want to be when you grow up?

Dineo: A doctor. (Interviewee 9, 28 August 2014, Mdantane)

Rather than a source of new freedoms and opportunities, pregnancy was understood by numerous teenage girls in this study as weakening future prospects for educational and material advancement:

Noluntu: Some friends of mine said it is not nice to fall pregnant when you are still young because the boys like to deny their children, and you will end up raising the child alone. A child will mess up your future. You end up not being able to go out to the mall with a friend, or if you see something in a magazine, you end up not being able to get it for yourself. (Interviewee 8, 22 June 2014, Mdantsane)

Unlike the allegation of 'mercenary motherhood', that young women were relying on their reproductive capacities for social and material advancement – when they should be aspiring to professional advancement through education – these young women understood education as the best means of pursuing a lucrative career. They sought to order their reproductive destinies accordingly. But, as is clear in Noluntu's association of a successful future with consumer purchase power, teenage girls in this study associated aspiration and advancement in the post-apartheid era with the freedom to consume.

## Conclusion

The scandal of teenage pregnancy has flourished because of its resonance with deep-seated public beliefs and fears regarding the loss of social and sexual control of youth (Hodes & Schumaker, 2015b: 3). The perceived failings of South African youth have tapped into broader, collective disappointments about the political transition. Waves of moral panic about deviant behaviours – including drug use, teenage pregnancy, and unsafe sex – have stoked beliefs regarding the recklessness of youngsters, who have betrayed the promise of social transformation.

Aspiration and advancement in the post-apartheid era have become associated with the freedom to consume. A growing academic literature has examined South African youth identity, exploring how consumer culture collides with the language of aspiration, ambition and advancement characteristic of the post-apartheid era (Salo & Davids, 2009). Scholarship on youth culture in post-apartheid South Africa has also explored how sex has become an item of consumption, at the same time as consumption has become increasingly sexualised (Delius & Glaser, 2002). This is a version of freedom that allows for conspicuous sexual and material consumption, yet simultaneously punishes and censures young women who seek invest their biological capital in material gain. Within political and popular discourse, emanating from the highest echelons of political leadership, and percolating through the layers of popular belief and response, young women are alleged to be abusing the freedoms endowed by democracy. The belief that young women are using motherhood as a form of material advancement is gaining popular currency. The fundamental claim here is that Born Frees, and women in particular, are behaving with a sense of sexual impunity, that they abuse the rights and freedoms that democracy has endowed, rather than channelling their procreative powers into morally-sanctioned forms of nation-building, aspiration and empowerment.

Beneath this admonition lies a threat – that teenage parents should be punished for their transgressions, made to pay for their drain on the public fiscus. Zuma's invocation of exile to Robben Island, as a potential punishment for pregnant teenagers, conveys the severity and significance of their transgression. Robben Island holds a particular place in South Africa's past, as a site of exile for lepers and political dissidents. Through suggesting exile there as a potential punishment, Zuma's remarks reveal the depth and intensity of moral opposition to teenage pregnancy. They also demonstrate how public condemnations of teenage pregnancy serve as powerful political tools to arouse ideological allegiance and amplify electoral support. In Zuma's recent threat, Robben Island serves as a new site of exile: for pregnant teenagers who have defiled a

particular dream of democracy, violating the social strictures and national imperatives of post-apartheid South Africa.

South African history reveals the power and malleability of motherhood as a political identity. The privileging of motherhood as women's primary social identity established connections between gender equality and the liberation struggle, and allowed women to leverage greater power within the anti-apartheid resistance movement (Hassim, 2006: 18). Women's rights advocates aligned their ideological goals as feminists with those of the anti-apartheid movement. They aimed not to unsettle or undermine their male comrades in the liberation struggle, but to build strategic alliances with powerful allies and to promote an understanding of how women's rights resonated with democratic enfranchisement.

Two decades after South African democracy, women's primary social identity remains as mother and wife. While 'motherism' is mutable, re-interpreted in response to the political needs of different eras and ideologies, it is still the crux of women's social identity in South Africa. However, pregnancy among teenagers is understood as an arch expression of delinquency, promiscuity and the abuse of democratic freedoms and ideals. The rights and freedoms accorded to children, youth and women, are perceived as promoting sexual profligacy, connected symbolically to other forms of feckless and rampant consumption. Among both older adults and young men in this research, the legislation of gender equality was perceived as licensing promiscuity among teenagers. While the young women in this research also used a rights discourse to defend sexual freedom, their experiences of sexual and reproductive rights did not signal the rupture of democracy, so much as a continuity of apartheid-era reproductive controls, in which teenage pregnancy was publicly condemned, but privately countenanced.

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