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THE TEENAGE MOTHER AND EDUCATION

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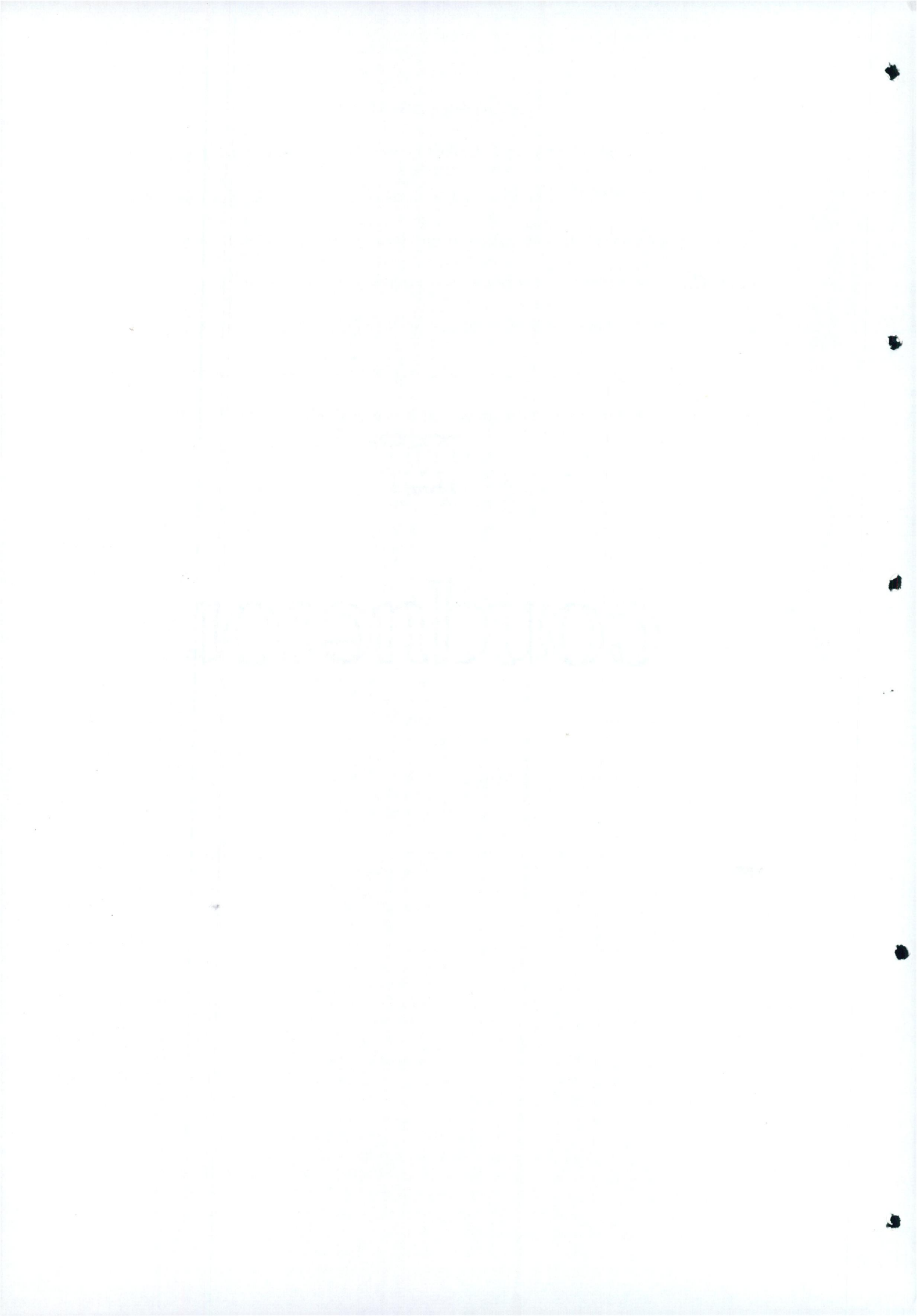
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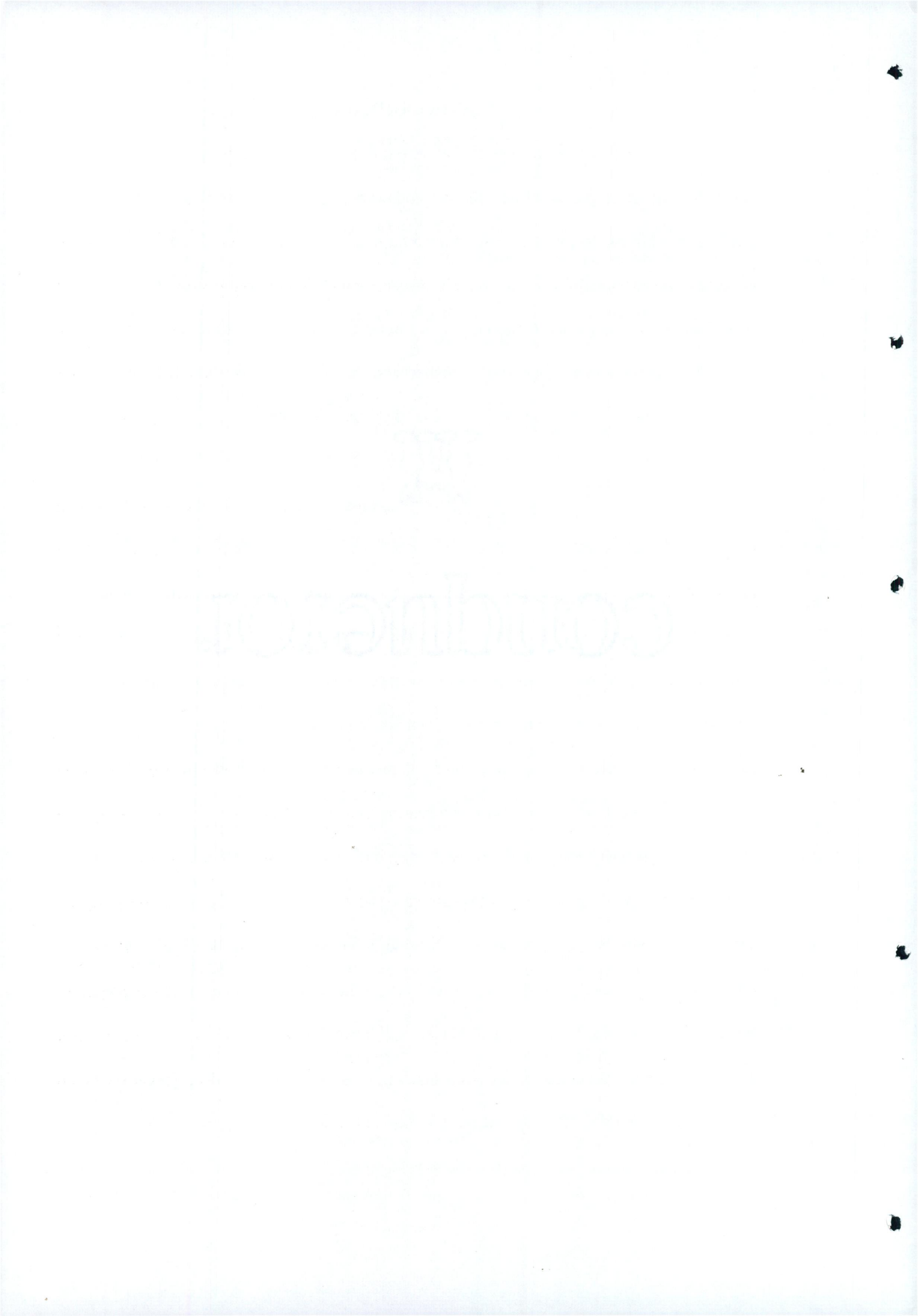
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INTRODUCTION

In this dissertation I will explore a topic which is as relevant to me, personally, as any topic could be. Single motherhood is my life, and how I deal with it is intimate and not easily revealed, especially in a document like this one. I chose this topic because of this personal relevance, and also because I wish to emphasise strongly the positive aspects regarding single motherhood, which I believe many people fail to recognise. There are positive aspects to teenage single motherhood, but the extent of these aspects depends greatly upon the support structures available to the young mother.

I will deal with the range of problems and decisions encountered by young women, and explore why, in many cases a pregnancy in adolescence is not avoided through the use of contraception. I will discuss also the outcome and consequences of a teenage pregnancy, i.e. what are the effects of parenthood upon the lives of teenage mothers. The main thrust of this work is to focus on the importance of learning from experience and through relationships with other people. Non-academic education, or education through an enriching life experience, like giving birth, is just as valuable as academic work, albeit in an entirely different way. Childbirth and rearing demands an attitude of responsibility and affords an opportunity to speak for oneself as an individual. It is absolutely critical that any young pregnant woman be able to express how she feels and what she wants because any decision regarding her child is essentially her decision - although not bereft of any external influences as I will explore further in this chapter. When a young woman becomes pregnant, the decisions she makes in respect of herself and her child will be the first important adult decisions she ever has to make, decisions that will effect her life more deeply than she could ever imagine possible. Throughout the text the italics used are mine.



Chapter 1

ANTECEDENTS TO TEENAGE PREGNANCY

Family Background

There have always been women who raised children alone. There have always been non-traditional families, but society's tolerance and acceptance of the single-mothered family has depended upon the cause of her aloneness. Why is this woman alone with children? If she is a widow then she is, and has been in the past, applauded for her strength of spirit, her endurance, her loyalty to her dead husband and to her children. In the past hundreds of thousands of women were left to cope with their grief, and the welfare of their children. In the male dominated defence forces, forging through war after war, the men who died left in their wake families decimated - financially, emotionally and spiritually. But society was sympathetic. The reasons were acceptable, these now-single women, with families, were virtuous. While the men were away, the community at large, survived and continued with a woman-dominated society.

On the other hand, women who had children and were never married were shunned. The children were passed off as their grandmother's children, and raised as siblings to their parents. At a time when there was no control over the rate of conception, when self-induced abortions were rife, any sensible person would imagine that with the advent of adequate and reliable contraception, society would see the end of unplanned or unwanted pregnancies. So why is the opposite true? Why is it, that the majority of teenage mothers are working-class and not very well educated - classical low achievers (1). If a young woman is faced with a future that is likely to be average, or below average, with lower qualifications (academic) than desired, and employment prospects which may be quite

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inadequate, she will look for an alternative solution. Is it inconceivable that the solution for such young women will be that they want to succeed, to achieve, to possess something which is self made, something which says "*I am valuable, I am a worthwhile human being*". And so we see that the rate of teenage pregnancy has increased steadily over the years (see Table One) despite the availability of the contraceptive pill in the 1970's.

Adolescence is a difficult time anyway, and no woman wants to make it any more difficult. To people who never had any experience of early motherhood, or known anyone who has, then it may seem almost perverse that anyone could want to feel needed and worthwhile, to be an adult strongly enough to use pregnancy as a means to achieve adult status, to fulfil the desire for some form of achievement. But my own experience leaves me in no doubt that this is fact. My own view is reinforced by the experiences of friends and relatives in the same position, and by articles I have reviewed and included in my bibliography. The following is an extract from a leading magazine for teenagers which was sent to me by the British Birth Control Trust. The words of one single mother on why she became pregnant:

..... I'd had a bit of a rough life and I just wanted something that I could have as mine, that was the only thing no one could take away (2).....

Surveys have shown that, as I have mentioned, single teenage mothers are likely to live in rented accommodation, less likely to be high academic achievers, more likely to come from large families themselves, and to have poor employment prospects (3). Surveys have also shown that "*knowledge is not successful in reducing the chances of out-of-wedlock child-bearing*" (4).

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TABLE ONE

RISING BIRTH RATES TO SINGLE WOMEN IN IRELAND

| AGE | 1961 | 1971 | 1981 | 1986 | 1990 |
|-------|------|------|-------|-------|-------|
| 15 | 31 | 33 | 49 | 34 | 62 |
| 16 | 40 | 58 | 155 | 150 | 168 |
| 17 | 65 | 118 | 305 | 364 | 440 |
| 18 | 84 | 211 | 486 | 588 | 692 |
| 19 | 85 | 185 | 498 | 692 | 882 |
| TOTAL | 308 | 605 | 1,493 | 1,828 | 2,244 |
| 20 | 71 | 200 | 497 | 659 | 838 |
| 21 | 73 | 186 | 380 | 608 | 684 |
| 22 | 57 | 155 | 309 | 448 | 611 |
| 23 | 64 | 152 | 258 | 392 | 469 |
| 24 | 58 | 113 | 175 | 324 | 390 |

Source: Central Statistics Office, Dublin, telephone conversation.

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Extensive tests and studies throughout Britain in the early 1980's concluded that:

.....knowledge of how conception occurs and how to avoid pregnancy is virtually universal, even among those aged less than eighteen..... (5).

I found this fact to be extremely interesting, firstly because it is my own belief that this is true, and secondly, because exactly the opposite was said to be true by the Irish Family Planning Association in reference to the need for their Adolescent Helpline (6). It appears that, in Ireland, the only comfortably accepted reasons for teenage pregnancy are ignorance and lack of knowledge. Perhaps this adds an air of respectability and acceptability to the business of teenage sexual activity. I will discuss this and the contraception debate in the next section. What I wish to stress here, by means of a quotation, is the deep social recognition attained through being a mother.

.....having children also brings status, women are raised from the earliest age to perceive womanhood as equivalent to motherhood..... (7).

CONCLUSION

Relationships and Contraception

I have already stated that lack of knowledge regarding contraception cannot be used as a general excuse, a comfortable reason for teenage pregnancy. It was not the reason in my case, nor with anyone I know. Not one of us is below average intelligence, not one of us comes from a large family, not one of us ever had to go without anything, materially or emotionally. We knew where babies came from, we knew about contraception. So what happened? During the course of my research into the contraception aspect of teenage sexuality, I have discovered that attendance at the Dublin Irish Family Planning Association Clinics has shifted, over the thirteen year period from 1977 to 1990, from being mainly married clients to being mainly single (see Table Two). There has also been an increase in the number of first time callers aged nineteen or under, an increase of almost six per cent. *In 1990 15.5% of all new callers at the I.F.P.A. were aged nineteen or younger (8).* Of these young first time callers, (survey done in 1983), *85% of them had been sexually active for almost two years on average and 35% of them had already been pregnant.* So although young people are availing of contraception, they are doing so sporadically, inconsistently. So the number of births to teenage mothers has risen dramatically (see Table One). It must be stressed that the following statistics are for out-of-wedlock births, not specifically teenage births. The figures have risen as follows:

.....in 1971 2.7% of births were registered to unmarried women. By 1983 this figure had risen to 6.8%. And in 1990 one in ten children were born to single mothers..... (9).

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TABLE TWO

MARITAL STATUS OF I.F.P.A. CLIENTS: 1977, 1978, 1987, 1989, 1990.

| | MARRIED | SINGLE |
|------|---------|--------|
| YEAR | % | % |
| 1977 | 53 | 47 |
| 1978 | 56 | 44 |
| 1987 | 35 | 65 |
| 1989 | 40 | 60 |
| 1990 | 29 | 71 |

Source: Irish Family Planning Association, Annual Reports (years shown).

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There has been a significant rise in the number of births to young women aged fifteen and younger. This was of particular interest to me, and the statistics quoted were surprising to say the least; in 1986 when I gave birth to my daughter, I was aged fifteen. Thirty-three other girls of my age and younger gave birth that same year. *By 1990 that figure had risen to sixty-two (10).* A very alarming rise! Again I believe ignorance is used as an easy explanation. When interviewed by the I.F.P.A. and other organisations, most young pregnant women stated that they had been involved in a steady relationship. Gone is the myth of the "easy" one-night-stand. 58% of the mothers in that same survey had not even considered contraception (11).

So why not consider contraception? The question arises again and again. Could it be that young women disregard contraception because of the element of premeditation involved? Pretending that one did not intend to have sex is surely the easiest way to calm one's frantic parents. This is a bizarre way to view the whole issue, but yet it is a common way. Surveys done in the early 1970's showed that 51% of girls interviewed feared their sexual activity would be discovered by their parents should they realise that their daughters required contraceptives (12). So, in Catholic Ireland it appears that it is quite acceptable to be sexually active at an increasing early age, it is forgiveable if one becomes pregnant in one's teens, "because you didn't know better". It is sinful though to have an active sex life in one's teens, using contraception, because then one's sexuality is blatant, it exists, it is intended and purposeful. So it appears that so many young women hope for divine intervention - pregnancy will never happen to them. In a society where the majority of girls are convent-educated, religion and religious values are instilled into us, we fight against them but they seduce their way into the subconscious and the guilt gnaws its way through our sexuality.

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We are conditioned to become the wife and mother-figure, and also now, to balance a career with marriage and children. We are bombarded with contradictions by school, media and society. Women are equal, we are told. Women must look beautiful, we must be strong, we must be feminine, we must be gentle, loving souls with hard raw earning-power in the work place. We must be supportive, we must not be dominated and must never be domineering. We must be capable mothers, loving wives, ravishing lovers, equal breadwinners. We can never be sexually experienced, never be tied to the home, never leave our children with minders, never earn more than our men and always have confidence in our abilities and beliefs.

So with this new confidence there is the feeling that, yes, women can be gutsy go-getters! Daughters can choose whatever career they wish, women can break into male-dominated careers. Is it really that surprising that those same young women are beginning to want adult status earlier and earlier. They are encouraged to be ambitious and fearless in their career choices. Yet the most fundamental area of their lives, our lives, is controlled by religion and society. Our sexuality belongs to someone else. Sexuality is something which remains dormant until you find the right man and marry him - then everything, it is presumed, falls into place. Real life, as my statistics have shown, is not that simple. People are not that simple, sexuality cannot be postponed or pigeon-holed. The sexual maturity attained during adolescence is not an indication of emotional maturity, but it cannot be suppressed until the young woman's emotions catch up. Instead a responsible attitude to sex must be fostered and this includes openness about contraception.

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FOOTNOTES - CHAPTER 1

1. Ann Phoenix, Young Mothers, New York, Polity Press, 1991.
2. Teenage Mothers, Mizz Magazine, December, 1990, p.12-13.
3. Phoenix, Young Mothers.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., p.63.
6. I.F.P.A., Young People and Family Planning: The Learning Experience of the Irish Family Planning Association, 1984 - 1990, Dublin, I.F.P.A., 1991, p.1-23.
7. Diana Gittins, The Family in Question, Changing Households and Familiar Ideologies, London, Macmillan, 1985.
8. I.F.P.A., Young People and Family Planning.
9. Ibid.
10. Central Statistics Office, Census and Population Department, Dublin, telephone conversation, January, 1992.
11. The following quotation written in the 1950's gives an indication of the attitudes then towards single mothers:
.....they either do not know the man at all or have had only a brief casual relationship with him...all the evidence points to the fact that most of the girls in this group are truly disinterested in the actual fathers of the babies whether they know them or not the basic fact remains unaltered. They do not have a poor relationship with men, they have no relationship at all.....

Leontine Young, Out of Wedlock, New York, McGraw Hill, 1954 (quoted in Vivienne Darling, And Baby Makes Two, p.53.).
12. I.F.P.A., Young People and Family Planning.
13. J.K. Russell, Medical and Social Hazards of Teenage Pregnancy, Changing Patterns of Contraception and Fertility, London, Academic Press, 1981.

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CHAPTER 2

CONSEQUENCES OF TEENAGE PREGNANCY

The Role and Reaction of Others

Upon discovering that she is actually pregnant, the teenage mother-to-be usually goes through a denial phase. It is quite a difficult state to describe, in spite of having experienced it. It is a time when there is absolutely nothing else on your mind but the baby, a time when you tell yourself three months of morning sickness is an upset stomach, you are not in fact getting fatter, you tell yourself it's your imagination. You cannot sleep because of the tension and worry in the pit of your stomach. And although you tell yourself you are not pregnant you try to plan how to tell your parents you are. My research has shown that among my friends and relatives, the stage at which the pregnancy is actually admitted, or revealed depends very much upon the age of the mother-to-be. These personal experiences are reinforced by published study reports (1). The younger the mother, the later she leaves it. Most young mothers wait until the pregnancy is actually noticed even by close friends (2).

I have looked at many tables and charts regarding who is the first person to be told of the pregnancy in general. Approximately 60% of women tell the father of the child first. His reaction is of extreme importance to the woman's own view of, and reaction to, the pregnancy. Sally MacIntyre states a very clear and humanistic explanation as to why this is true:

.....a woman's description to various audiences of the relationship in which she conceived requires the collaboration, whether positive or negative, of the putative father. His responses to pregnancy and subsequent actions can confirm and/or disconfirm her claims. Total lack of interest on his part, for example, can negate her claims that she conceived in a steady relationship for reciprocal love; acceptance of his responsibility, concern for her welfare and providing support in reaching a mutually acceptable outcome, can support her claim (3).

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Another reason why the father is usually told first has got to be that he was obviously aware of the existence of sexual activity already. When telling parents, the obvious, embarrassment and shame attached to admitting sexual activity, let alone revealing a pregnancy, is a deterrent to any young expectant mother. The chances of a mother being told first are increased if the young woman is under eighteen and living at home (4). Surveys have shown that parental support is generally good, although naturally not all parents are in a position to offer the mother and child a long term home. Emotional support is extremely important. Contrary to popular belief almost 41% of the children's fathers are supportive when told, although sometimes the promise of financial assistance is not honoured (5). However, the relationship is somehow validated, even temporarily, if the father of the child is supportive.

The most important barrier regarding parents is a very difficult one to overcome. It involves feelings of betrayal and deviance. Parents feel let down and conscious of other people's reactions. They feel that they have somehow caused the situation and that the pregnancy is a result of some shortcoming in their own parenting. And so the expectant mother postpones telling them for as long as possible. It is a silent festering worry which no young woman enjoys inflicting on her parents. Often this is what goes through the expectant mother's mind - "my parents will blame themselves" or "what will they think of me?" (6). The single mother's right to motherhood is rarely honoured without a great deal of guilt, shame and remorse being experienced first. The opportunity to enjoy the gift of motherhood is denied to many young women, because of their age and marital status.

Another aspect of single motherhood which I feel is often dismissed is the mother's need for friendship during and after pregnancy. Many friendships are irreparably

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damaged or destroyed because of either the pregnancy itself or the resulting child. The young mother is now alien to her previous social group. Lack of freedom to social as before can mean loss of contact with original friends. To mix purely with other single mothers is not exactly desirable as this does not improve the variety of social contacts, or the young mothers ability to socialise in a positive, confident way with people in a different position to herself. Naturally it is much more beneficial for a young mother to have a wide circle of friends, in order to ease the isolation of single parenthood, especially if she is living alone with her child as many young mothers must do. It is better that she develops personally, through having the child and that her ability to further her own life contacts continues and develops. Her life should not be totally secondary to the needs of the child.

On the positive side however, the consequences of early motherhood include accelerated maturity. In achieving apparent adult status, and womanhood, the young woman also learns to cope financially, emotionally, and physically with having a child. Problems are many and varied. They include problems with housing if the family home is unsuitable due perhaps to lack of space, or circumstances unsympathetic to allow the mother and child to remain at home. Landlords are all too often unwilling to accept young women with babies and conditions are often undesirable anyway, i.e. flats in bad repair with high rents (7). Financially the single mother is in a better position now than she has been in the past. Since the introduction of an allowance for unmarried mothers in 1974, now called the Lone Parents Allowance, young mothers are not totally dependent on parental financial support or employment. As it stands, the amount is almost £70.00 a week for a parent and one child and the myth that young women "do it for the money" must be dissolved here and now. This small amount of money must be budgeted to cover all expenses, another skill which is

condemned

new to most young women. Raising a child and running a household all in one huge step, and on a limited amount of money is surely a difficult task for anybody. If the single mother is still living at home, she is now in a position to contribute to the household expenses. This increases the chances of staying in the parental home after the child is born as the financial burden does not fall on the young mother's parents.

Emotionally, the mother changes. Many single mothers, including myself, found that the fathers of their children seemed far too immature and irresponsible following the birth of the child (8). This contributes to the high break-up rate of couples following the birth of the child and is a valuable educational experience for the woman involved. She now discovers that she can lead her life and rear a child without the child's father being involved. This could be described as the birth of an independent, responsible parent.

The question of whether a child needs a father depends on the kind of father involved. Common sense tells us that no father is better than a father who does not wish to be responsible for the child, or who has a detrimental effect on the child's welfare. One supportive loving adult who has no adverse interference from another is more valuable, more able to provide an emotionally stable life for the child than one who is under pressure from a dispassionate partner. A more disturbing consequence of teenage pregnancy is perhaps the fact that many young mothers leave school at the earliest opportunity. It is impossible to find data on the numbers of such school-leavers in Ireland, i.e. those young women who have left school as a result of being pregnant. I interviewed a priest who teaches in a large vocational school in a working-class area of Dublin. He stated that the general trend is for the girls to have their babies, leave school around age fifteen to seventeen to do this, and then return to

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school to complete their own Leaving Certificate when their children reach school-going age. The fact that the school also has a creche, because it is a venue for adult night classes is very helpful. He believes, and his experience is wide, that young motherhood need not be detrimental. He stated that in the majority of cases in his experience, the young women involved had changed for the better as a direct result of the forced responsibility involved with mothering. It is interesting to note that while single motherhood is associated with the lower classes pregnancies also occur among women of the higher social classes. These women are more likely to either use contraception or to consider termination if a pregnancy does occur. Perhaps this is because their lives are heading in an altogether more prosperous direction. It is an interesting paradox that those women who can least afford, financially, to keep and raise their children are those most reluctant to avoid or end pregnancy while the women who have greater financial and occupational security and better prospects are those for whom single motherhood is unacceptable (9).

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Medical Hazards of Teenage Pregnancy

The most common problem involved with the medical care of teenage mothers is that the majority leave it far too late to seek ante-natal care. Another important aspect is in relation to the health and birth weights of babies born to young mothers. Many young women experience premature labour and this results in slightly smaller than average babies. The social conditions and nutrition of many pregnant teenagers are less than desirable and this also contributes to the birth of lower than average birth weight babies. Another contributing factor to premature labour is the considerable stress and anxiety under which the teenager is placed during her pregnancy. The question of the safety of giving birth at an early age must be divided into two categories - the first being the physical safety. Is there any concrete medical reason as to why a young mother should be physically incapable of carrying and bearing a child? I questioned my own doctor as well as reviewing some of the literature available. The answer is simple - with proper ante-natal care there is no medical reason why a young teenager cannot bear a healthy child. The second aspect regarding safety is the mental safety of the young mother. The pressures of being pregnant and realisation of the impending responsibilities involved with parenting are disturbing and impossible to come to terms with alone. If the support structures are adequate and appropriate then the young woman should be thoroughly and carefully prepared for the event. Ante-natal classes are essential and younger women particularly are strongly advised by the nursing staff to enrol when attending the maternity hospital.

The time spent denying pregnancy is wasted time really. This is a time which should be spent coming to terms with and preparing for the new arrival, even if the girl's intention is to allow the baby to be adopted. It has been found to be emotionally more

hazardous for very young mothers to be given therapeutic abortions. Although it may solve the immediate problem, abortion during the early teenage years carries an increased risk of reproductive problems in later life. The problems associated with bearing and rearing a child at that same age, ie, early teens, are ones of social and educational importance (10). I will deal with these issues further in the next chapter.

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FOOTNOTES - CHAPTER 2

1. Vivienne Darling, And Baby Makes Two, Dublin, Federation for the Services of Unmarried Parents and their Children (F.S.U.P.C.), 1984.
2. Phoenix, Young Mothers, p.110.
3. Darling, And Baby Makes Two, p.29.
4. Ibid., p.30.
5. Ibid., p.56.
6. Ibid., p.72-78.
7. Ibid., p.84-90.
8. Angela Hopkinson, Single Motherhood, The First Year; A Scottish Study of Mothers Bringing Up their Children on their Own, Scottish Council for Single Parents, 1976.
9. Darling, And Baby Makes Two, p.35-39.
10. J.K. Russell, The Hazards of Teenage Pregnancy, Academic Press, 1981, p.192.



CHAPTER 3

MOTHERHOOD AS MOTIVATOR

The reasons why people work to achieve their greatest potential are varied. Some people see financial reward as the ultimate goal, some want to please their families, some achieve because it is expected, some need to be constantly heckled and pushed to work well. Some women need to have the responsibility of another human being to become motivated enough to take charge and achieve. Is this reason any less valid than the other motivational factors stated above? I think not. It may be that the ambition to succeed simply for oneself is not strong enough in women like myself. In 1987 Furstenberg, who has done extensive research into this subject, states;

.....those women under 20 who did not marry after having a child were more likely to continue with their education than women who married. Seventeen years after birth, women with "educational credentials" were more likely than those without, to have children who did relatively well in school.....(1).

So obviously young women who drop out of school when pregnant are not only affecting their own educational success but also that of their children.

On the other hand some mothers decide to return to school when mature to fulfil their own ambitions and potential partly as a result of the confidence mothering brings and partly because of the necessity for further qualifications to secure higher quality employment (2). More and more women are finding it necessary to go to work to support their families. They become mother, father and financial controller all in one. The single mother has an opportunity to avail of a very different kind of education. It is an education which embraces all aspects of life. Most importantly it is a two-way education, the mother teaching the child and the child educating the mother through mutual experiences. The confidence and self esteem which can be built through parenting is very much under-

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estimated, and when this is begun at an early age the benefits are enormous. The merits of raising a child alone are tied in with this confidence. Because there is nobody to consult, the single mother is forced to make decisions regarding very important aspects of the child's welfare and rearing. The existence of one parent only means there are no conflicting opinions regarding parental roles in issues like punishment and discipline for example. The very close one-to-one relationship which develops between the single mother and child stems, I believe, from the amount of thought, worry and discussion which usually goes with teenage pregnancy. The fact that the mother has faced so many difficult decisions, and the realisation that sole responsibility for how that child grows up rests in her hands, must be taken very seriously.

Part of the long-term education of the mother, which is particularly valuable to the child must be the development of personal qualities like tolerance, patience and respect for a different way of doing things. A child reared in a non-traditional family experiences a valuable education for life, the realisation that not all families are the same and for girls the positive role model of an independent mother and head of house.

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Personal Qualities and Motherhood

Early motherhood is not, or at least need not be, the end of a young woman's life. If handled correctly it can mark a new beginning. Motherhood awakens values in us that remain dormant or untapped until the birth of that first child. It brings intense difficulties which I have discussed and do not deny for a moment. But I would strongly challenge the belief that young motherhood brings more problems than it brings rewards. The rewards are recognisable in the changes evident in the young mothers themselves. Qualities like warmth, caring, strength and maturity are all necessary and unavoidable when it comes to child-rearing. Suddenly one's life is simply not for oneself. Sometimes that is frustrating, often frightening, but one cannot escape from it. So the difficulties faced foster an attitude of leadership and resilience - a set of personal values and traits which could be very attractive in the job market. The time is slowly coming when employers will realise this is a fact.

Changes are slowly being made in company's structures where creche facilities are being incorporated into the larger company premises - eg. Telecom Eireann, Head Office, Dublin, and in many of the third level institutions. As for the stigma regarding single mothers, at no time have I encountered other than minor difficulties when dealing with other people and their attitudes to me. In many ways most people respect that I have tried to achieve, even if they were originally uncomfortable with my early motherhood. Most people say that I have matured, become much quieter, or at one stage almost reclusive. The general agreement among family and friends is that motherhood has had a very positive effect. Another close friend says of one of her single mother friends "she is much different now, she used to be terrible, wild. Now she is much more responsible; she idolises her little

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girl". The dissolution of the stigma attached to single-mothering has been proved in recent Irish attitudinal surveys. The questions revolved around all the so-called minority groups (see Table Three). The results showed that of all those groups about whom people were questioned, single mothers were accepted as easily as the other single women categories, eg. deserted wives and widows (3). MacGreil asked the following questions of a cross-section of Irish people:

Children born out of wedlock should be treated the same as those born within marriage - 98.6% agreed.

The unmarried mother should pay for her sins - 95.3% disagreed.

The unmarried mother is more to blame than the unmarried father - 86.6% disagreed.

It is always wrong to use artificial contraceptives - 63% disagreed.

It is obvious from the results of MacGreil's Study that my own experience of people's favorable attitudes is not unique to my situation.

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TABLE THREE

Liberal/Illiberal Scale by Total Sample - No. sampled approximately 2,280 people.

MacGreil's introduction to the questionnaire as follows "*again, I would like to read you a number of statements about opinions that some people hold. After I've read each statement could you tell me whether you agree or disagree?*".....

| STATEMENT | AGREE | DON'T KNOW | DIS-AGREE |
|--|-------|------------|-----------|
| | % | % | % |
| Children born out-of-wedlock should be treated the same as those born in marriage. | 98.6 | 0.3 | 1.1 |
| The unmarried mother should pay for her sins. | 3.2 | 1.5 | 95.3 |
| The unmarried mother is more to blame than the unmarried father. | 10.4 | 3.1 | 86.6 |
| Premarital sex is always wrong. | 57.6 | 3.9 | 38.5 |
| It is always wrong to use artificial contraceptives. | 31.3 | 5.7 | 63.0 |

Source: Micheal MacGreil, Prejudice and Tolerance in Ireland, Dublin, College of Industrial Relations, 1977.

Note: The statements above are relevant excerpts from an original total of 24.



Paternal Rights?

The position of single fathers as regards their children must of course be considered, but first I will clarify the legal position of the mothers involved. Single mothers had no legal rights over their children until 1964 when the Guardianship of Infants Act (4) recognised the single mother as guardian of her child. The child until that time was classed as Filius Nulius (child of no-one). Now the position of the single father is different. He has no automatic parental rights. He can however be named on the birth certificate if the mother wishes and he is in agreement. The fact that his name is included on the birth certificate is an admission of paternity but does not affect the mother's rights to sole guardianship of the child or eligibility for the Lone Parent Allowance. He can apply for access to the child through the courts however, although this is a very rare occurrence. I believe that every single mother has the same single certainty in her mind - that is the knowledge that she is the sole legal guardian of the child and that this is a stable position. This knowledge is imperative if the young mother is to plan her new life with the child. Any undermining of this legal right would cause huge difficulties and worry wishing to make a fresh start alone.

In Britain, a working paper has recently been put forward by the Law Commissioner in which it is proposed that unmarried parents would have the same legal rights as married parents (5). It is a painful but factual matter nevertheless, that many single fathers have "an erratic and unstable relationship with their children" (6). I strongly believe that a single mother must be given the freedom to decide whether or not access of the father to the child would prove detrimental to the welfare of that child or if he has any constructive part to play in the rearing of the child. The young mother has no real choice once she has chosen to keep the child, about the amount of time spent caring for her/him. She bears sole

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responsibility for all aspects of the child's life - legally, emotionally, spiritually and financially. The father, on the other hand, can decide whether or not he will be a consistent support to the mother and an active, involved parent on a long-term basis. They must come to an agreement about this involvement and it is then up to the father to honour his promise. Should he fail to do this, then the young woman is free to make the choice preventing any access at all - to protect herself and her child from the adverse effects of such an unstable relationship. Should the suggestions in the working paper mentioned earlier be introduced, then this basic, necessary right to choose, to protect, would be denied every single mother. Again I wish to stress that no father is better than an unreliable, unstable one.

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FOOTNOTES - CHAPTER 3

1. Phoenix, Young Mothers, p.180.
2. Ailsa Burns and Cath Scott, Career Trajectories of Mature Age Graduate Mothers, Melbourne, Australian Institute of Family Studies, 1989.
3. Micheal MacGreil, Prejudice and Tolerance in Ireland, Dublin, College of Industrial Relations, 1977.
4. Darling, And Baby Makes Two, p.64-65.
5. Law Commission, Working Paper No. 74, Family Law, Illegitimacy, London, H.M.S.O., 1979.
6. Darling, And Baby Makes Two, p.65.

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CHAPTER 4

RECOMMENDATIONS

Redefinition of the Family Unit

The stigma attached to single motherhood is no longer prevalent. The reasons for this are related to the numbers of families which are headed by a lone parent. Nationwide figures from the Central Statistics Office Census from 1981 and 1986 have shown an increase in lone-parent families. In 1986 one-fifth of Irish families are classified as lone-parented. Earlier figures are not available as the question was not included in the Census form. The fact that it was considered necessary to include this question reflects the changing structure of Irish families and an increased awareness of this fact. It is very interesting to observe that of the four categories (see Table Four) the biggest change occurs in the number of lone-mothered families, which increases at the expense of the married couple category. It is also interesting to note that of the single parent homes in 1986, 84% of them were headed by lone mothers (1). Although the changes in numbers illustrated in the table may seem small, even insignificant, the time space involved (5 years) is so small that these changes are very likely to be magnified greatly over a longer period of time.

The status and structure of the family has never remained static. One incidence alone, which I discovered when questioning my grandmother, aged 75, showed that her eldest daughter (my aunt) was reared by my great-grandmother. This was because she was my grandmother's first-born, the first of a succession of children born within a short time-span as was normal in the 1940's and 50's. My aunt did not return to the family home until my great-grandmother died. She was then aged eighteen. This apparently was quite a normal occurrence.

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During the Industrial Revolution in Britain it was also quite normal and necessary for families to live in extended family units because of over-crowding and lack of housing. Children worked and illegitimacy and disease were commonplace (2). Now we have families composed of any combination of adults and children, but all are valid family units each with their own merits and demerits. Members of such families are all learning and teaching each other through experience - the experience of living together as a non-traditional family unit. How can the experience of these families be enriched and made easier? It is not enough to provide a weekly allowance only, although the economic problems involved with single parenting are difficult. But passivity should not be encouraged. The valuable qualities discovered through motherhood which I have discussed earlier must be capitalised upon. To enable this to happen the development of a proper network of child-care must be initiated in earnest. Creche and pre-school facilities should be available to all mothers. These facilities must be of good quality, accessible and, above all, affordable. Schools facilities should be adapted to include an after school-hours child-care programme as exists in France and Denmark. Working parents could then leave their children in the care of the school until work finishes. Development of good child-care facilities in schools and colleges will result in more single mothers going on to further or continue their education. The single-mother is then in a much more favourable position to give her children a better chance of successful education as well as the home-based education through experience discussed earlier.

Third level grants are not affected by the Lone Parents Allowance. Nor is the allowance cancelled when the claimant is in receipt of the grant. So educationally, the doors could open.

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TABLE FOUR

STRUCTURE OF IRISH FAMILIES

| | 1981 | 1986 |
|--|-------|-------|
| LONE FATHERS | 3.3% | 3.4% |
| LONE MOTHERS | 14.8% | 17.0% |
| MARRIED | 61.6% | 57.0% |
| NO CHILDREN | 20.0% | 21.0% |
| LONE MOTHERS (as a percentage of total single parent families) | 81.5% | 84.0% |

Source: Central Statistics Office, Dublin, January, 1992.

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FOOTNOTES - CHAPTER 4

1. Central Statistics Office, Census and Population Department, Dublin, Telephone conversation, 1992.
2. Diana Gittins, Family in Question, p.104-107.

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CONCLUSION

Considering all aspects of single motherhood, from the conception of the child to the mother's experience of raising him/her, it is obvious that early child bearing and rearing is fraught with difficulties. Stress, early decision making, economic hardship and strains on the academic/ educational prospects of the mother are examples of these difficulties. However, what sort of woman emerges from the other end of early motherhood? What are the factors influencing whether or not she becomes successful and independent? Furstenberg, who has carried out longitudinal studies of a large sample of teenage mothers over a seventeen-year period in the USA has discovered that educational ambitions are extremely important in determining the future economic success of a pregnant teenager. He states that:

.....the pregnant teen's educational ambitions and goals are the one set of attitudes that predict later economic success. In particular, a strong association exists between the pregnant adolescent's educational aspirations and her later economic well-being. Her self evaluation of school performance and enjoyment of school were also modestly related to her economic status in adulthood. The strongest predictor of eventual economic success was being at grade level, suggesting that adolescents who were performing below grade level were especially susceptible to economic disadvantage in later life. These findings seem to confirm the earlier observation that competence and motivation, as inferred by early educational commitment, are important sources of variation in later life. This interpretation is further bolstered by the fact that those reporting higher aspirations were more likely to remain in school throughout the pregnancy and to finish high school eventually. And, of course, school completion is an important path to subsequent economic well-being.....(1)

Factors which were proved not to be important in relation to predicting the adult economic success of a pregnant teenager were (2):

1. **Rate of church attendance**
2. **Age at first intercourse**
3. **Timing of first pre-natal visit**
4. **Marital status of own parents**

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Obviously the strongest link between teenage pregnancy and economic success in adulthood is the quality and extent of her education along with her attitude and level of ambition in relation to this education. Simply stated, women who remain in school throughout their pregnancy and after the birth of their child " were significantly less likely than early drop-outs to be on welfare and more likely to be economically secure" (3). In relation to this point regarding the importance of the continuation of schooling, parental support is invaluable if the young woman wishes to continue with her education. This is an area where parents can be of enormous benefit - they must encourage their pregnant daughters to remain at school. Furstenberg states that:

.....in the initial phase of the study, women who remained with their parents were more likely to remain in school and avoid repeat pregnancies..... This favourable effect of coresidence did not hold up over the long-term. In fact, the more years women lived with their parents in the first phase of the study, the more likely they were to have economic problems at the seventeen year follow-up. Possibly, coresidence offers temporary relief but, if extended, may foster long-term dependency.....(4)

This adds a whole new dimension to the role of parents. It highlights the importance of discouraging passivity in the single mother. Her independence must always be encouraged and its importance stressed. An independent attitude must be developed during the struggle for economic stability. In supporting the teenage mother through the early stages to establish independence, the parents must ensure that she is becoming wholly independent, i.e. mentally liberated and confident in addition to being in a stable financial position. It is then that teenage motherhood will become an easier state to survive, with more favourable results for all people concerned.

The parental role is also important when considering the contraception issue. Many parents consider that having ensured that their children know about, and how to avail of,

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contraception they have fulfilled their parental duties. However, they must also emphasise the difficulties involved with single mothering and the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases, especially AIDS. Then the onus is on the young woman to choose whether or not to become pregnant. If she chooses pregnancy, she must be supported, as I have outlined above. The route she has chosen must be made as productive as possible for her, emotionally and financially. It must also be emphasised that the more children to which a young girl gives birth the less likely she is to become economically successful (5). This is where creche and child care facilities are of optimum importance and the development of such facilities must be initiated in earnest. Furstenberg has highlighted the need for educational options**reduced schooling, in turn lowered their ability to support themselves in the long run.....(5)**

Finally, parents now and in the future must realise that their, our children, are sexual beings. Sexuality does not begin with a wedding ring. No parent should condemn or deny a young person's desire for sexual activity. The myth that all teenage pregnancies are caused by ignorance is one, I believe, fostered by adults who just do not feel comfortable with the fact that teenagers choose to have sex and disregard contraception. This idea cloaks teenage pregnancy with a shroud of decent respectability. Sexuality is respectable and should not be stifled. It is as much a part of the individual as hair and eye colour. The emphasis should be on responsibility coupled with sexuality. Then the constructive, enriching potential of teenage motherhood will be fulfilled.

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FOOTNOTES - CONCLUSION

1. Furstenberg, Gunn and Morgan, Adolescent Mothers in Later Life, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986, pp.54-55.
2. Ibid, p.54.
3. Ibid, p.55.
4. Ibid, p.57.
5. Ibid, p.61.

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