Bread, baby shoes or blusher? Myths about social grants and 'lazy' young mothers

Recent newspaper reports[1] and Jacob Zuma's political campaign[2] have once again raised the alleged issue of young women abusing the social grant system – either by falling pregnant 'on purpose' to collect the Child Support Grant (CSG), or by leaving their children with grandmothers while the mothers spend the grant on 'drinking sprees, [buying] clothing and [gambling] with the money'.[1] Many researchers and social grant advocates believed that the issue of perverse incentives and the CSG was unequivocally laid to rest 2 years ago. In March 2007, the Department of Social Development released the findings of a Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) study commissioned to investigate the relationship between teenage pregnancies and uptake of the CSG. The study showed that there was no association between teenage fertility and the grant. This conclusion was based on the following three findings: Firstly, while teenage pregnancy rose rapidly during the 1980s, it had stabilized and even started to decline by the time the CSG was introduced in 1998. Secondly, only 20 percent of teens who bear children are beneficiaries of the CSG. This is disproportionately low compared to their contribution to fertility. Thirdly, observed increases in youthful fertility have occurred across all social sectors, including amongst young people who would not qualify for the CSG on the means test.[3] (p. 2)

The CSG was implemented in 1998 after recommendations by the Lund Committee for Child and Family Support to phase out the former State Maintenance Grant.[4] The CSG had reached 8.3 million beneficiaries in 2008 – having grown from 34 000 beneficiaries in 1999 – and constitutes the largest income cash transfer programme in South Africa.[5]

Research has consistently found a correlation between social grants and positive childhood development. There is an inverse relationship between poor social and economic conditions in childhood and subsequent success in life; and increased incomes via social grants for single mothers with children has proved to be an important factor in educational performance of the child.[6] Studies on the CSG have pointed out that this grant is often the only source of income for the child's primary caregiver and that it is primarily spent on food and clothing – not on Lotto tickets or cosmetics.[7,8] As one participant in a study of the CSG in the Western Cape put it: '*Al is die CSG so min, dit help 'n mens baie. Jy kan byvoorbeeld skoene koop vir die kind, of genoeg brood vir die maand.*'[7] [Even though the CSG is so little, it helps one a lot. For example, you can buy shoes for the child, or enough bread for the month.] (p. 221)

Delany *et al*. also found that access to health care was high among CSG beneficiaries, as was enrolment at school.[8]

Turning to the argument of perverse incentives and teenage pregnancies, it is hard to imagine that a young girl would 'deliberately' fall pregnant for R230 a month. In a country with a high prevalence of HIV[9] and STIs,[10] strongly conservative social norms around sex,11 high rates of gender-based violence and coerced sex,[12-16] and unacceptable maternal mortality ratios,[17,18] it is very unlikely that young girls would premeditatively choose to have unprotected sex, so as to fall pregnant as a means to a mere R7,70 a day. Rather, the high rates of teenage pregnancies should be attributed to the lack of sexual and reproductive health rights and sexual decision-making.

Millions of people in South Africa survive only because of the country's social security system – one that should be supported and its delivery strengthened. Indeed, the safety net of social grants should be extended to include a chronic illness grant (as proposed by the National Strategic Plan 2007 - 2011,[19] while the phased roll-out of a basic income grant should also be considered (as recommended by the Taylor Report.[6] South Africa's social security system should be lauded – not denigrated together with the people who legitimately make use of it. Two brackets in the above para that don't close

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