



A Road Less Travelled

Voices of 21 teenage mothers
from the country



WOMEN'S HEALTH
GOULBURN NORTH EAST



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Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE) was established in July 2000. Previously known as NEWomen, Women's Health Goulburn North East is the government funded, specialist women's health service for the Goulburn Valley and north-east Victoria.

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Thanks too, to the youth workers who assisted.

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WOMAN TO CHILD

By Judith Wright

You who were darkness warmed my flesh
where out of darkness rose the seed
Then all a world I made in me;
all the world you hear and see
hung upon my dreaming blood.

There moved the multitudinous stars,
and coloured birds and fishes moved.
There swam the sliding continents.
All time lay rolled in me, and sense,
and love that knew not its beloved.

O node and focus of the world;
I hold you deep within that well
You shall escape and not escape-
that mirrors still your sleeping shape;
that nurtures still your crescent cell.

I wither and you break from me;
yet though you dance in living light
I am the earth, I am the root,
I am the stem that fed the fruit,
the link that joins you to the night.

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Executive Summary

The lives of the young mothers in this report have dramatically shifted axis. Surprise trailblazers before the rest of their peers, they now find themselves suspended between two otherwise distinct seasons; treading a rather rugged unpaved shortcut from the typical life of a teenager to a strictly routine existence of motherhood and the juggling of nappies and budgets. While a few of the young mothers report excitement and happiness, others express fear and shock in the abrupt change of place, and for all there is an immediate blur of what creates identity. Some have experienced loneliness during nights and days at home with their baby. A sudden deep and disquieting lull has settled when many of their friends have left to explore their own teenage lives.

Largely shut out from the world of older parenting women, some have had the resourcefulness to create, or the good fortune to be networked into, their own sub-community; a sort of 'young mothers world' that helps to strengthen them against the condemning example of those who have achieved the education, career, house and marriage before planning their own babies. As if succeeding these milestones predetermines the ability and right to parent, for most of the young mothers a coveted red tick of approval from modern society is an unattainable dream despite their plucky characters and courageous mothering. Immediately identifiable by swelling bellies and youthful faces in sparsely populated country towns, most of the young mothers' lives are a public forum for ongoing community gossip and debate.

For some, conception occurred within a committed relationship, and a small number of the pregnancies were planned. Sometimes unplanned conception was a result of a rush of alcohol-supported pleasure, a brief moment of romantic and sexual excitement illuminating what they describe as the otherwise dull monotony of small town life. In regions sucked financially and emotionally dry by drought and fire, little local infrastructure and the heavily marketed illusion of a better life in the big cities, some of the young mothers found themselves and their male peers seeking temporal pleasure to ward off encroaching boredom and hopelessness.

While for a few, engaging in sexual behaviour has always been a positive experience, others reported generally a pressure by the young men to have sex; coercive behaviour supported by an increasingly sexualised society and a culture of peer pressure in the school yard. With sex often spontaneous and unprotected, use of contraception is sometimes further frustrated by a lack of adequate information about sex and struggles in negotiating the social aspects of sex. Perhaps most significant is the absolute refusal by many of the young men to consider their own role in sharing the responsibility of protected sex; a standpoint for which the young mothers are quietly (though largely passively) indignant.

If they had nursed vague concerns about the young men in their lives prior to becoming parents, conception, in many cases, cracked illusions of romantic commitment. While some have discovered motherhood with a loving partner, many of the young mothers realised early that the decision about whether to keep their baby or not would be a solo one. For a few, the choice to keep their baby was influenced largely by the young father's own wishes, only to experience a deep sense of betrayal when the young man eventually left. For those who have experienced violence from their partner, there was relief at his leaving.

Just over half of the young mothers are still partnered with their baby's father, and some have re-partnered. Regardless of relationship status something of a shadowy presence of

the opposite gender lingers in all the young mothers' lives. Often conspicuous by his physical and/or emotional absence, some of the young mothers have experienced increased judgement for their single mother status, increased poverty, submersion in traditional and inequitable definitions of male and female roles, and fewer childcare options. In particular, many have felt hurt and confused when their rural communities continue to view irresponsible sexual and relational behaviour of the young men in an indulgent light, even as they have judged the young mothers as sexually immoral. Societal double standards in this way are enormously unhelpful to the healthy and empowered development of values and relationships for both young women and men in rural communities.

Faced with the decision to keep their baby or not, many of the young mothers found themselves having to negotiate moral, inter-relational and structural minefields that went well beyond the often complex situation with the young fathers and the fear of looming single motherhood. For many, the decision not to seek alternatives such as abortion or adoption was couched in a quietly personal conviction that they did not want to, and 'could not', give up their child. For a few, their choice to avoid an abortion was largely influenced by passionate and at times manipulative family members. Alternatively for others, the strong desire to keep their baby was heavily tested by family members and workers who pushed for an abortion.

Often comparing their situation with their urban 'sisters', many of the young mothers are aware of the lack of availability of abortion services in their local and regional centres. A difficult deterrent such as this, along with the cost and inconvenience of travelling to Albury or Melbourne, seems to have been a factor in at least some of the young mothers' 'choice' to keep their baby.

Support is an often complex notion in the lives of the young mothers. Aside from the presence of a partner, the need for informal supports can loop broadly over various clusters of people and structures, stretching from family, workers, schools, other young mothers, and communities to current political policy. While for some, support from workers has been good, it has been a disappointing experience for many of the young mothers to encounter social judgement within the hoped for confidential and professional objectivity of a doctor's room or social support service. A lack of choice of rural support and maternity or health services only frustrates these encounters further.

Encouragingly, many of the young mothers have found new levels of support and care from their own mothers. There are also a few beautiful examples of older women supporting the younger. This somewhat redeems the disturbing reality that much of the social judgement fiercely dumped upon the young mothers comes from other women.

Despite the difficulties, the rugged rural journey from unrestricted teenager to busy, structured mother proves the resilience and overwhelming strength of character of the young mothers. Forced to reflect on their actions and lives long before many of their teenage peers, the visible and exposed nature of their motherhood encourages a maturity and depth of insight that is inspirational. Listening to their voices adds an important contribution to the feminist narrative in choosing how to be a woman.

Table 1 outlines key points relating to this report.

Table 1 ~Aspects of rural teenage pregnancy across sample of 21 young mothers

Has life changed?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 8 experienced personal growth 4 lost independence 3 catalyst for getting off drugs and alcohol 1 closer relationship with partner and family 1 workload has increased 2 health has deteriorated 1 nothing's changed 1 didn't say
Friendships changed?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 lost friends 9 lost friends but made new ones (especially with other young mothers) 5 friendships haven't changed 2 didn't say 1 lost friends because moved towns
Pregnancy planned?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 16 unplanned 5 planned
Initial feelings about planned or unplanned pregnancy?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 excited and happy (planned) 4 scared and a bit excited (unplanned) 2 scared (unplanned) 5 shocked (unplanned) 2 disappointed in herself (unplanned) 1 devastated (unplanned) 1 didn't say 1 excited (unplanned) 1 scared (planned)
Reasons for keeping the baby?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5 the baby was planned 7 wanted to keep the baby 3 baby's father wanted to keep the baby 3 found out too late in gestation to have abortion 2 didn't like the idea of abortion 1 observed another woman not coping with an abortion
Clear about local termination or access to termination generally? *original question had two parts. Many interviewees ignored the second part about abortion access that would account for high numbers of 'didn't say'.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 10 felt clear 6 felt unclear 1 knew about Melbourne options only 4 didn't say
Felt pressure to keep the baby?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 13 entirely her own decision (didn't feel pressure) 2 felt pressure because too late in gestation for an abortion 2 felt pressure from baby's father 1 felt pressure from baby's father and from her sister 2 felt pressure from family members 1 didn't say
Felt pressure to have an abortion? * information disclosed by some though the	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 felt pressure from those around her 1 felt pressure from baby's father

question was not asked.	1 felt pressure from partner's family 3 no pressure 14 didn't say
Why teenagers in the country are twice as likely to become mums than urban teenagers?	9 small town boredom (lack of work opportunities, recreation and resources) 4 small town boredom linked with heavy drinking 1 small town boredom linked with peer pressure to have sex 3 lack of information and/or abortion clinics 1 lack of abortion clinics linked with small town boredom 2 didn't know or say 1 answer unclear
Received good sex education?	18 lacked good information 2 Uncertain 1 didn't say
Pressure to have sex?	1 has experienced rape 1 has experienced rape and now experiences pressure from new partner 1 felt forced by partner 8 felt pressure from partner/s 5 felt peer pressure 4 never felt pressure 1 didn't say
Partner willing to share responsibility with contraception?	12 no 4 woman has assumed responsibility without discussion 2 yes 2 neither she nor partner ever used it or spoke about it 1 didn't say
Young father is with young mother?	10 no 9 yes 2 yes after he initially left and has now returned
Estranged young father is co-parenting separately?	6 no 4 very minimally 11 not relevant (still with baby's father)
Violent partner? * information disclosed by some though the question was not asked.	19 didn't indicate any violence 2 yes

Where has support come from?	11 combination of two or more sources (e.g. mother, father, worker, baby's father, current partner, friend and family) 3 mother 2 new partner 1 partner (baby's father) 1 mother-in-law 2 felt lacked supports 1 didn't say
Felt judged by local community? * stories of social judgement saturated many of the interviewees answers, though the question itself was never actually asked.	12 yes 3 no but thinks because she was still partnered with baby's father 6 didn't say
Felt judged by workers?	12 yes 6 no 3 didn't say
Double standards for partner?	16 yes 2 no 3 didn't say
Left education before conception?	8 yes 10 no 3 didn't say
Want more education?	13 yes 4 no 1 no – not enough support for young mothers in education system 3 didn't say
Want a career?	13 yes 6 no 2 didn't say
Childcare facilities readily available? * information disclosed by some though the question was not asked.	2 worries about her child in childcare 2 too expensive and not enough places 1 too expensive as a single mother 1 not enough places 15 didn't say
Information available in local town on contraceptives?	7 no 4 yes 1 only via friends 1 yes but its still taboo 4 uncertain 4 didn't say
Ideal role of women in society?	9 whatever they want to be 7 equal opportunities to men 1 no ideal role 3 didn't say 1 didn't know

Recommendations

1. Holistic 'Sex Education' and Contraception

1.1 Identify good practice examples of effective sexuality education programs and delivery

1.2 Rethink 'sex education' and redesign under a different name which captures its dimensions of:

The mechanics and biology of sex

Contraception

Relationships education

1.3 Rethink the delivery of this holistic sexuality education, and develop a communication strategy to suit the needs of young people in the 21st century

1.4 Increase availability of condoms (with an awareness of the constraints facing young people purchasing condoms).

1.5 Reinstigate or develop a media campaign promoting use of condoms with emphasis on males taking responsibility

2. Gender roles

2.1 Challenge gender stereotypes to create a fairer society by:

Holding educational opportunities for health professionals to (1) question and redefine their own expectations of gender roles and (2) consider expectations of behaviour based on gender

Holding educational opportunities for young people to (1) question and redefine their own expectations of gender roles and (2) consider expectations of behaviour based on gender

3. Health Professionals and Community and Health Workers

3.1 Encourage health professionals and workers to integrate the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria's, *Code of Ethical Practice* into their daily practice

3.2 Hold educational opportunities for health professionals and workers about equity principles, so they consider who is not coming to their service and why

3.3 Young people to provide training to health professions and workers increasing the levels of respect to young people

3.4 Develop strategies to educate and empower young people to assess how 'youth-friendly' their local services are, and to share this information with each other

3.5 Ensure young people have a say in how services are delivered to them, e.g. Community Health Service staff can ask young people if their service delivery suits them and what could be improved

3.6 Develop a behavior and language audit to complement the *Code of Ethical Practice* and to be include in training offered to health professionals and workers

4. Good practice

4.1 Identify good practice examples in service delivery to young people, both big and small, e.g. specific youth clinics; using new technologies to convey health messages

4.2 Consider ways to progress some ideas emerging from the good practice literature search.

5. Pregnancy and parenting

5.1 Promote the midwife care program to young women

5.2 Establish and support young mothers' groups

5.3 Establish and promote a mentoring program where older women mentor and provide practical assistance to young mothers

6. Networking

6.1 Work towards streamlined services to young people through greater coordination and collaboration within the health and community sector, e.g. by:

Developing a sustainable and up to date resource data base, and

Encouraging networking between different agencies and sectors

7. Education

7.1 Provide formal education for young mothers in a flexible learning environment, considering, childcare, transport and food

Introduction

The catalyst for this research was anecdotal information about increasing numbers of young women becoming pregnant as teenagers in the Goulburn Valley and north east of Victoria. Although the statistics do not support that rates are rising nevertheless, country rates of teen births are roughly double city rates¹.

Two sites were chosen from the Hume region – Seymour and Benalla – to gather in-depth information about the issues facing girls and young women in becoming pregnant and then mothering in these rural areas. This research heard directly from young women about their experiences. A peer research model was developed where young mothers interviewed each other in a narrative interviewing style.

The approach was open and positive and sought simply to learn what being pregnant and mothering as a teenager was like for these young women and how they felt about their lives.

The findings leave the reader in no doubt about what it is like for these young, rural mothers. The implications for the way we construct, understand and live out gender are clear. If we are interested in working towards a society with equal opportunities for the roles we take on and the sexual lives we lead, the findings point out where to start.

Aim of the project

The aim of the research was to hear from young rural mothers themselves, reflecting on what led to their becoming pregnant; family and partner support; their experience of health services and the community while they were pregnant; and their experience as young mothers. (See Appendix 1 for literature review and Appendix 2 for details of the research questions). Secondly, the aim was to understand how rural communities, the education system and health services can respond more appropriately to teenage pregnancy.

The research approach

This is feminist research, privileging the perspective of the women. The young men have their own stories and reasons, and in this research young fathers are spoken of, rather than spoken with. Yet young men are not the focus of our research. We want to know what it is like for young mothers, pregnant and parenting. And the fact remains that most are unsupported by the baby's father, for whatever reason.

Anecdotal information from sympathetic youth workers in the Hume region suggests the need for more supports to be offered to young fathers. We would consider it a valuable by-product of our own research if the findings were shared with young fathers. Ultimately, education that the way we assign roles to each gender is socially constructed will help both young women and young men to recognise structural discrimination working either for or

¹ Hume region statistics over the 10 years to 2004 show that the percentage of births to women under 20 years of age ranges from 3- 5%. The average is 4.7%. The lowest metropolitan region is Eastern metro the range is 1- 2%. The average is 1.6%. The highest in the metropolitan region is Northern metropolitan with 2- 3% and an average of 2.6%. DHS Perinatal Unit.

against them. This awareness can allow individuals to choose not to go along with these prescribed gender roles. Instead, negotiation of roles can lead to more mutually satisfying sexual and parenting experiences.

In choosing feminist research, we agree with Humphries (1997) who writes: 'What [is] required is research which "brings to voice" excluded and marginalised groups as subjects rather than objects of research and which attempts to understand the world in order to change it'. And having heard the voices, it aims to change the oppression of women and correct the invisibility of their experiences in ways relevant to ending women's unequal position in society (Chatzifotiou, 2000).

Chatzifotiou (2000) suggests that in-depth interviews are one of the most powerful qualitative research methods used by feminist researchers to enable women to tell their stories. She emphasises the importance of keeping the interview equal, non-hierarchical and non-exploitative and suggests the researcher use open ended questions because this encourages woman-to-woman discussion, defining their own experiences from their own points of view.²

With this in mind, a peer research model was developed.

Methodology

The two rural towns selected for this research were Benalla and Seymour. Both are within WHGNE's catchment region (the Hume region) that covers a fifth of Victoria. Benalla has a population of 8,700 (Travel Victoria www.travelvictoria.com.au/benalla/facts) and Seymour's is 6,600 (Travel Victoria www.travelvictoria.com.au/seymour/facts). Both are located beside the train line between Melbourne and Sydney. Benalla is two hours and Seymour one hour from Melbourne.

Recruitment occurred through referral from health and community service providers in both locations, and by women responding directly from newspaper advertisements. The initial round of eight³ interviews occurred in a venue between Benalla and Seymour, and second round of six⁴ interviews were held in Seymour. Subsequently, using a snowball technique, we engaged one participant from the first session to conduct interviews with a further seven young women. The final sample size was 21.

An innovative methodology of peer research was developed, where the young mothers were asked to interview each other in pairs. Interestingly, a Youth Empowerment Project (YEP) in Seymour was carried out in 2005 with a similar research methodology. Developed by Health Promotion Workers from the Lower Hume Primary Care Partnership (LHPCP) and Mitchell Community Health Services (MCHS), young people from Seymour were invited to participate in conducting research related to the needs of Seymour youth. Of this experience, Buschel et al (2005) reflect:

...To get better results with young people it is vital to have someone around the same age conducting the research. This is because they are able to relate to the issues and give confidence to participants to give their real opinion. Young people are not as intimidated by a younger facilitator who is closer to their own age' (Buschel et al. 2005, p.10).

² With thanks to Kerry Burns, author of 'Literature Review about Feminist Research', Appendix 3 of *A Powerful Journey* published by Women's Health Goulburn North East, Wangaratta, 2000.

³ 16 were booked but the youth workers said many were living marginally, some were homeless and their attendance depended on what kind of night they had. This was informative in itself.

⁴ Nine attended but only six met the criteria for the research.

For our research, a narrative approach was also taken, where 'the interplay between the interview partnership of interviewee and interviewer is at the core of this approach ... the personal characteristics of the interviewer can constitute one of the main stimuli to the interviewee and there is not a blanket prohibition against the interviewer either reacting openly to the statements of the interviewee and/or revealing personal details of their own' (Miller, R. & Brewer, J. 2003, p.208).

The young mothers were given a brief overview of this research interview technique immediately before the interviews. (See Appendix 3 for details of interview instructions given and interview schedule.) The approach worked to a greater or lesser degree depending on the skill and personality of the pair. (See Appendix 4 for details of the sample.) For example, numbers of 'didn't say' when results of the interviews were tabled sometimes indicated where the peer researcher failed to follow up unanswered questions. At other times questions with multiple parts proved confusing for young interviewees. These problems may not have occurred with an experienced interviewer. However, when the peer research model 'worked', it worked powerfully, providing not only rich data for analysis but as a platform for educative exchanges between the women. In this way peer research really became a sort of mutual peer learning.

The following is a particularly frank example of an educative exchange recorded between two of the young mothers. Formerly strangers prior to interviewing each other, their discussion highlights the beauty of women disclosing the rawness of their lives within the safe parameters of shared experience, and the learning that can be gained there.

'(My partner) wants to have sex now, after the baby's born and I'm like, "No no, I'm just not interested". I suppose there is a little bit of pressure. Not so much he's forcing me to do anything. You know, it's just him saying, "Oh can we have sex tonight?" as a joke but, you know, there's a bit of pressure.'

'I know. I couldn't have it for a while because (of) my vagina, because it just tears apart and it hurts so much...It does take time. Did you get stitches?'

'Yeah yeah.'

'Yeah, it makes it so much better, and its not as painful. Have you tried?'

'No, nothing. I haven't tried. '

'Don't feel wrong about doing it just because you had a baby, everything does go back to place and it just feels exactly the same as before you had the baby, so nothing's different, honestly. It does take a while to feel right again, but don't forget about doing it. It's fine, seriously. Don't be embarrassed or anything by doing it and even if you just try and it doesn't happen...I know with stitches, it does hurt, trying to put it in, and obviously when you have the baby you don't get as wet.'

'Yeah, that's what I heard.'

All recorded interviews were transcribed and analysed inductively by a WHGNE researcher to identify key themes and patterns.

Post-interview debriefing was offered to all the young mothers although none took up the offer. Prior arrangements were made to ensure counsellors were aware this may be required at short notice following interviews.

Ethics approval was granted by The Centre's Research Ethics Committee, registered with the National Health and Medical Research Centre.

Findings and Discussion

Part 1 ~ The Shift

...In personal and practical ways

The young mothers are deeply reflective about the change of place or 'shift' that has occurred in their lives since becoming mothers. "It's a big change," said one simply. Some choose to focus on the concept of multiplication; the shift of one life becoming two, and the constant surrender of time and resources to the will of a small baby.

'You've got not only to look after yourself, you've got to look after somebody else, and they've got to be able to come first before you put yourself, and that's sort of difficult for somebody that's always putting themselves first.'

'You don't get to go where you want when you want to. You've got to make sure that you find a babysitter before you can go anywhere. You have to revolve your life around the child or children.'

'Everything you do is for the kids.'

'My life has changed focus a lot. I'm not going out with my friends and picking up. I'm looking after my kids and taking them to Kinder Gym and swimming and that sort of thing. Yeah, it's changed a lot. My responsibilities have changed so my outlook's changed. And the things that I want to do have changed as well.'

'I'm not independent anymore. [Laughs] You can't do anything for yourself anymore. You're always looking after someone else.'

...In goals and dreams

Others talk about a shift in personal goals; sometimes linking this to leaving high school or education as a result of pregnancy and motherhood. Their reflections range from something of a contented pragmatism to wistful yearning.

'I was planning on being a nurse, and doing further education, but [[the pregnancy] happened... I finished my VCE so I was happy with that. I'm glad I passed that and finished that, but I would have liked to do further [studies].'

'Was the pregnancy planned? No, not at all, no... that was a big mistake. I had other plans for my life.'

'In a way a career was important to me. Yes, and then I just sort of forgot about it because I fell pregnant.'

'I wanted to have a life, go out, party, drink, whatever. You know, have a life before I had kids and a career and basically be set up so that the kid wouldn't have to struggle....[Education] was and still is [important to me], but I haven't got around to it. [My plans for the next few years] are for my husband, [and I want to] raise my daughters [to] be happy, healthy little girls.'

'I wanted to have the career and the house and the car, but of course I didn't plan on having a family.'

'I wanted to be a childcare worker, and I did actually start doing that course and I fell pregnant. Because I was having a lot of trouble through my pregnancy I had to quit the course.'

'I had uni offers for beauticians and hairdressing which I've wanted to do my whole life since I was little. Because I found out I was pregnant, I just got all my uni offers, but I didn't go.'

For others, personal goals have not so much changed as been put on hold. "It's just put it back that little bit longer," said one young mother optimistically.

'I would have loved a career. I wasn't too sure as to what I wanted to do after school, but I really wanted to finish. That was something I really, really wanted to do. I'd hoped to sort of own something of my own, to start my own business, which is something I still want to do, even though I haven't finished school. Now that I've just sort of taken on board what's happened in my life, I'm going to try to find other ways around it by doing TAFE courses, and then going into it that way.'

'I'm planning on this pregnancy being the last child that I have [laughs] to add to our family. Then once both children are in school, I'll plan on working towards having a career that I've wanted and getting the job that I want.'

One of the young mothers has a strong sense of time passing quickly, and a belief that by becoming a mother she has forever forfeited other opportunities or goals in life. Thinking ahead to the possibilities in her own baby's life, she places her hopes there.

'I was going to be the one in the family to go to Year 12. Then I got to Year 10 and just buggered it up. Now I think I want to go to TAFE and do Year 11 and 12. I've seriously been thinking, now that I'm older and more wiser, that I want to make something of myself. I want to be a police officer, or be something like this. But then I think about it. By the time I go through all my education and everything like that, it's going to be by the time I'm 50! By the time I get to be a police officer, I'll be too old. If I could turn back time and go back to school, I would have gone all through Year 12, made sure that I'd get A grades everything. That's what I want to push towards my son.'

...In housing and locality

For a few, becoming a mother has also included relocation; a very real shift in housing or locality. Often this is because of a desire to 'make a family' with the father of their baby, for which having their "own little house", as one puts it, is an important element. The hope for security and love for themselves and their baby can sometimes be the reason for significant shifts in their lives, such as leaving school or changing country towns.

'My partner has just moved in with me, so we're going to be getting a house, [public] housing. It will be a pretty good one as soon as we actually get into our own little house and settle down, 'cause at the moment we're just staying at a friend's house and we're all clashing.'

'Education was important to me, but when me and Johnno got together, I thought it would be better to combine us with the family [which meant moving country towns]. I had none of my own family. It was a lot harder. And for him to say, "I love you Mez, I want to be a family". I thought at that stage, "School isn't too much important, if I need to I can come back to it." I can't turn around, and say "no Johnno sorry", and then come back to him, a year later and go, "Yeah ok we'll do it now", when he could already have moved on. I thought I could go and do TAFE. I can find other ways to get where I want to go, whereas, you know. I could probably find someone else to take the role of Suzie's father, but that's not what I wanted, because I love Johnno as well.'

Sometimes inflexibility of the high school system is responsible for these dramatic changes.

'Your life changes so much...maybe you have to move town like I did. 'Cause I wasn't allowed to go back to school because I had a baby.'

...In lifestyle and identity

Many of the young mothers intuitively describe the shifts in their lives in ways that capture two very different seasons; often remarking on the fast track to adulthood or 'growing up', as distinct from their former lifestyle as a teenager. "I've had to grow up a hell of a lot" one young mother said. Another speaks of "growing up quick". They seem to talk about being a teenager in external rather than internal ways that transcends actual age. Like an item of clothing that they once wore, their old identity as a teenager is now removed and the new suit or role of motherhood put on.

It is as if they believe that wearing the two together is an impossible incongruity; an awkward mismatch, and it is not surprising that, for some, there is an element of fear and grief.

'I was devastated. I [had] actually just come back from holiday. Over the holiday I didn't get my period ...so I was waiting for it to come while I was on holiday, and it didn't come. So, when I got back from my holiday I went to the doctors, and that's how I found out. I was actually thinking, "That will be the end of school", and all that kind of stuff. I was thinking that I'd actually have to stay home and be a mother and not do anything as a teenager, and I'd have to grow up and play that role a lot faster than what I should have.'

'I have a very strict lifestyle now, I don't drink, I don't go out. I don't get to sleep in anymore.'

'I feel a bit better now. The further along I'm getting, like, I'm loving it. But I really am scared because I'm a kid myself... I'm just still a little kid. I'm just learning. I haven't started my life. It's sort of a big spin around for me.'

...In options for socialisation

For many of the young mothers, the surrender of their teenage identity is most obvious socially with their peers. Largely because of their pregnancy and motherhood, drinking, partying and smoking have become things of the past and friendships based on this old lifestyle have buckled. Attending high school has been difficult for most of the young mothers since their baby was born, and this also has impact on options for socialisation.

Social isolation is a real threat for young mothers. Peeling away the outer layers of the teenage lifestyle for the sake of their baby means the young mothers are also often forced to remove the very heart of their social networks and support base.

'Before I fell pregnant...I was still going out, and doing the usual things as a teenager...such as parties and drinking, and stuff like that. Then, as soon as I knew [I was pregnant], I was sort of a lot more wary of those things, so I stopped. Socially, I didn't really go out as much because everybody was drinking and I couldn't do anything like that. And when I did go out, I just felt tired, so I had to go home earlier.'

'I thought, "This is going to be easy. Just change their bums and feed them, they'll be right". But it's a whole different kettle of fish when you have them. It's changed my life heaps...It was a bit of a reality check, because it's not just a doll or anything like that, it's actually a human being's life...I was partying a lot, and I do not party a lot anymore. I used to practically go out every weekend, and go to a

friend's house and drink and run amuck. When you've got a baby you can't do that anymore.'

'I had a few friends while I was at school, but when I fell pregnant it just sort of faded away...I suppose because I was pregnant and I couldn't go out and drink all the time.'

'I lost...quite a few of my friends, [lost] a social life, couldn't work and no independence. A lot changed when I had my baby...All my friends wanted me to go out all the time, and I'm only sitting there sober, bored, because everyone else is getting drunk and dancing around and I'm not really interested.'

'I was just starting Year 12...I went from having a lot of friends at school, and being at school to sort of leaving school. Not fully but I left school and didn't have so much of a social life. Sometimes I feel like I've missed out a little bit on that.'

...In friendship

A significant shift in friendship groups was expressed by many of the young mothers. This fits with the construction of teenage lives as a social identity, and offers understanding to how traumatic shifts in friendship can be.

Further to changes in options for socialisation, some of the young mothers feel that their peers have cast them off because of their pregnant and/or mothering state. One young mother uses the word "preoccupied" to explain the absence of her teenage friends. "Too preoccupied with partying and drinking and going out," she said.

'Everyone else has left you. The age group doesn't have kids. They're not doing the same thing as what you're doing. They're going out to pubs, and doing whatever. So, you pretty well lose all your friends.'

'When I got pregnant with my baby I had two circles of friends: One side I drank and hung out with and the other group that was getting pregnant. The ones I used to drink and hang out with, they completely ditched me.'

'I lost a lot of friends.... Basically as soon as I told them I was pregnant, I just rarely seen them.'

'I had a lot of friends before I became pregnant. Soon as they found out I was pregnant they just sort of disappeared and since then I've just kept to myself.'

'All the friends I did have don't even come around anymore, but before I had her, they said "Can I come around until your baby's born?" Once she's born, no-one comes around.'

Sometimes old friends may feel intimidated by the young mothers' new responsibilities. One young mother wonders if friends may think their more conventional teenage concerns will be scornfully viewed.

'My friendships have changed heaps. They're just too scared to tell me stuff. Like, that they're going out and doing stuff like that because they think that I'm going to look down on them, because I'm a mum now.'

Trying to make sense of the gaping gulf that can exist between their old friendship groups and their new life as a mother, the young mothers often speak of two roads; one that meanders along in an 'ordinary' teenage existence, and one that forks sharply away and steeply uphill to motherhood. Many express this with language that literally captures the split.

'Friends my own age from school all went their way. They went their way and I went mine pretty much...They don't understand what I'm going through. And I don't have any interest in what they're doing, anyway.'

'When your friends go the other way, and you're still [pause] pregnant...See, I went to school throughout the whole of my pregnancy and I was kind of on my own, going to school. It was hard to associate with the other people in the group.'

'Not many of my friends are mothers. I guess that it's the last thing on their minds. They're talking about boys, I'm talking about babies. I guess I have had to move up a bit from my friendship group and just mature a lot more.'

'The things that you used to think about doing...like, I've got no desire to go out and party anymore. I'd rather sit at home with my other half, just watching movies, or you know, just playing board games.'

'The people that I was going out partying with are more distant now. They're like, "Oh my God, she's had a kid."

Sometimes the road that separates the young mothers from their old friends is a literal one based on the uniquely rural experience. As peers finish high school and travel the highways to explore their lives beyond small town country life, the young mothers remain behind with their baby. "At the end of Year 12 a lot of my friends moved away," said one young mother.

Some of the young mothers report that their old friends continue to reach faithfully over to them, bridging the gap between the roads of the old life and the new.

'Some people sort of [say], "Oh Trudy can't come out, 'cause she has a child, so we won't even bother asking her", whereas you have the odd couple of really close friends, who will say "Hey, we'll just ask her, just in case she can."

For the majority, however, friendships have shifted. Perhaps this is most evident when the young mothers reflect on who is in their social networks now. Many have found shared understanding with other young mothers, helping them to settle into this new stage of their life. This is particularly so when they have found real belonging in organised 'young mums' groups.

'I get along better with a lot of mums of my age now.'

'I've got heaps new mums that I've met through mother's groups and play groups.'

'Now most of my friends are mothers, because my group of friends changed when I fell pregnant with Ben.'

'Practically all my friends are mothers.'

'I've made other friends that are mums since then, and through the young mums group.'

Despite making new friends, the young mothers can feel confused by the rapid changes in their lives. Even within the security of new friendship groups, there are sometimes sharps reminders that they have strayed away from the conventional teenage path.

This is particularly so when a young mother has found herself loosely in community with older parenting women. Thrown together in a mostly older culture of mothers' groups, antenatal checkups, and day time trips to the supermarket when other stay-at-home mums go shopping; at some point most of the young mothers have felt the difference of their age and life circumstance from that of older parenting women.

The young mother's identity is blurred: Is she teenager or mother? Where does she belong? Standing between the two worlds, some of the young mothers still gaze hopefully at both.

'A lot of my friends are older, not the same age group...mostly other mums. It's only people with families themselves...It'd be nice to have people my own age.'

...A visible shift and a public forum

Often changes in people's lives cannot easily be seen by the casual observer. With the young mothers, most of the changes discussed above can only be understood by listening to their own reflections. Nevertheless, becoming a rural young mother is a very visible shift. The young mother's lives are conspicuous through small town community gossip and through the very visible swelling of bellies and pushing of prams in communities where, as one said, "everybody knows everybody".

Two of the young mothers tried to explain the situation. One began with a searching "Well, you know, small towns...", and the other jumped in with a quick "Small talk?" as a rejoinder. "Yeah, exactly," the first answered. "You took the words right out of my mouth."

[People] found out through the grapevine, and they didn't believe it, they didn't believe it, until they saw me waddling down the main street ... with a big fat belly hanging out. Yeah, it was funny, like, the rumours were going around town, "Oh Jen's pregnant, Jen's pregnant", and I'd go, "That's crap". Then they'd see me waddling and they'd go, "Yep, she's definitely pregnant!"

'There's always some way of finding out [who is sleeping with who, who is pregnant, etc.], and there's not much you can keep a secret. It's still a small town, so of course there's going to be all this talking and stuff. I think that it's just so childish.'

Perhaps because of the visible nature of their motherhood, rural communities have often assumed a right to comment on the young mother's lives. "Everybody had to have their own say," one said of her own pregnancy.

Critics in the rural audience are usually vigorous in their condemnation and judgement of teenage motherhood. The young mothers are compared to older parenting women, defined by their ages, and measured according to standards of education, career, marriage, and house. These things remain status symbols in society and are yardsticks to measure someone's worth. Without them the young mothers generally come up short in achieving social acceptance.

'A real issue in the community is that...as soon as [the older generation] saw that you were either pregnant, or that you were young and had children, they looked down on you, because of what you weren't doing, the way they had done it...'

'I did get discriminated a little bit and a lot of the older ladies, I'm not saying that they're horrible or anything, but they seem to judge younger ones when they're pregnant because it's just wrong to them, because they were all married and had children after they were married whereas we've got children before we're married and half of us don't have partners.'

'After I had my son, like, I got that many names called to me, 'cause I'm only 15, so I got called a slut or whatever. Because [I was] up in a small country town [and] there's not very many women there that's young with babies.'

'I think some people [accept rural teenagers having sex] but other people don't. It just depends. Like the older people, I'm not saying they're horrible or anything, but the older people are disgusted if people walk around with hickies on their neck, or

seeing someone with a pregnant belly that is under the age of 20 and who's not married.'

Judgement that is based on status (and probably morality) is sometimes particularly obvious in its absence. A very small number of young mothers admit they have never received criticism for their teenage pregnancy. They suspect this is because they have been partnered, rather than single.

'Because we were together for three years before hand, and we were engaged and stuff, I think people were pretty lenient and easy on the two of us.'

'I think sometimes when it's an unplanned sort of pregnancy and the father doesn't stick around, you sort of get negativity from people a bit more maybe than when you're partnered.'

'People didn't really treat us different 'cause we were together.'

Many of the young mothers talk of having to 'prove' themselves and their parenting abilities to their watching rural communities. Some believe this is in a context where teenagers generally are viewed negatively. As one young mother said, "the community always looks down at everything to do with teenagers".

'When I moved away from my own family, over to another country town, it was like you had to prove yourself, like they had to see what you were doing, and that you were doing the right thing, before they respected the way you done things. That the kids were clean, they had shoes on their feet, pretty much. Another thing was the eating, making sure that they were eating. That was one thing that they always questioned me on when any of the kids got sick: "What's their diet like?" and you'd tell them and then they'd be like, "Well fine, that's ok", but until then...'

A few of the young mothers shrug off the condemning stares or outspoken views of those around them. "People said I was just too young," said one young mother. "But I didn't really worry about it half the time". Nevertheless, some have struggled to reconcile social judgement with their hopes of finding belonging in a supportive community. Finding 'place' amid the myriad of shifts they have navigated since conceiving their babies is further frustrated by communities who refuse to accept their new lives.

'Everyone around me was, like, disappointed, so it made me feel like I was wrong or I was doing something wrong being pregnant I guess...'

'I thought everybody was judging me, like for being a young pregnant mum, and yeah it's horrible, it's not the nicest feeling ever, but anyway...'

'It [being judged] makes you feel horrible, it makes you feel really low, it makes you feel like you don't belong in that community...it makes you feel out of place.'

Sometimes words don't even need to be said to level judgement and criticism on another human being. Strong messages can still be sent through the vehicle of silence. Rural communities that attempt to ignore the reality of teenage pregnancy reinforce a belief that the young mothers have something to be ashamed of, something to keep hidden. One of the young mothers reflects on the difference in attitudes in the Royal Women's Hospital in Melbourne.

'When I went to the young mums group inside the hospital, I was surprised, I mean, you realised that you're not the only one that's pregnant. There's plenty out there [in the country] that's still "hush hush" about teenage girls becoming mums...but [in the Royal Women's Hospital] you're, you know, you're equal. Everyone's equal. So it doesn't matter if your 21 or 13 years, it's just that you're a mother, that's all.'

Summing up the visible nature of her shift from teenager to motherhood, one young mother is particularly eloquent about the response from her rural community. "If you have a baby, that's it," she said. "You're tarred with that."

Part 2~ The Sex

...That made the baby

Conception of their baby catapulted most of the young mothers into new understandings of what exploring sex can mean. A small number planned their pregnancies and for these there was joy over discovering they were going to have a baby.

'I was happy, very happy...the pregnancy was planned.'

'It was planned so it was good.'

'It was planned so I was happy.'

For those who planned their pregnancies, there is personal strength in choosing a path for their teenage selves that is contrary to a rather rigidly flowing mainstream. Perhaps for one young mother this was the reason it was preferable to keep her plans private for as long as possible.

'The pregnancy was planned...we just didn't tell anyone. It was what we both wanted and, just what we wanted to do.'

However, there is another and significantly larger camp of young mothers for whom the shock of unplanned pregnancy is expressed with emotions ranging from fear to disbelief.

'I nearly fainted [when I found out I was pregnant] ...it never was planned... I had two other tests, so I kept on getting strange pain here and I thought I'll get a pregnancy test, I'll get other tests, and the doctor goes, "Oh it's positive," and I said, "Positive for what?" and she goes "You're pregnant", and I nearly fainted on the counter.'

'One day, the other half [partner] said, "Oh geez your boobs are getting bigger". I said, "No they're not, are they? I haven't noticed". I went to the doctor, and thought that I was just having a bit of the cold, 'cause I had a bit of a sore throat and I felt sick. When I went to the doctor's, I said, "I'd better get a pregnancy test too" ... and it come up positive, and I just went "Err!", like a stunned mullet!'

'It wasn't planned and I was scared shitless.'

'I was shocked, very bloody shocked.'

'I wasn't too happy with falling pregnant.'

'I was devastated.'

'I was tripping, I really was tripping. My head was spinning and stuff and I couldn't believe I was actually pregnant again. It was a bit of a spin out for me, I didn't really believe it, I don't reckon. I just previously had a termination a month or two beforehand.'

Only a very small number of those with unplanned pregnancies remember a sense of excitement on discovering the news. Even for these, excitement was mingled with a certain level of trepidation.

'I was really scared. I was really scared and I think in a way I was a little bit excited. I was very naive and I was, like, oh wow! I love kids.'

'[I was] excited but scared at the same time, because I was so young, I was only 17.'

It is interesting to trace these varied emotions back (at least in part) to the sexual experiences that produced the pregnancies. To do this there needs to be some focus on the sexuality of rural teenagers, an understanding of why rural teenagers are having sex and what are some of the possible reasons behind unplanned pregnancies.

...Becoming a sexual woman

The young mothers reflect on the exploration of sexuality in their lives with maturity, insight and honesty. Promoting a healthy sexuality, some of the young mothers speak of an "emotional side" beyond the physical act. Sometimes this observation is linked to learnings from their own experience.

'[It's] the emotional side. [Young women] need to feel comfortable with their own bodies, they need to feel comfortable with the person that they're with, they need to feel comfortable that they can talk about sex, and stuff like that.'

'There is an up side to having sex, there is a down side to having sex.... You can be silly about it, and, you know, feel bad about it, like do it a lot, and not respect yourself, and get pregnant. And that doesn't necessarily make you feel good about yourself.'

'It was my choice to have sex. Now that I look back on it I sort of wish that I did it at a later age.'

For a few, sexual experiences have always been positive, and they feel comfortable being vocal about this, though rural communities are often ready with a sharp word of reproach to sexually active teenagers. "In my community you have to be old and grey to have sex", said one young mother.

'It's a natural thing for girls to want to have sex... It's perfectly normal, natural, it's healthy for a girl to have a healthy sex drive... [then] everyone label[s] her a slut for it.'

'I lost my virginity in my teens, and I don't care what anyone says, I feel proud of it.'

A small number of the young mothers choose to be private about their sexuality, nursing the sexual experience gently to themselves. They mention it being "your own personal thing," and not talking about it "outside the house". "I think that is something you keep in your bedroom," said one young mother.

It is worth considering the possibility that the young mothers' words here may be influenced by the structural and deeply dangerous silence that continues to exist around sexual abuse. On the other hand, in a consumer society where sex is sometimes just another commodity, it is not at all inconceivable that their words actually capture an attempt to keep beautiful or "sacred" what can be so quickly muddied and cheapened.

'Girls are becoming a lot more open about their sexualities and I think that's a good thing, rather than being embarrassed about it. It's changing and in some ways I think it's a good thing and in some ways I think it's not, because girls are just becoming so open that it's not so special anymore like it used to be. It's not sacred and so sometimes I think it needs to go back to how it was.'

...Sex and curiosity

The motivations behind first exploring sexuality as a rural teenager are varied. Some of the young mothers report curiosity as a chief motivator, and the social construction of a teenager's lifestyle may sometimes act as an instigator. When one's friends are sexually

active before you, there can be a heightened sense of interest in just what this 'sex' is all about.

'Everybody was doing it and they're all like," Oh you should try it, oh you should try it". And sometimes you'd go out to a party and they'd say "Oh you can hook up with such and such", and they'd go to second base or whatever and you're like, "Yeah, great". Friends are all talking about it so you want to experience it for yourself and see if they're lying.'

'Older kids were having it and I guess you get more inquisitive about it and want to know what it is.'

'My friends were all having sex age 13, 14. I was 15 [when] I had sex.'

...Sex and boredom

However the majority of young mothers point to a weaving of multiple motivations to explain their sexual experiences and unplanned teenage pregnancies. The young mothers often compare their lives to those of their urban peers. Two young mothers discuss the differences below.

'I had my baby in Melbourne and all the mums down there, I'd believe there was none under 26, not any! I reckon the average would have been about 30.'

'Yeah and up here, it's like everyone young's having kids.'

In hearing that rural teenagers are twice as likely to become pregnant than urban teenagers, many of the young mothers immediately suggest a link between unprotected sexual activity and boredom for those living in small country towns. "I think its just plain boredom," said one young mother. Some of the young mothers suggest a lack of recreational activities is the reason for this boredom.

'I think there's more things to do in Melbourne, like you can go to a bowling alley, or you can go to the cinema, you can go, you know, anywhere, and it's not more likely to happen there, because there's just a lot more things to do there, besides sitting on your arse bored. Whereas here you're sitting around on your arse and you're thinking. "Oh well let's go and have sex, that's something to do."' "

'I think it has to do with boredom, like cause there's nothing else to do.

In rural areas there's less for teenagers to do than there is in the city, so I think they fill in their time and know the opposite sex a little better than most teenagers in the city would.'

'City kids have more stuff to do.'

'City girls like to be able to go out more and they don't want to be stuck at home with being pregnant. They've got more things to do, time to socialise, whereas in the country we don't really have much places to go to. I don't know, that's just my opinion.'

'I reckon it's 'cause they have more places to go in the city and more things to do, like nightclubs and yeah movie theatres and bowling allies and stuff.... Just that there's more to do than what we have, so...'

A lack of opportunity also cultivates boredom. The young mothers talk about the difficulty for rural teenagers in achieving higher education because of the distance to educational institutions.

'I'd completed my Year 12. I was planning on going to uni, but I did not sort of like the thought of having to move to Albury - that's the closest.'

A shortage of work opportunities in communities that have been afflicted by drought and fire and the exodus to regional and urban centres are other stark realities that rural teenagers must grapple with. According to the young mothers, sex can sometimes partly fill this void.

'[City people] have got work, whereas country people have nothing to do so we go experimenting [with sex].'

'In the city there are more jobs and more things to do than here. In [this town] there's not really much here for teenagers to do, so...'

'In [my town] there was absolutely nothing to do. The population's... probably gone up now to about 3,000, but there was not much people there in the town when I lived there. The kids and the teenagers just run riot there. I got my first criminal record there at twelve.'

Perhaps not surprisingly given their comments above, quite a few remember a personal feeling of powerlessness to 'make anything of themselves' that existed prior to becoming pregnant. An encroaching hopelessness and lack of purpose had caused some of the young mothers to abandon the school system long before they conceived their child.

Their comments seem to suggest there may be a link between a lack of support in the area of educational or trade opportunities and dreaming of future goals and unprotected sexual activity and consequent unplanned pregnancy.

'I didn't really have a career picked out or anything...I gave up on school halfway through Year 11. Education wasn't important to me.'

'I wasn't going to school.'

'Education was never important to me, not at the time when I was a teenager because I hated the teachers at the school, cause they wouldn't attend to me when I needed help, they would attend to the smarter kids.'

'Once I hit Year 8, I left school.'

'I sort of bummed. When I was in about Year 10, I was really good with handing homework in on time. I think I was about B average. But once I hit Year 11, everyone was going out and you knew all the people that were turning 18. You were going to an 18th once a week, sort of thing, getting drunk. [Education] just sort of went all out the window. You don't really think about it [at the time but] if I could go back and do it now, I would. You don't think about the repercussions of things that you do.'

'I did leave school before I fell pregnant.'

'I quit first Term through Year 12, and I don't think I would have done that if I hadn't have met this guy, my baby's father.'

...Sex and alcohol

Some of the young mothers talk about consumption of alcohol or drugs in the same breath that they talk about small town boredom. Like partaking in sexual activity, they suggest that drinking or drug-taking is a pastime for teenagers in communities where there is little else to do.

This is particularly significant to the occurrence of unprotected sex and unplanned pregnancy when sexual experiences are taking place in the blur of an alcohol induced state. One of the young mothers spoke bluntly of the drinking culture, of herself and friends "being at some drunken party and trying to work out later who it was". Again, the young mothers will often compare their situation with that of their urban peers.

'When you start drinking you start having sex and yeah like it all sort of goes together, whereas in Melbourne like there's a fair bit more to do.'

'Country kids are drunk and don't expect to get pregnant.'

'I think alcohol plays a big part in [teen pregnancy] as well, because they're in such a small town and there's nothing to do. You go to a friend's house, and [say] "oh I'm bored, I'm bored" and "there's a party over here, let's go and get some alcohol and go over there". For girls, they get drunk a lot quicker than what guys do, and a lot of them can hardly walk, and so their minds just go, "oh let's just hook up with this guy and go home with him"... If all you've got to do is go to someone's house for a party and get drunk, then that's gonna play a bit more of a role [in teen pregnancy]. Whereas in town, like in Melbourne, [at] under-age night clubs, you can't have alcohol. And I know that none of them drink down there, and as soon as I moved up here, that's when I started drinking as well.'

'There's a lot more to do in the city and girls aren't drinking as early and when you drink you dabble [with sex].'

'They're actually gonna drink a lot more [in the country], whereas down in Melbourne, yeah there's things to do. They still get drunk, you might as well get drunk, but not as drunk as, not as intoxicated and drunk as country kids. I don't want to admit country kids drink a lot more... 'cause I drink a lot more when I've come up into the country than I [did] down in Melbourne.'

'There's more to do in the City than there is in smaller communities... 'Cause, you know, having such a small community, you have the wonderful things of sports or drugs...and that was it. So you make up your mind which!'

When everybody knows everybody else in small town life, there can be a sense of safety that indirectly cultivates an availability of teenage sexual activity and excessive consumption of alcohol. Some of the young mothers talk about unsupervised backyard parties, where parents feel relaxed in their knowledge of the young men and women who are going to attend. With the absence of urban 'stranger danger', both the young people and their parents may at times fall prey to a false sense of security.

'I think that [teenage pregnancy] also might be a case of around the country areas we have those like, backyard parties, and a lot of them... 'cause they're out unsupervised. They're not supervised enough, where the kids can go into the toilets and sneak another one in and voila! Baby!'

'In a smaller town there's a lot more alcohol which means you're not completely in control of your thoughts, so you tend to do a lot more stuff than what you're going to do if you're in a bigger city, 'cause you need to be a bit more wary of the guys that are around you down there.'

'Because the city is a bigger place with a higher population than the smaller towns, city parents would probably be a bit stricter and a lot more protective of their children and not have them out all night. Whereas if you're living in a small town, like [here], you get a bit more freedom because it's a small town, and you can't get up to too much really, and everybody knows everyone anyway.'

...Sex and pressure

It was disturbing to learn that a significant portion of the young mothers consider that pressure has been a motivator to exploring their sexuality and their sexual experiences. Sometimes this pressure is again linked to boredom and the culture of alcohol consumption in small country towns.

'There's a lot more pressure for girls in country towns because there's not much else to do so they go and get drunk and hook up with boys.'

Pressure can be classified in two ways. Quite a few of the young mothers share alarming tales of coercion by a partner or young man who pushed them to have sex. A few of the young mothers use the term "rape" to describe these experiences, while others refer to terms such as "pressure" or "forced" or "pushed". Their words also speak of both the physical and emotional sides of coercion and are sometimes directly related to the sexual relationships in which their baby was conceived.

'[There was pressure to start having sex] from the first person that I had sex with. He forced me into it and I didn't really want to do it.'

'I didn't feel comfortable talking about sex with anyone, only because of being raped and molested. It's sort of like because they didn't talk to me, that you know that is wrong. That what he did to you was wrong. I thought, "Hang on sex is not talked about."'

'I was molested by a couple of family friends, um, and I was raped by my cousin.'

'I was pressured into [sex] by my boyfriend... [He] and I were living together for two months. The whole time we were together I wouldn't have sex with him, 'cause I'd only been raped a couple of months beforehand. He said that if I didn't sleep with him, he'd go and sleep with my best friend...'

'[There's pressure for sex from] mainly the guys.'

'[There was] kind of [pressure] from my baby's dad to have sex. He wasn't pushing too hard, but he was pushing, yeah.'

'Sometimes there was pressure from my boyfriends [to have sex].'

'There was pressure from the baby's father. All the time! [laughs] It's just what happens.'

'There was pressure mainly from boys that were the same age or a bit older than me that were already having sex.'

'There was pressure to have sex...just boyfriends.'

Perhaps most distressing are the comments from young mothers who have accepted coercive behaviour from young men in their lives as "normal", unwittingly accepting that they themselves are merely sexual passengers to a young man's desires. They seem unclear that coercion is a sign of abuse in a relationship.

The suggestion offered by one of the young mothers below that the burden of responsibility is on the young women to not be "silly enough to fall into it" follows a view that the young men are somehow absolved from taking responsibility for their actions.

'[There was] normal boyfriend pressure to start having sex.'

'There's no pressure to have sex.... When you're with a guy he gets horny and it happens. So no pressure at all.'

'My first boyfriend, he pressured me a bit [to have sex] in the young days [of] the relationship. But what boyfriend doesn't, in a way, kind of pressure the girls? But whether or not the girls are silly enough to just fall into it...'

The second classification of pressure is no less concerning. It is worth considering where generalised schoolyard peer pressure, including from a young woman's female peers, intersects with or even triggers a young woman's exploration of her sexuality.

Society is becoming increasingly sexualised, but despite a rising obsession with sex it is now dangerously uncommon to hear a healthy critique of sexual activity and sexuality in

circles where it is desperately needed. Comments from the young mothers suggest that schoolyard peer pressure to have sex may support a permissive environment for coercion.

'If you're not having sex you're a geek.'

'[People] shouldn't think... "oh they're not having sex, so oh they're frigid."'

'I think that [boys] in their little friends, like their group of friends, their male friends. they probably call a girl frigid...'

'The knowledge that other girls have started and you hadn't was a little bit of pressure to start having sex. Feeling that you weren't, you know, up to the same level as they were, I guess.'

'It really sucks 'cause if you don't sleep with a guy you get called "frigid" for not wanting to do anything with him.'

'[For young people to have a healthy sex life] it would be good not to be pressured.'

'You do have a lot of pressure, like, if you don't do it, you're not cool. People do give you a lot of shit for being a virgin.'

'There are some girls who will say, "I've done this and I've done that [sexually]", and try to just sound good so you sort of look little.'

'At the school 'frigid' is like a big thing. If you don't kiss a boy by the time you're in Year 7, you're frigid. And then you have to kiss a boy just to prove to them that you're not.'

'If you don't want to have sex or you don't want to kiss a guy if you're not ready to, people judge you for that as well.'

'There was a little bit of pressure because everyone was doing it.'

...Sex and information

According to many of the young mothers, rural teenagers are stumbling blindly in the dark, attempting to navigate complex sexual relationships without appropriate information or wise guidance. Clutching at misleading images thrown up by a sex saturated media and traditional understandings of gender, the majority of young mothers feel there is often an unfortunate lack of helpful signposts from parents, teachers and sex education classes. Some of their comments seem to touch on the social aspects of negotiating sex, and a deep hunger to be equipped with information of this nature to confidently manage sexual relationships.

'There's a lot of kids out there that do need to know a lot [about sex] and they don't get it from the parents, because their parents don't feel like they need to talk about it to their kids... Young teenagers need to know a lot more in pregnancy and sex... They really do need to know.'

'I went to a Catholic School, both Primary and Secondary. School was a bit 'hush hush', you know? Their priests were against sex before marriage so, shit, that didn't really help me. They gave you examples and pads and stuff, not the pill though. They didn't give you anything on contraceptives and condoms and a male point of view and what the male should do and what the girl should do. I think [it] needs to be more out in the open.'

'[Sex Ed] was just the teacher at the front of the class. "Contraception, this is how it is if you use it, and this is what happens if you don't", pretty much... No you get nothing out of it.'

'[Of sexual health education in school] Their idea of telling it, they're more or less just saying, "Oh don't have sex, use a condom or don't have sex". Basically they don't fill you in, or they do but they don't explain everything. It's just little things that they explain and you can't get your head around that.'

'When I was growing up [sex] was still a secret... we had Sex Ed at school. They said like how you got pregnant, but it was more the mechanical side of it... we did the whole banana thing, but they basically said the mechanics sex, rather than about the emotional and the peer pressure and that you can get pregnant the first time you have sex. You know, into detail.'

One young mother tells the story of what happened when her school realised that its teenagers were sexually active. It suggests the positive possibilities that exist if rural communities and their schools face the reality of sexually active teenagers with maturity and wisdom.

'We had year 12 prefects that got pregnant. Not long after they said that they were pregnant they announced their engagement and everything and they were actually quite happy together. It was only till that happened that the [school staff] realised, 'Hang on, our students are having sex!' Then they brought in Sex Ed and tried to make people open about it, and if students were being inappropriate [with sex] they pulled them up and things like that.'

Another young mother remembers the positive role that her school counsellors played in promoting discussion about sex.

'We had school counsellors and that and they tried to keep sex as an open discussion as much as possible.'

Generally, however, the young mothers report a lack of information. They reveal that information channels can be blocked by various complications. Sometimes the passage of time is the problem, where sex education classes may need to start in pace with the age of young people's sexual activity. "It really needs to start earlier," said one young mother. "Even in primary school!" For others, confidentiality was a problem in their quest for information. "I couldn't really trust any teacher at that school to talk about anything like that," said one young mother. At other times parents themselves are the obstruction.

I actually asked them one day, "Can you take me to the doctors? I want to go on the Pill", and they've gone, "Oh why do you want to do that? You'll get fat", and so I'm like "oh ok", so I decided not to do that, and I didn't pursue that, so that's how I became pregnant.'

Quite a few young mothers spoke of disrupted sex education classes where peers turned serious discussion into something of a circus. "Everyone was embarrassed," said one young mother, "So they'd all just make jokes and you'd sort of just sit there saying stupid things and come out not really knowing what had been said." Another remembered herself and her peers "seeing a person naked and just laughing at it". Yet another spoke in a frank way about classroom peer pressure.

'Because you're around a lot of your other peers that you really look up to, you don't want to make a dick out of yourself in front of them. We had this thing where you'd write down some questions, and you'd put them in this hat so that nobody knows who wrote them. The teachers read them out, and you've sort of got to hope that you don't blush or something, 'cause then somebody goes, "Oh my god, that was her question". If you're trying to find out something serious, then it would be embarrassing to do it in front of everybody, so you've got to be careful with your approach...Especially the boys, they wrote down stupid stuff like, " Why does my vagina smell?" and stuff like that. But I think there were a couple of students

who probably would have liked to have had some [answers] but were too afraid to ask the questions.'

Speaking with something of a grim humour, another young mother questions the sufficiency of one of the current modes of information.

'They think that if you have that plastic baby, that it'll put you off having children at a young age. But it's nothing like having a baby. It's nothing like a real baby at all...[Young people] don't realise that [babies] need to be played with. [Babies] need...what's the word? Interaction with their mums and their dads and other things like that. I mean, I pretty much cheated. I taped the bottle to its mouth, so I could have a good nights sleep. Just taped the bottle to its mouth. I mean, with a real baby you couldn't just go, "oh here you go", and put tape around their head!'

...Unprotected sex

Many of the young mothers and their male partners either never used contraception, used it irregularly and precariously, or fell prey to myths that they thought would prevent pregnancy.

'I'd ran out of the pill and I didn't go back down to the doctor's...I didn't get my period for like two and a half, three months, and I'm just like, "Na, this isn't right". I went to the doctor's and...he's like, "Yeah, you're three months pregnant."'

'I fell pregnant the second time that I had sex and it was with a condom, and I was told that condoms worked. We weren't told that condoms can have holes in them. We were just told they were good, they were good and that they were safe and easy to use... the thing is I would have taken more serious thought about it, rather than saying, "Oh just use a condom". You know what I mean?'

'I hadn't been on the pill for 18 months when I got pregnant with Sylvie, I didn't believe I could get pregnant.'

'I think neither of us really had a lot of idea about contraception. You know, I had an appointment to go and get the pill but I didn't really know how to go about it... My appointment when I fell pregnant was actually the appointment that I'd already made to get the pill, so that was a bit of a disaster.'

'We sort of thought that as long as he pulled out that it would be OK. We used [a condom] when we had it and when we didn't have it I suppose we, you know, we'd withdraw and we thought, "Yeah that's going to work, and I'm not going to get pregnant", like, "Who me?" Yeah, yeah, very naïve.'

'Nah, it wasn't planned. My older sister was on the pill ...and I used to pinch her pill, and I used to think this was alright. One day [I'd] miss it, and then the next day [I'd] take two or three, and think it was alright.'

'We didn't have [contraception]. No, we just did it...we were just a bit reckless.'

'I fell pregnant straight after a period and I had thought, "Oh, you don't get pregnant when you've just had your period!"'

'We had no conversations about contraception...cause we'd only just met, we were only together for a month, until I fell pregnant.'

'We didn't actually ever talk about contraception.'

'A lot of girls forget to take the pill, and I know for a fact, some of them don't use protection. I can say without a doubt, most of my friends have not used protection

at least once, so they're just lucky it hasn't happened to them, because they may not have necessarily have been protected.'

'We actually didn't discuss [contraception], cause we weren't planning [sex].'

...Contraception ~ a woman's responsibility

It is a significant finding of this research that many of the male partners of the young mothers resist taking mutual responsibility for contraception. In a kind of foundation laying for future discussions about mutual responsibilities as young parents, the situation glaringly shows education is needed to shift the weight of protected sex from one set of shoulders to two.

'We were forever having discussions and stuff about [contraception] because every so often he'd say, "no, I don't want to use anything"...I was on the pill and everything but that still didn't help. You forget it once and you end up pregnant...he was pretty lazy with it, he really didn't care, like if he didn't have anything he'd just not worry about it.'

'[My partner] does not like contraception, no he doesn't like it.'

'We actually talk about contraception quite a bit. He believes it's my role.'

'He was very pressuring, very demanding, about me using contraception, considering he's the one that didn't use it.'

'[Contraception] was never actually really discussed because I was already on the pill when we met.'

'I'm not allowed to go off the pill. I've been told I've got to take the pill, because he doesn't want to use contraception, so it's up to me to make sure that we don't get pregnant.'

'It was a joint decision [to use contraception]. Well I knew that I was going to be doing it, but yeah it was a joint decision, like he was telling me, "you've gotta go back down to the doctor's and get the pill", and after the baby was born he wanted me to go back on the pill.'

'He hates wearing condoms, absolutely hates it.'

'He doesn't like [contraception for himself] at all, nothing.'

'Before we started trying for Frankie, he was quite happy for me to be on the pill, but there's no way on earth that he would wear protection.'

'He didn't want to use condoms at all, he hated condoms.'

The following conversation between two young mothers captures their vulnerable position. It paints a disturbing image that reflects a past era of few choices; of women waiting for their periods to come, chillingly alone and unsupported. Seeking comfort in a vague hope that pregnancy may somehow not ensue is a poor substitute for a mutually responsible sexual relationship.

'Just using condoms would be a lot easier, but then again, you don't always use those. You've just gotta count on your lucky stars too.'

'Yeah, 'cause guys have issues about condoms too.'

'Yeah, so you've just gotta count on your lucky stars, you know?'

While many of the young mothers seem indignant of the expectation that they bear sole responsibility for contraception, the conversation above illustrates that for some there is a level of resignation. While this continues their indignation is rendered passive.

Part 3 ~ The Young Man

...Who became a father

As this research seeks to capture and privilege the voices of the young mothers, it also relies on their observations and insights to, in part, present the additional voices of those around them. In this way, the rather quiet but strong voice that weaves throughout each of their stories is the voice of the young man who became a young father.

However, as the young mothers reflect on the young fathers, there are often more questions raised than understandings gained. It is vital that similar research privilege the voices of young fathers to learn from them what their experience is. Meanwhile, the young mothers talk passionately of the young men in their lives, sometimes with affection and often with confusion and pain.

...Single Mother ~ single choice

One of the young mothers shares vividly of the moment she discovered she was pregnant with an unplanned conception.

'I'm just sitting there. Just blank, you know? Nothing was going through my head. I was completely blank, blank stares, everything, and then I thought to myself, "Oh shit, what is my boyfriend gonna say?" We were together for three months, so I'm thinking, "Oh God, he's gonna run a thousand miles" ...'

For some, telling the father of the baby about the pregnancy was a significant time of feeling alone. "It took me four days to be able to tell my boyfriend," remarked one young mother, "so it was really stressful".

A very small number of the young mothers speak fondly of their baby's father. "He's lovely," one said, "he wants to be there and look after the baby". Others are less verbal in their praise, but they seem to imagine an otherwise grim alternative of single motherhood and use this as a measure of the character of their baby's father. "Thank God he stayed," said one young mother.

Just under half of the sexual relationships that conceived the baby did not survive the rigours of either the pregnancy term or the initial experience of young parenting. This includes at least one of the relationships in which the baby was planned. From the number remaining, some of the young mothers underwent relationship chaos as they watched the baby's father leave and then return again a few months later.

Because of relationship challenges and single motherhood, many of the young mothers remember having to figure out what to do with their unplanned pregnancy on their own.

'I was very upset actually. Very scared. Actually very scared. Well I was 17 when I got pregnant with Sienna, and I was in-between relationships so I wasn't sure who the dad was.'

'It was entirely my own decision to keep him.'

'I decided [to keep the baby] myself, pretty much decided myself.'

'I think I sort of made my own decision that I couldn't get rid of the baby.'

'I didn't have a lot of support from the father so, yeah, that was pretty hard.'

'My baby's dad [said], "If you keep the baby then I'm not going to be able to handle it and I'll kill myself". I sort of felt like I had two lives in my hands. I had to make a decision. I guess at the time I felt like if I got rid of the baby then things would be OK; my partner wouldn't kill himself. But then I'd be getting rid of my baby and I had to think about my life and in the end I just had to make the decision for myself. I had no guarantees that my partner was going to do anything to himself, but I definitely had a guarantee that if I got rid of the baby, then the baby would be gone and I had to weigh that up...I wouldn't be able to cope very well knowing that I'd gotten rid of my child.'

'It was pretty much my decision.'

'I had Rick telling me to put her up for adoption, to the state where every time I spoke to him, I felt like crying... Even if Rick wasn't going to be there for me, I sat down and I thought, "I want to be her mum. I don't want somebody else to play that role"... I think I made the right decision.'

Sometimes the young mothers found themselves still in a relationship with the baby's father but in many ways still alone in making a decision. One example is the following story.

'Ben was locked up when I was pregnant with Lizzy. I didn't know how long he was going to be in prison for, so I didn't really want to have to raise the baby on my own with two other kids running around, which I do pretty much anyway. Anyway, I considered adopting Lizzy out, but I chickened out at the last minute.'

...Visible in unsupportive ways

It is important to consider the possibility of young fathers becoming disempowered to the decision making process of young mothers. The decision to keep a baby or not may affect him, as well as her, for the rest of both their lives. The difference is that in the great majority of cases the mother has little choice about her motherhood and the responsibilities and constraints this brings to her life. The father can choose to live a different life, and often does, as borne out by the statistics⁵.

Negotiating 'rights' can be complex. One of the young mothers suggested she was "being harsh" on the young father, denying him the opportunity to say what he wanted and telling him bluntly, "I want to keep my baby...feel free to walk out". Another commented, "I told him it was totally my decision, like it or lump it...he got used to the idea".

Some of the young mothers revealed that the young fathers were visible and active in the decision making, promoting that they, as a couple, keep the baby. However, often this was interpreted as the young fathers putting 'pressure' on the young mothers, suggesting a similarly unequal decision making process.

When, in the course of time, these same young men eventually left the relationship, the young mothers faced single motherhood. Sometimes a sense of betrayal lingers, particularly when a young mother feels she may have made an alternative choice if she'd been deciding on her own. The comments below also include one where the young man remains visible in promoting that they, as a couple, keep the baby, but who nevertheless is absent in preparation to become a supportive partner and father.

'When I fell pregnant... I went through a bit of [an] emotional stage where I didn't actually want the baby. The baby's father pressured me a lot to have the baby. He didn't want the baby either but [then] he got used to the idea of having a baby and there was a little bit of pressure... But now [the baby's father] lives a few hours

⁵ In 2006, 87% of one-parent families with children under 15 years were headed by mothers. The proportion headed by fathers was 13% in 2006 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 4102.0 Social Trends 2007).

drive from me and works six days a week, so he doesn't really get the time of day [to play a role].'

'It was my partner at the time and my decision to keep the baby, obviously because it was planned....[but] the baby's father doesn't play a role, no not anymore.'

'[The father] did say that he would be there to support us, but now he's too far away.'

'It was the partner. He wanted to keep it, so yeah he's sort of a big pressure on me to keep it. Cause I didn't really want to have the baby at all. I'd just had the termination with my ex partner beforehand so, yeah, I wasn't too keen or crash hot on it...[And now] my partner's just not realising that I am pregnant. He's still doing his own little thing, like, you know, blowing cash and running around, doing his own thing. He's got to realise he's got to settle down 'cause he's got a kid coming. Like we've got to make ourselves a family.'

Where the relationship has ended and the baby is born, sometimes the young father continues to be visible in a young mother's life via access visits, child support payments, and the 'smallness' of small town life. Though it is obviously important that the young father participate in the life of his child, sometimes his ongoing presence can also bring pain.

'I'd like more support from my daughter's father. She knows who he is and she will see him down the street and she will be yelling out, "Dad, Dad, Dad!" And he won't even come and get her. He doesn't spend any one-on-one time with her...I ring him up all the time and say "every second weekend, just have her for one night, - even once a month! As long as I have a certain set date that I know you're gonna come and get her so that I can tell [our daughter]". It's so hard. She knows that he's her father, 'cause he was there for the birth, like for the first, oh, two months, three months, and then we broke up. Every day she gets the photo albums out and gets the photos of her dad out and brings them over to me, "Mum, Dad, Dad". He used to live by the outdoor swimming pool and I'd take her to the swimming pool, and she'd just be screaming, running over to the fence. "Dad, Dad" as soon as she sees his car... I took her there Sunday, 'cause I got a message from his brother. He said "drop Katherine off..." So I took her down there and my daughter's father had just knocked off from work by this time, and he's like... calling me names [and saying] "just take her home". And my daughter's down at the gate calling "Dad, Dad!" What am I supposed to tell her? He's just looking at her and he seen the look on her face. I'm like "just take her for half an hour, 15 minutes even, I'll come back, I'll drive round the block, and I'll come back and pick her up. At least it's gonna make her happy that she got to see you". So I did that. When I came back in an hour he'd calmed down...he was all calm, all relaxed. He was there for a couple more hours, so I left. Then, about 45 minutes later I got a message, "Come pick her up please."'

One young mother prefers the estranged young father to remain visible, at least in a purely economic sense. For her, requiring his provision of child support payments means the young father is held responsible for his own part in making the baby.

'I feel a little bit pressured by other people for my second partner to adopt my first son. I do get a lot of people who ask when my partner is gonna adopt Ray. I'm sort of like, well, if he does that then the father of my first child gets off the hook. I guess out of a bit of spite I sort of don't want that to happen. I'd prefer that he has the little reminder each week out of his pay; that he's got a responsibility.'

For a few of the young mothers, grappling potential single motherhood and its difficulties is overwhelmingly preferable to continuing any sort of relationship with their baby's father. "I'm glad we don't have anything to do with him", said one young mother. In the comments below, the young fathers stay visible in memory only as two of the young mothers share stories of violence and fear.

'My dad pushed me [to go to] court, to have a Restraining Order put up against [my baby's father]. One weekend on access, he told me he was gonna steal Maree. He pushed me away from the car, and he tried to grab her and run off with her.'

'I haven't seen [the first baby's father] since Lilly was two, last time I saw him we had a fight. He saw Lilly twice after she was born but he did nothing but threaten me so he has nothing to do with us.'

...Visible in supportive ways

Quite a few of the young mothers have re-partnered with men who are not the father of their baby. They often make comparisons between the young men in their lives, basing their observations on notions of support in the parenting role, and this is particularly so when they feel the young fathers themselves have disappointed them and their baby.

The young mothers are fiercely faithful to the parenting needs of their child. They often describe themselves and their baby as a 'we', a sort of combined unit. Because of this, a young man is viewed as caring for the young mother if he is also "active" in caring for her child. Fortunately, some have discovered relationships where their new partners are willing to adopt this father role. The young mothers speak eagerly of these young men, voicing their appreciation freely.

'Molly's dad, I don't have anything to do with, but my other half, my now husband, he's fantastic with them, I wouldn't change him, but I'm happy for the other one to stay right away.'

'My first child, his dad doesn't have anything to do with him at all. He's seen him once just after he was 12 months old, but after that he never came around. He pays child support and that's about all. But my second son, his dad has taken on active roles as both the children's dad, and treats them both the same. He loves both the kids...he's really good.'

'He's basically a step-father to Jess. I never ever mentioned 'step-dad' to her, but she just come home from kinder one day and said that there was another little boy there who said to her something about her 'daddy' and she's like, "That's not my dad, that's my step-dad". I was so proud when I heard that, [laughs] because he's been with her, with me, since she was about one and a half. He's actually away on holidays at the moment, and Jess is counting down the days until he comes back. She's missing him terribly.'

'I'm not actually with her father, but I've been with someone for five years now, and he's absolutely brilliant with her, and helps me out a lot.'

...What women want!

When asked further about how they view support from the young men in their lives, many of the young mothers pause a little awkwardly before answering. Even in those for whom relationship with their baby's father or step father is considered "good", there sometimes seems to be a restless undercurrent of unmet desire.

Trying to understand these desires, the young mothers search hesitantly through the uncharted and precarious terrain of so called 'differences' between men and women.

Surprisingly, some of the young mothers settle their search finally on the notion of maturity, sometimes even linking this to the age of the young men. It is the only time in the research that the young mothers themselves refer to age as a potentially problematic factor in young parenting.

'[The kid's father] is living with us at the moment...we were separated for a while, [pause] about six months. [He was] just too young I think.'

'We weren't together at the time when I found out. It was a bit hard for him. He didn't actually see her until a month after she was born...probably right up until she was about six months old, he was sort of still a bit...funny. He just didn't want to hold her, because she was too little...It was when she was two months old that we got back together...I suppose he just needed...to sort of realise that this is his child, and there is a bond there, and nothing is going to take that away. So, he's just grown up with the idea.'

'He's lovely, my husband...[but I'd like] to get him a bit more involved... like he's getting there now but...I think he might not have been [ready] in a sense, he was still young.'

'He's a lot younger than me, he's only just turned 19, so that's his main problem. He's really immature and he doesn't understand how he's hurting his child...I mean it's hurting her.'

'My group that I hang around with is mother group people. People that understand and that aren't on drugs. But he's got people...like all his mates...I just hate them sorts of people around my son, and I hate the thought of what's happening when he goes to his father's house... I want him to know his responsibilities, and step up to them. Act like a responsible father, not a child anymore.'

'I expect him just to be a loving dad and that's just about it. I'm not too fussed about the support where the income comes in, just as long as he's a good dad and role model for our kids. Like, that's just my main concern. [I'm] worried that he just forgets. I just don't want him leaving the kids all the time and him running off, running around town with dickheads and just all the shitheads. If he does it, he knows he'll be out the door, anyway.'

The young mothers want the young men to be good fathers and role models to their children. They also want more practical help in raising their children. Often accompanied by something of an exasperated or embarrassed laugh, they give real examples of how support could improve. "Get up in the middle of the night and feed the baby!" said one. "Look after the kids more and give me more time to myself!" said another. One said simply, "Instead of him sleeping for an hour and having a nap, I'd like to sleep for an hour and have a nap".

Others link practical support with emotional support. "My partner doesn't look after the baby," said one. "And the fact that she's here today...he doesn't have any idea of emotional support".

...Living in his shadow

As the young mothers share their stories, it becomes evident that all their lives and experiences are framed, to a lesser or greater degree, by the presence of the young men. Something like the shadow of the young men falls on the young mothers, determining the environment and conditions in which they and their babies grow.

Importantly though, the shadow seems even bigger than the individual young men themselves. It is as if it has long ago left its owners and now exists monstrously self sufficient, spreading itself over both women and men as a kind of cultural and rural mindset or belief system that is accepted as normal. This would suggest that both women and men must be shown how to wrestle with the shadow of patriarchy, even as the young mothers continue to face its effects every day.

Most of the young mothers' relationships are constructed in traditional divisions of labour. Often these divisions are supported (and expected) by the young parents' extended family and communities, making critique of the arrangements difficult and sometimes unfamiliar for the young mothers. Exploring their feelings about these matters joins with the questioning voices of other women (and some men) globally, both past and future.

'[The baby's father] helps out a fair bit... you know, he's bathing and sometimes changing nappies. [But] I'd like him to have a more active role. Yeah, what can I say? He works for me, 'cause someone's gotta work, but I suppose I want that bit of extra time to myself...My family and friends think that, you know, 'cause he works, they think that's all he has to do. That's his role, you know? I think maybe that's old, like it's more traditional. They think that his role is to bring in the money, just to watch what's happening, you know? No hands on.'

'He does play the father role...he absolutely adores our baby. Ever since day one. He's his little man, sort of thing. He bawled his eyes out when he was born. He's great with him...[but] I'd like him to do more housework! [laughs] He keeps saying to me, "How's your day been? What have you been doing all day? Are you just sitting down watching TV?" I go, "No. Alexander does get a bit of a handful sometimes...He does have needs too. He just doesn't sit there and be quiet for the whole day."... But my partner sits there thinking and he says "I'd love to be a stay at home dad. It'd be better than my job. I'd love to...sit on the couch and do nothing."...I said [to him] "I'd love that, so then you'd see how I feel; trying to get tea ready, wash the dishes and keeping Alexander satisfied as well" [laughs].'

'Heaps of males think we should just be stuck at home, with our babies and looking after them, cooking them food, doing their washing, looking after their babies.'

'I still reckon it's quite sexist, 'cause we're still supposed to be at home looking after the kids, and just doing all the housework, and things like that. I still find that's the way a lot of people are.'

'I think everywhere I look we're always keeping the males in society in control.'

'If I was living with a partner, he'd be expected to work, and bring in the money, and I'd be expected to stay home and look after the kids, I think that's my role in the house. To do the cleaning, do the cooking, do the dishes, do all that sort of stuff, and to have him come home to a clean house, because he has been working all day...'

In families and communities that do not question traditional gender roles, the young men themselves are denied an opportunity to explore alternatives.

'My family is more traditional; they expect that he should be the bread maker you know, getting the bob, you know working and earning money.'

'Mum just bitches about him and basically went straight away to find out if he was going to have a job once she was born. But I told them to nick off.'

The shadow also lingers in the situation of single motherhood. "It's not easy being a mother," said one young mother, "and it's not easy being a young, pregnant, single woman". Another speaks vividly of her pregnant belly as "carrying the load", and its heavy

weight could be seen as symbolic of her single motherhood. The absence of the young fathers has plunged some of the young mothers into increased social judgment, poverty, and fewer childcare options and choices beyond child rearing.

'A friend of mine, she's just had a baby. She broke up with her boyfriend- the baby's father- and now she's going out and she's sleeping with [different guys]. It might be just a way to sort of try and get her mind off her ex boyfriend, or just make her feel better. Anyway, she's been labelled as a dirty whore and a slut and everything like that. They go, "Oh my God, she's got a kid". It makes you feel bad that you know your gonna get judged even worse for doing it, 'cause you've got a child.'

'I'd hate to be known as the girl whose "always got that kid at her mothers... she never has her baby...her baby's always with her mother" you know? I think that's horrible what people say. I don't think people realise that teenage mums are still young. Especially single teenage mums, they're still out their looking for that person- this is gonna sound really corny- that they want to marry and have a relationship with. It's 10 times harder, I reckon, for a female that's had a baby to go out and find someone that's willing to accept her and her baby. Whereas a man can just go out and lie to women, and go, "No I don't have any kids" and pick up. Whereas, in most cases, the mum has the baby to go home to.'

'I can't go back to school, I can't get a job, or anything like that, because I don't have the money to provide. Like, I don't know if you've seen the cost of childcare nowadays. It's very expensive. If they had childcare that was free, maybe. It would be so much easier. There's a lot of single women out there that don't have fathers for their children...it's very expensive to go back to work and you don't want to leave your child with someone you don't know.'

'The father isn't involved. Not at the moment. He used to, but not much, so not really. I'd like him to come and visit Oliver. Share some of the responsibilities, the cost of things. 'Cause my son has eczema and dermatitis and asthma and, you know, it's not cheap.'

'There are days where I want to go out. I hate getting up and not having nothing to do. Just to get up in the morning and have something to go to do. Like I've gotta do the housework, but you're gonna be home for the rest of the day. You know, I've got nothing else to do. I'd like to have a job too, so I'd have something to do, something to go to.'

However, perhaps the shadow lies coldest in the double standards that rural communities show towards sexually active young women and men. A large number of the young mothers speak vividly of their pregnancies being met with hurtful comments while, confusingly, the young fathers are often praised for having something of a sexual prowess.

'I just became labelled as the slut, pretty much the only term they used, they treated me like shit. Sam it was a pat on the back, good on ya, you know, getting Chrissy pregnant and so forth.'

'[People] were all judgementative [sic] towards me and not the father. I seemed to cop a lot of the crap and getting judged and having people come up saying "Oh you're too young to have a baby" and the father walking next to me and not getting anything said to him or anything. Just getting "When's the baby due?"'

'People treated me differently from the baby's father. People called me a slut. I guess it didn't make me feel any better about myself. At the time I was very disappointed in myself and I knew it wasn't the right thing, but you can't change it. Yeah, there was lot of reaction.'

'[People] were congratulations to him, and they were like, "Are you sure it's yours? You better get tested, like, be sure it's your kid". In my country town they do it about all the girls though, they think all the girls are sluts.'

'[When people first found out I was pregnant] the father was like the king and I was like the girl who was like a dirty big whore...when they saw the bump they're like "she's not relevant, just him."

The visible swelling of a woman's belly and developing pregnancy causes her sexual activities to leap from the private space into the public domain. Because of this, many of the young mothers suggest that the young fathers can hide from the communities' piercing eyes in ways that they cannot.

One of the young mothers spoke about the young father as having "no strings attached"; a very visual illustration of what sex can be for young men compared to the clutching and daily enlarging of new life in the womb of a young mother. Sometimes the role of the young father in making the baby seems to have been ignored by judgemental communities, by virtue of his comparative 'invisibility'.

'I'm judged. I can't walk outside and leave my belly at home, whereas he can leave and there's no strings attached.'

'Perhaps because of [my belly] I got the looks and up the street, whereas I felt like James sort of didn't get any sort of acknowledgment.'

'People who have like a one night stand...she may be pregnant and he's just off doing his own thing and no-one knows who the father is, cause it was only a one night stand. So she's the one who's carrying around his child, and she's getting all the dirty looks, but he's off and no-one knows anything different about him. In that perspective it was a lot harder for me as well, because I did have the belly, whereas he was off doing his own thing.'

'Rob didn't really get anything. But with me being the female, I had a lot of rumours going around...All these rumours going around saying that I slept with this guy, that guy and this guy. That I've got diseases, and STDs and stuff like that. It wasn't until I actually came home and said, "Hey this guy's the father" that most of them stopped... I think the girl has it a bit harder, having to face everyone.'

'You can't really hide your belly...and everyone else knows what you've been up to. You can't hide it. The guy might get it a bit from his friends, or family or whatever, but you kind of get it more from everyone, because everyone can see it. When you walk up the street, every one in the street can see that you're pregnant. When your partner walks up the street, they can't see that his girlfriend's pregnant.'

More broadly, many of the young mothers reflect on the inequitable and unbalanced attitudes of their communities generally.

'There's always gonna be a double standard with everything like that. It's alright for boys at aged 16 to go out, have sex, drink alcohol, be idiots, come home at all hours of the morning. But if your daughter did that [she'd] cop a mouth full. Even from other people from the community. A girl can go and sleep with ten guys and, excuse my French, but she's [called] a slut. If a guy went and slept with ten girls, he's like, "Yeah man, you're sick!" sort of thing, I think that's just horrible.'

'If a guy wants to sleep with you, you get called a "slut". But if he goes and sleeps with someone else, he's alright. If a girl wants to sleep around, she's a "slut", but if a guy wants to sleep around he's not. He's just the "macho man" and he gets classified as "cool."

'A girl can have sex and she's named a tart and a slut. The boy having sex is a hero, so of course there's always gonna be that no matter how hard you try. There's always gonna be the boys up high and stuff.'

'My mum was always more, way way more, over protective with me and I'm the only girl out of four kids... I think that it's still the case of a double standard where it's okay for guys to have sex but not for girls.'

'Boys can still do whatever they want but the girls have gotta be under lock and key...the girl does it and she's a "little slut."'

'There's always going to be people thinking that it's alright for guys to have sex with lots of different girls, but girls can't do that.'

'Girls get called either sluts or frigid constantly and [this] will never stop. Girls always get called that, which I think is really unfair. I mean why do boys get like to sleep around and do all that you know and it's, like they're champions yep...they're champions and if a girl does it, and if a girl does it, they're a slut immediately, which I hate.'

'The community knows [teenagers having sex is] going to happen but they don't accept it. It's OK, I think, where it's the case for it's ok for boys to go around doing it, but not so much for the girls. And I'm still trying to work out how the boys are supposed to have sex, without the girls.'

'It's always, "This girl sleeps around, this girl sleeps around". You never hear of guys, you know "oh this guy sleeps around", 'cause that's just not on. It's like it doesn't matter. Whereas if a girl goes, "I slept with a guy" [it's like], "Oh my god, I can't believe you did that!" And word gets around, "She sleeps around". Guys get away with a lot. More than what the females do so...The parents have gossiped to other parents...so a lot of parents can be like that, and especially if they've been bitching about somebody... they're sitting there going, "oh my child would never do that, that girl is such a slut. Her parents must have brought her up wrong." It reflects values on parents as well. Even if they slept with two people, they're still sort of labelled that, and it's not very nice. A guy can pick up four girls in one night and he never gets labelled anything, he was just a champion to all his mates... it's not very fair. It is double standards.'

Sexist and inequitable community attitudes contribute to the double standards that restrict young women and young men from developing healthier and fairer relationships. The images of the young men below are disturbing. They may be a ghastly product of peer pressure or a horribly misguided attempt by the young men to live up to the expectations of their rural communities and peers and to receive their praise as sexual 'heroes'. Within this culture, sexist and inequitable behaviour seems to be generally justified by the young men themselves with a sort of casual dismissal that the young women are merely 'sluts' anyway.

'This guy will go around, and go "yeah I slept with this chick this night, and I slept with this chick that night", and they're rewarded for it. The guys think they're great. They're going, "oh good on you buddy" rah, rah, rah'

'I found I didn't really talk to my friends about [sex]. I didn't go, "Oh yeah I had sex, it was like this and that". I just sort of kept it to myself, and if people found out that I did, it was by the boy, because I notice guys go around and gloat about it, and they're like, "Oh yeah, I did this with her". So if people found out, that's how they found out.'

'I've actually got a 16 year old brother-in law, and I noticed he had the bad attitude guys have towards girls. He picked up some sheila, and that was because

he just wanted to do it with her, and they did it and he made every excuse possible to try and break up with her, and in the end he found a way, and within a week and a half of them doing it! So it's wrong, and I felt like smacking him out and I gave him a lecture for it... I reckon that if they actually pointed it out to the guys in health education classes in school about it more, I reckon it might open their eyes.'

'I really don't think that you could change community attitudes and boys that call girls sluts. Just ignore what's been said about you because most of the time it's guaranteed that the blokes actually have more sex than what the girls are, and he's just doing it to make himself feel big. You know, saying something about it that gets her the label, that she's a slut, she's a slut, and bragging to all his mates that he's finally done it with her.'

Part 4 ~ The Support

...In the choice

The young mothers remember varied experiences of support in their decision to keep their baby. "I had support from people, which was good, it was really good," enthused one young mother. "That's what made my decision a lot easier on me, because if I didn't have support it probably would have been heaps harder." Another praised those in her immediate circle.

'We told his friends and my dad and then they said "just make sure you're 100 per cent sure". They said "it's up to you, it's your choice, you do what you want." That was the best thing that they could have said. I just couldn't believe it. They were helping [us] like that. You know, they just made sure we were sure, and then...'

Some of the young mothers speak in absolute terms when questioned about their choice to keep their baby, regardless of the presence of support. "I'd never get rid of my baby," one said. "I'd always keep my baby". Another said, "I wanted to keep her. I can't abort her." For others, a deep inner searching was needed in order to locate a decision that they, personally, could live peacefully with.

'I had to weigh it up. I wouldn't be able to cope very well knowing that I'd gotten rid of my child.'

'My mother asked me, she said. "Are you sure you want to keep this baby?", and I said, "Yes, you never know what could happen, it could be the only one I could ever have, and so yeah I kept it."'

'At first I did [think about alternatives to keeping the baby], cause I was starting off, you know like, I just had a new job and everything, but then I thought, no way.'

'You can't give him away once you've just had him. It's not easy. I considered it, I did think about it, I did think about adoption and stuff. I just couldn't do it, there's no way.'

The listening ear of others (free from opinion and unsolicited advice) during this time of personal reflection can be valuable. But the young mothers also remember searching to make sense of their own story within the broader narrative of those around them. In this way those closest to them have at times indirectly influenced the young mothers' choice to keep their babies.

'I considered adopting Niki out, but then [I didn't]. My stepfather had passed away, and the baby was the only thing that mum had to look forward to, plus, I don't think that my brother would have forgiven me if I had. He absolutely loves being an uncle.'

'I think I sort of made my own decision that I couldn't get rid of the baby. My aunty had just had an abortion and she just wasn't coping with it so that sort of pushed me in the direction of keeping the baby.'

'In the end I just knew that I wouldn't be able to adopt her out because my aunty had told me this story: I have a cousin out there who's 21, and I have never met him. Because she was too young at the time, she had to put him up for adoption, and she really regretted it. I knew that [after] carrying around this baby for nine months, as soon as I see her, I'm not going to part from her. And because I don't know my real birth father... that sort of played on me. I started to think, "Oh I

should go and find him. One day, I really want to find him, I really want to meet him". So I didn't want Amy to be thinking that about both her parents.'

Others remember direct and largely unwelcome intervention by family members and those closest to them. Sometimes this intervention seems to have partly influenced the decision to keep the baby. "When I told my dad," revealed one young mother, "he was adamant that if I had an abortion, he was going to have nothing to do with me". Another young mother seems to question the assumed right of family members to influence choice, particularly if they do not follow through with support.

'My sister pressured me a bit too [to keep the baby], 'cause she didn't want me to have another abortion. It would have been, if I had another abortion, it would have been my third one in two years. She wanted me to have the child. I haven't heard much from her though...'

At other times the young mothers found themselves having to stay strong in their decision to keep their baby amidst pressure from those around them to terminate the pregnancy. While sometimes facing the reality of single motherhood, the fact that these young mothers withstood the pressure shows their courage.

'I just felt horrible for a long time because everyone around me was making me feel horrible and telling me that I should have an abortion.'

'I was really pressured to have an abortion by my boyfriend's family.'

'I sort of had a pregnancy scare a few months before we found out I was pregnant and I [was] slightly pressured by my mum not to have it...I was very disappointed.'

'I had a friend who was pregnant and she was younger, she was only 15 or 16, and one of the midwives was really encouraging. But one of them just turned around and said, "She should be thinking about abortion or adoption". That was a bit disheartening.'

'I know a lot of girls whose mothers have forced them to get abortions.'

...When there is no choice ~ in family planning options

But there were some instances where the young mothers felt they had no choice, or at least only a very limited choice. For some, an unawareness of the pregnancy during the normal timeframe open for termination options complicated the decision making process about what to do with their baby.

'It was entirely my own decision to keep him, it was difficult because I had really no choice, I found out that I was four months pregnant, before I knew I was pregnant so that was too late, yeah you can have an abortion but I didn't want to, the baby's alive and everything, it had a heartbeat, so I couldn't do it anyway. Too big, anyway, too big, they put you through like a mini labour anyway, so I don't want to give birth to a dead baby.'

I went to the doctor's and when I found out he's like, "Yeah, you're three months pregnant". I had two weeks to decide whether I was gonna keep it, or not. He's like "you've gotta decide, like, really quickly".

I didn't have a choice, 'cause I found out that it was a bit late for me to have an abortion. I wasn't able to have that choice.'

One young mother's decision to terminate her pregnancy was frustrated by poor service from her local doctor and the unavailability of abortion services locally.

'I wasn't too happy with the doctor that I had. She made me go down to Melbourne for the abortion. I understand she just went off the information I gave

her, but she could have sort of felt around [on my belly]. Because that's all the doctor in Melbourne did. He felt my stomach, and he turned around and said, "Well I think we're going to have a problem [doing an abortion]". Whereas [my local doctor] didn't even feel my stomach, or anything, she just said "you can go to Melbourne for an abortion"... that was a bit hard for me, because I'd made this trip to go down to Melbourne...and after that I had to try to get my head around "well, do I keep it, or [put the baby] up for adoption?" which is something that I didn't really want to do... I think my local doctor could have tried...to be a bit more thorough.'

Many of the young mothers are aware of the lack of choice available to them in their country towns if they had wished to pursue termination. One young mother captures the fewer options in words that suggest something of a vulnerability in size. "There [in the city] it's awesome," she said. "There's a lot more information, and if someone wants to have an abortion or something, there's clinics everywhere. Here, you're so small, you know?"

But some of the young mothers are vague about support options in their local towns, wondering aloud what they would have done if termination had been what they'd wanted. "I don't know about abortions here 'cause no one talks about them," one said. Another was puzzled. "I don't know if you can have an abortion here. Do you?" Presumably, access to information about various support options could be improved in country towns.

For others, the lack of available local termination options support conjures up the long drive to Melbourne or Albury, problems with transport, the financial cost of the procedure and associated trip, vulnerability in an unknown setting, and potential trauma over the procedure itself. It is clear why, for a few of the young mothers, these realities may have influenced their decision to keep their baby.

'I had considered an abortion, but just the thought of going down to Melbourne, and having to go through surgery, and having people poke around in places that, you know, I wasn't feeling comfortable with, and having strangers around me, that was enough for me not to do it. It was one of the factors involved in me not doing it.'

'It isn't possible to have an abortion in my country town, because you can't. You've got to go down to Melbourne, to the main hospital, the big one. But it's quite horrible to go down and see that. There's at least 40 girls that get an abortion on that day...I spun out both times that I went in there because the rooms were just packed and...a lot of them were young girls too...most of the girls are upset and both times that [I've] been in there, I've woken up next to a person and I've made her smile. I've cracked a joke and made her happy. That just sort of ...makes me a bit happy too, by making someone else happy.'

'The doctor gave me one or two choices for an abortion, but they're nowhere near my country town. And you have to travel for that, and then it's wise to try to find accommodation straight after the abortion as well because it's just like straight after having a baby. You have your period for a while, and your stomach is a bit unsettled, and stuff like that. So it's not wise to do long trips, straight after you have it done.'

At least one young mother reflects that limited local support options for terminating a pregnancy may actually encourage young people to think carefully before choosing an abortion. Another reminds the research and other teenagers of how personally difficult the decision to have an abortion may be, rather than assuming that an abortion will always be a positive option.

'I think [being referred to Melbourne for an abortion] gives [young women] time to think about the situation. To not just say, "Well, yep, I've just fallen pregnant, and I

don't want this baby". It gives them time to calculate and think about their own feelings, not about what everyone else is telling them to do.'

'When you're looking at it as a teenager you sort of think, "Oh well if I get pregnant, then I can just have an abortion", but it's not as easy as that and when you're in the actual situation yourself it's a lot harder.'

...When there is no choice ~ in health and support services

The young mothers speak of limited choice in support, maternity and health services. "There's no Medicare office in my town," one young mother said. "That's really pissing me off at the moment." In country towns with few doctors, especially female doctors, and sometimes no antenatal clinic or hospital, some of the young mothers speak of finding the lack of choice in professional support stressful during their pregnancy and birth experience.

'Just [me] being young and being a male doctor, there was a lot of things I was scared to talk to him about and ask him.'

'[My doctor] keeps changing the times on me, and days and he's postponed it for the last three weeks.'

'I'd like to have something in my own country town. At the moment I have to travel to another country town for every second anti-natal visit, which is a little costly in running the car, there and back, every second month and it used to be every week so yeah.'

'I had doctor R and he was absolutely fabulous. He was unbelievable, but I got told the other day that he doesn't deliver anymore. I was very upset. I don't want to go to another doctor...I've built up the confidence for this doctor that I had my first baby with, and now he's not meant to be delivering, and I'm like... "great".'

A few of the young mothers tell stories that suggest the importance of developing more women centered support services. The current lack of these services further frustrates choice of support.

'I decided if I ever wanted to go back to school, I would. But there's not enough support there. I can't take my baby into the classroom to breastfeed and I don't take the bottle. There's no support, there's no support there, so what are you supposed to do? You know there's no support.'

'In The Royal Women's they used to have these sort of cubicles where you could go in, and these big soft cushion chairs. [There you could] express milk, 'cause I couldn't breast feed and I used to get truck loads of milk. But when I went back to [my town], one of my biggest problems that really devastated me [was] they had no privacy to expressing milk. They just had this chair in the telly room where all parents go. Fathers, mothers, and all sorts of people, and they had no curtain, no nothing. And they were still expecting me to [pause] bring me boob out.'

'When my little boy got whooping cough...there was just nowhere [to express in the hospital]. I had to go express in the toilet. That was my second [child]. You sort of think that you're OK with that stuff by the time you've had the second one, but still it's not very nice. There's not enough places to go and do that mother stuff around any of the towns.'

...When there is no choice ~ in childcare

The young mothers feel there is no choice in other ways too. A few of them tell stories of overcrowded childcare centres in their country towns, making it difficult to get their child

booked in. Without support in the caring role, the young mothers sometimes feel compelled to give up hopes of further study or work. What childcare is available can carry a high cost, both in the dollar and in a young mother's peace of mind.

'I think women should have equal rights with men and go out and work and have somebody to look after the baby but that's pretty hard, because there's nowhere to leave your baby and if you do, it's not always that crash hot.'

'Of course I'd go back to school if I could, if there's free childcare, like if I could go back to school, I would just go back to school. My partner works and I still can't afford [childcare]. It's unbelievable and we're lucky we don't pay rent or board or whatever, you know, and we just have to just pay some bills and help out a bit and stuff. If there was support I reckon that a lot more people would go back to school. Plus you know there's two childcare centres, and they're full, I can't get him in. Then, in another country town there's one where I sent my son there two weeks ago, and he came home with ringworms, conjunctivitis, and he's 10 months old. You've gotta be careful...in the city there's a few more you know, here we've only got one or two.'

'Childcare is so expensive like it's just unbelievable. Maybe even if the community had a free childcare. The government's pushing for mums to go back to work but they don't understand how much it costs and stuff like that. \$100 dollars a day out of your pocket is expensive.'

Sometimes multiple obstacles, such as the cost of childcare and transport, the reality of rural distance and limited educational opportunities all conspire to squash choice.

'I was looking into getting my V.C.E. but I can't afford to drive to Shepparton every day. Putting him in childcare, driving into Shepparton every day...[so] I was looking into doing it through the distance education, but once you turn 21 you can't do it through them anymore, and I'll be 21 next year. So there's no use starting.'

...When there is no choice ~ in finding work

Even if affordable and attractive childcare was available, one of the young mothers questions recent government policy encouraging mothers to return to the workforce.

'Also with the Centrelink thing, how they're bringing in that [policy] that after your last child turns 5 or 6, I think it is, you have to go back into the workforce. But I don't think that they realise that it's harder for someone in a rural town, like in my town, to be able to find work. There are no jobs in my town. I mean, I had a hard enough time trying to find a job when I wasn't at school before I had him.'

Two others speak of the financial 'loss' in what is contrived by the government as a 'gain', suggesting the bar of financial independence is raised too high for young families to scramble up.

'They bring out all these ads for women to go back to work, but the thing with that is as soon as they go back to work, the [government] takes away the [payments] incentive which makes it harder on the families themselves. They're not getting supported by the government anymore, which is way harder. You're losing a lot of government support, which doesn't particularly help your family. Then you've gotta really work on a budget, and you can't live as comfortable as you were when you weren't working. Like me, when I was by myself before [Pete and I] became defacto, I [had] enough money to support me and Amy, to rent a house and everything. Now that I live with Pete, they've taken a lot of money off me, so now we are sort of on a budget, where we have to really put money aside, for this and

that. We can't actually live comfortably and go out and do the usual activities that we really want to do...Even though we both work, you just find the more you get ahead with your life, the more they try to take away from you. They say "well you're on your own two feet now. You can do it yourself".

'I'd love to go and get back out into the workforce, but as you'd know, the childcare is through the roof. You'd probably go out and work in a full time job and bring home \$400.00 [a week]. And \$300.00, even \$400.00 of it, goes to childcare! In the system today, you're probably better off staying at home to look after your children.'

...Informal supports

When informal support continues beyond the initial decision to keep her baby, a young mother's road is a lot easier. Some speak of family members helping out with childcare and finances, as well as a listening ear. "My family is just unbelievable," one young mother concluded. "I've had heaps and heaps of support from my mum and dad," another said.

Others tell stories that show where friends and local community can make a difference.

'During the whole pregnancy a lot of my friends were really good about it. They sort of joined in, and they really liked it actually, which was a bit weird [laughs].'

'One [local] family has been very good to me as well. When I first moved out of home their daughter actually came and stayed with me for a little bit, just to help me settle and stuff.'

'I had a friend who had a baby, not a long time before I fell pregnant. I could relate to her because my friend had been through it, so I didn't feel totally on my own. I could ring her up and have a talk to her.'

Others are aware of the value of informal supports as they are forced to struggle on in the absence of family and friends. A few of the young mothers live long distances from family or friends and they regret their absence.

'[If I could change something about my support people it would be] their location, cause they're all far away from me. I've got family [all over the state].'

'I don't have any family, and my partner doesn't have any family, I have friends but they're like everywhere, like all over the state and all that.'

'I'd try and bring [my parents] closer because they're so far away, they're a long way away. We don't really get much support [from them]. If I need them, I can call them over the phone, but that's not always as good as face to face with my mum... If I could, I'd just probably bring them closer.'

Sometimes informal support can be swamped by the changing tides of people's affections. Some of the young mothers remember enduring periods of limited or no support while family members struggled to reconcile with the changes.

'Now I have Rosie's dad as well, and all of his family, whereas while I was pregnant, we weren't actually together, so yeah, I've got all of his family now, [laughs] on my side now, which is a lot better.'

'His side of the family have been topsy turvy the whole way through. At first when they first found out they told me that it wasn't his child, and that I was cheating on him...it kind of hurt me. [When I had the baby his family] came around and said, "Oh she looks just like Greg...she's beautiful", and I was just thinking, "So much for it not being his child".'

'My dad said he'd kill me if I did it within another year, like popping 'em out every year, he'd kill me. Um but other than that my dad definitely absolutely adored me being pregnant, he'd come up and rub my belly, and now he's having a ball.'

...Worker support

Ushered down the traditional corridors of antenatal and postnatal support, many of the young mothers have fond memories of doctors, midwives, and support services in the journey of becoming a mother. Support works when it is flexible to a young mother's needs and non-judgemental.

One young mother speaks of services and her doctor 'keeping her going for a while,'. Another spoke of her doctor encouraging her to "just keep going". Some speak of nurturing bonds formed between themselves and midwives. Sometimes these bonds have the potential to influence a young mother's future goals. "I actually wanted to become a midwife after I had my son," said one young mother.

'People that I'm talking to from the community health centre and the doctors and stuff, they're all giving good advice and they just, they're there for you. If you need any help, they help you. Sometimes they even call to make sure that you're ok and everything's fine.'

'I've been able to use the same Maternal and Child Health Nurse...from when Michael was born right through to when I had Benny...so we had sort of a friendship, a bond sort of thing, because she was there from the start...and I chose to go to her all the time.'

'I wouldn't change anything [in support from support services] because I think it's really good.'

'The workers have been fine, really helpful and everything.'

'The midwife from the hospital, she helped me a lot... She supplied a lot of things to help me. 'Cause at the time I wasn't earning a lot of money. I had to move out of home...I was only earning \$50.00 a week which I had to somehow buy all this stuff for this baby, and that just wasn't working for me. So she helped me and gave me a lot of donated stuff.'

One of the young mothers had a very good experience with her school. Her story shows how enormously beneficial it is for schools to be inclusive to young mothers during their pregnancy and after the birth, particularly when other supports are lacking.

'While I was pregnant it was OK. I stayed at school, right up until the baby was born. I think I stopped school about two weeks before Andrea was born and after that, they allowed me to come back to school, and bring Andrea to classes with me...it was good, a little distracting, because everyone was, [laughs] you know all over the baby, but it was really good, because it still gave me the opportunity to pursue school...One of my teachers adores [my baby]. He was really, really good to me, considering my parents had left and moved to another country town far away. At the time he was sort of there for me, if I needed anything, like financially or emotionally...to talk to.'

However, it was an unfortunate reality that the critical stares and judgemental attitudes encountered by the young mothers in their own rural communities were sometimes also waiting for them in the professional rooms of local doctors and rural services.

"My health nurse had a few words to say because I was so young," said one young mother. "She was judging me too a little bit". Another young mother answered her casually, as if the experience were not uncommon. "Oh they all do that," she said.

'I had a problem with one doctor, he treated me like a second class citizen, like, that I was a worthless piece of crap, like he treated me well as a doctor, like he checked everything was OK and all that, but it's just his mannerism that was bad.'

'With the second one I was more aware of people making me feel that I wasn't experienced enough because I was only young. I guess I just I'm pretty good at not paying much attention to what people say, so I was never too worried about what people said. I mean, the first doctor was not very personable. I think people, the health professionals, definitely need to have a better view on teenage pregnancy and a more accepting view.'

'When I had Robbie I was 21 going on 22, so it wasn't that big a deal, when I had Sarah some of the doctors acted as if I was a burden.'

'When I went in there, the doctor goes, "How old are you? 16?" I've gone, "No I'm 18". And she goes "oh well, I suppose that's better than 16".'

Vulnerable to criticism in the early nervous attempts of mothering, one of the young mothers remembers how important it was to have a positive and supportive worker as a sort of advocate who could reassure her about her parenting choices.

'I wanted to give him a dummy, 'cause he' was always sucking on his bottom lip. So instead of getting a burning rash at the bottom of his lips, I'd put a dummy in his mouth. One of the nurses was like, "No, no, no! Don't give him the dummy, don't give him the dummy". I had a midwife down there [at the hospital] and she's like "If you want to give him the dummy, give him the dummy. He's your baby. If you want to give him a dummy, give him a dummy". You know, I felt like that was really good.'

Others also spoke of disempowering situations; of having their hands full of a scrambling baby and yet being treated as a "baby" themselves by professionals. Resilience in these situations displays the strength of the young mothers.

'There was sometimes when I felt like I was being looked down on by the nurses...after I had Francis. When she was born, she was up in the Intensive Care Unit for quite a while, and the nurses loved bossing you around... just because they're old and they think they know everything. In the Intensive Care Unit there are about three different rooms up there, and [the patients] progress [from one room to another]. In one room I was taught to give my baby a dummy, this special little premature dummy. Then my baby was [moved to another room] and I didn't know where the dummies were in this room, so I went and asked the nurse, and she went right off at me. She said, "Francis shouldn't need a dummy, cause she can't suck anyway", and all this sort of stuff, and "Babies don't need dummies, they shouldn't have them". But after she walked away, I sort of snuck around and found one, and gave it to her anyway [laughs].'

'Some of the nurses, though, were really down on it and treated me like a bit of a baby.'

'The older nurses and midwives seem to [do that]. Some of them just took over...The feeling that I got was that I was incapable...When I had Ethan, he had to use a humidity crib for a few weeks, and one of the issues that came up [was] pretty much they just wanted to do everything their way, and I felt that because of my age, my opinion [wasn't important].'

'My normal doctor, him and my mum get on really well. [But] he's sort of like a father figure. I was too scared to go there and then he goes, "Oh my God, you're pregnant" so I went and saw another doctor. That might sound stupid but...'

...Mothers and daughters

Many of the young mothers speak of deepening intimacies between themselves and their own mothers since having their baby. In words that show a heartfelt gratitude, the young mothers reflect on what it has meant to them to have their mother's support. One describes her mother as her "best friend". Another said simply, "Mum was always there".

'For support I had my mum. She was just a great help.'

'I had mum in the labour room with me, and I tell you what, if I was to have another one again, she'd be in there. It just felt a lot easier, and I was really relaxed.'

'My mum, she said any time I need a break or any time I just want to do something on my own, just to give her a call.'

'It was my mum who actually came to me and said, "Could you be pregnant?"... my mum was actually really good she booked the appointment and told my dad and helped me to the extent that she'd take me to the doctors appointment and stuff like that.'

'My mum is a big time [support].'

'I have a lot of support around me, especially my mum. She was there for me the whole time through the pregnancy.'

'My mum still supports me heaps. Every second weekend [my daughter] doesn't go to her father's she'll go to her nana's house. She supports me heaps. If I'm running low on cash or anything like that I can ring her up and she'll help me out there.'

'I went to the doctor's. My mum come in with me...she was really good, she was really supportive. The doctor goes, "You're pregnant". My mum's sitting there smiling, happy as can be. She was fantastic. She said to me, "Whatever you want to do, I'll support you, I won't judge you".'

'I get a bit of support from my mum when she calls and that. She actually went out and bought a few things for the baby... She's really loving that I'm actually needing her help.'

The importance of the support and wisdom of older women is evident by a young mother's attempts to seek out a nurturing female figure in the absence of a literal mother-daughter relationship. Fortunately for some of the young mothers, a mother-in-law, an aunt or a family friend has filled this role.

'I remember once I was about 15 and I actually thought I fell pregnant, 'cause I got drunk, and I had unprotected sex. I was really scared that I was pregnant and I went running to one of my mum's friends, and she went and bought a home pregnancy test, and done all that. Luckily it turned out to be negative.'

'If I actually [needed] somebody to talk with about the pregnancy, I would have rang my aunty and spoke to her about it. She's really the only person I could ever talk to.'

'I couldn't really bring myself to even tell my parents, I had to tell my aunty, and she told them for me. I was fairly embarrassed, because I was so young.'

'I have my mother-in-law, who lives like right next door to me, so she's a lot of help cause she's always there.'

...Woman against woman

Despite the real potential of other women supporting the young mothers, the pages of this research report reveal that many judgemental comments remembered by the young mothers have come from women in local communities or female workers.

Human behaviour is complex. It seems likely that when a female family member expresses her disapproval of a teenage pregnancy, sometimes an undercurrent of fear and grief may be the reason. For example, one of the young mothers remembered pressure from her mother to have an abortion. Though she'd felt hurt by the pressure, she reflected intuitively, "I think it was because she was a young mum herself, and she didn't want history to repeat itself".

At other times, the long standing culture of patriarchy in rural areas may be the reason. If an ideology is dominant enough, it can sometimes be internalised even by those who are most at disadvantage because of it. A story from one young mother illustrates the bizarre way that some women have accepted a cultural system that traditionally favors boys. "My mum was very disappointed at first when she found out I was pregnant," she said. "But she come along pretty easy when she found out I was having a boy".

Socially censuring the behaviour of men while damning the young mothers is disturbing no matter from whom it comes. But when a woman turns against another woman in this way, something else occurs. Breaking ranks, as it were, from each other, women lose their power of solidarity. Without this, not much will ever change.

'You hear of girls calling other girls sluts.'

'Girls are always saying that "this girl's a slut, she sleeps around".'

I had that baby that you get in school, like in the Health and Human Development class. I got that baby and I was pushing it around a shopping centre. I think I was about 17, nearly 18 at the time. Just pushing it around, and it started making this oh God almighty screaming noise, and this old women comes up to me and she goes, "That's disgusting". And then she just walked off and I was mortified. Then some other lady came up. She was probably between 35 and 40. She goes, "Don't worry, my daughter had the same thing. She had that baby and was getting abused from everybody". So that sort of made me feel a bit better.'

'The feeling that I got from his mum...I'd done this to her son and how could I do this to her son. Absolutely no knowledge that it takes two.'

'When my little sister was born, I'd want to carry her, and I'd get these foul looks from old women, just the foulest looks from old women.'

'It was his mother that thought that I fell pregnant because I wanted a roof over my head.'

'To start with my grandma just hated me!'

Part 5 ~ The Life

...For the better

Opening up spaces for people to share about their lives in depth creates an environment in which the speaker is able to weigh up the gentle benefits of their story despite the heaviness of what may have been endured. Frank in their descriptions of judgement, relationship disappointments and sometime isolation from teenage peers, the young mothers also dig deep for the jewels that having a baby has offered them.

'It makes you realise, what the hell were you doing with your life?' one reflected. In fact, some of the young mothers view their experience of having a baby as a kind of benevolence that saved them from encroaching doom. For them, deepening relationships with family members or partners, renewed vision for a future of education or career, and a sense of personal growth and hope are infinitely sweeter gains than what was lost from their old life or even what is difficult in the new.

'I'm pretty sure I made the right decision,' said one young mother, and she laughed. 'I love my life, and it's bettered me! It has truly benefited me'.

'I think I got fairly off track in Year 11, so having Pete was probably a really good thing for me because I just had no idea of where I was going. I mean, he really brought me back on track because as soon as I fell pregnant I was, like, "Well, now I've got to do this"'.
'

'Since becoming pregnant I've gotten close to my partner, and, you know, family.'

'My life's changed for the better, because I reckon if I hadn't had Anita, I would have gone into the drugs and the alcohol and done really dumb stupid things because at that stage I was really depressed and really down and I would have tried anything to pick myself up, so it would have been anything from the drugs, the alcohol, the sex, whatever. So I think that it changed for the better.'

'I was a lot younger and I'd just started with the drugs and drinking. I was stuffing up at school a fair bit and then I fell pregnant and I stopped drinking and I stopped going out so much, and then got a partner and now like settled down and we bought a house and stuff. So, even though every now and again I sort of feel like I'm missing out on something, I still like settling down and looking after the kids. Before I wasn't really interested in school and now I know that I want to go back and go to uni.'

'It's actually settled me down heaps.'

'Before I had my son I was really going down hill. [I] wasn't going to school. I was out drinking and stuff. I wasn't doing drugs or anything like that, nothing really bad. But I was getting in trouble with the law and stuff like that. So having a baby did change my life and education now is important to me.'

Tempering the difficulties of being a young mother is a resilience that has promoted new levels of maturity and understanding of themselves in the world. As they climb the up hill track of rural teenage motherhood, the grit of the path seems to be strengthening them rather than weakening.

'It would be better not to be called a slut. I hate that word. The actual definition in the dictionary of a slut is "a dirty housewife". I don't think that many people know that. But it's always going to be the same. And no matter how much you try and

make someone feel good about themselves I just think it's up to the person themselves. If you don't care about what other people think, good for you!

'Some of [my friends] left me. But then I thought, "Well, they're not my friends.'

I went to another one of my friend's 21st not that long ago, and it just made me realise that they're still doing the same things they were doing a year and a half ago. Exactly the same things. They're getting drunk, they're fighting. They're crying "boo hoo". Then they make up and go to bed, or they stay up drinking until they pass out and I sit there and think to myself "I can't believe this used to be me.'

...Choosing how to be a woman

Choosing a path for themselves today as both women and mothers is perhaps a natural result of deepening self awareness and reflection of what has occurred in the past. In many of their words and stories, most of the young mothers seem to be questioning their position in society and the status quo because of their early parenting experience. Their words sometimes reflect the exploration of ideas of 'being' a woman.

As they seek to carve out the life that is right for them, all their voices are an individual expression within the shared experience of being a young mother. Starting from the common ground of teenage pregnancy each now has an opportunity to choose their own life, "whatever they want it to be", and to live that life with courage.

'The ideal role of a woman in our society is..., well, everything! Everything from a mother to a single parent. From a house wife to single parents, childless or whatever they want to be. They should be able to have an equal playing field.'

'I think that women should be happy with whatever they do. I see so many women feeling like they have to go to work because the family's not bringing in enough money, but they want to stay home with their kids. So I believe that society should start accepting them.'

'It's sort of important to me to stay home with the kids.'

'There are a lot of 'men jobs' out there that women could do better, I reckon. Even parliament! They've got a more understanding and open mind with a lot of things.'

'I think there needs to be acceptance right through both ends of the spectrum. I think young mums need to be respected for the role that they play, and older mums do as well, and if you don't have kids as well. I think it definitely needs to be equal.'

'The ideal role for women is let them be who they want to be, without anyone saying anything about it.'

'I don't think women should have a 'role'. I think everyone has their own choices. It's not, like some people say, "all these women should be at home and be house cleaners, and all the men should be out working". And I don't think it should be all women have to go out and work now [because] there are some women who'll say, "Well I'll be a stay at home mum, you can do work". Some women who will go to work, and he'll be the stay at home dad, or they'll go to work, or they'll take in turns...I don't think anybody really has one role.'

Appendices

Appendix 1 ~ Literature Review

Teenage Pregnancy ~ A Rural Perspective

All Australian young people now find themselves in an increasingly sexualised western society (Skinner, S.R., & Hickey, M. 2003; Jackson, S., 2004, Williams, H., & Davidson, S. 2004; Alldred, P., et al. 2003). Images from media and the Internet are fostering earlier sexualization (Jackson, S. 2004), with young people 'progressing into adulthood at lightening speed' (Dubecki, L. 2008) as the age of first sex continues to decline (Williams, H., & Davidson, S. 2004). Earlier drinking is also on the increase generally in Australia, with children as young as eleven saying they are drinking regularly (Rosendorff, D. 2007). A fifth (20%) of Australian adolescents admit to having sex with no condom whilst under the influence of drugs or alcohol (Williams, H., & Davidson, S. 2004) and accounts of non-consensual sex among Australian teenagers are sometimes linked to alcohol (Weston, p. 2007). In the vacuum of comprehensive, gendered, sexual health and relationship education, young people are turning to 'television' and the sexual example of their friends for both their guidance and their role modelling (Jackson, S. 2004, p. 126).

Woodward et al. (2001) suggest that early sexual behaviour is associated with greater likelihood of teenage pregnancy (Woodward et al. 2001 cited in Jackson, S. 2004). When teenage pregnancy occurs, the consequences can be especially difficult for teenage mothers; including poverty, single parenting, loss of education, future unemployment or underemployment, loss of family and friends, greater likelihood of depression, lack stable housing or homelessness, domestic violence, low self esteem, and fewer life choices (Harrison, L. et al., year unknown; Jackson, S. 2004 ; Williams, H., & Davidson, S. 2004, Quinlivan, J.A. 2004; White, A. 2007; Crosier, P. , & Cook, J. 2004; Smith, M.M., & Grenyer, B. F. S. 1999; Evans, A. 2001; Quinlivan, J. 2000).

While it is not the intention of this literature review to 'problematise' teenage pregnancy (Jackson, S. 2004, p. 127), it is useful to consider the specific challenges that both precede and occur with rural teenage pregnancy. The literature is swamped with general risk factors of teenage pregnancy. Early sexual behaviour, sexual abuse, inadequate promotion of sexual health, low socio-economic situation, having a mother who was a teenage mother, low academic aspirations and being indigenous Australian are some of the those mentioned (Skinner, S.R., & Hickey, M. 2003; Jackson, S. 2004; Vlaicu, S. 2002, Family Planning Victoria. 2003-2004; Quinlivan, J.A. 2004; Evans, A. 2001). It could also be argued that, to some extent, 'being rural' is another risk factor. This is because of the particular and often challenging social, cultural and ideological environment in which rural young people grow and live. Research conducted with both urban and rural Australian young people is suggestive of this, as teenage pregnancy was raised as a health concern by young people in rural areas much more often than by young people in cities (Quine, S; et al. 2003).

Couched in the context of the broader sexualised society, rural young people have a unique local turf in which the dramas of youth, love, sex and teenage pregnancy are played out. Vlaicu (2002) refers to this idea of a local turf, suggesting researchers need to explore 'society, culture, values and political ideologies' when searching for explanations about teenage pregnancy (Vlaicu, S. 2002, p. 86). Jackson (2004) remarks similarly on the importance of understanding 'how society, culture and relationship ideology influence the decisions of young people' (Jackson, S. 2004, pp. 125 – 126). Despite this, most research has focused on urban young people with little attention given to the rural

experience, confirming the need for rural research (Jackson, S. 2004; Quine, S., et al. 2003; Lane, L. 2007). In favour of soliciting rural data that captures the personal or 'lived' experience of teenage pregnancy (Lane, L. 2007), the literature points to qualitative research that 'looks to pregnant teens, rather than at them' (Proweller. 2000, p. 115 cited in Harrison; et al. Year unknown, p. 26), arguing that an inductive approach aids in deeper understandings (Lane, L. 2007; Jackson, S. 2004).

The literature suggests that, for rural young people, sexual encounters can be complicated by boredom and risk taking behaviours. While adolescence has always been characterised by a 'desire to experiment' (Skinner, S. R., & Hickey, M. 2003, p. 158), a lack of future thought (Lane, L. 2007), and 'unpredictable sexual behaviour' (Williams, H., & Davidson, S. 2004), research with rural young people found that they believed limited educational, employment and recreational opportunities contributed to their risk taking behaviour (Quine, S; et al. 2003). Rural youth have difficulty in knowing how they can become a part of their community, remarking on the negative and damning attitude their communities hold toward them (Buschel, C., et al. 2005). Other research discovered that rural young people were engaging in reckless or dangerous behaviour 'as a result of boredom or frustration' (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2003, p. 355). Participants in another rural study made a link between teenage pregnancy and the overuse of alcohol, stating that boredom is the underlying reason (Buschel, C., et al. 2005).

Nash (2001) speaks of a 'culture of fatalism' influencing teenage pregnancy, linked to low socio economic situation and fewer opportunities (Nash, R. 2001, p. 8). Young rural people often 'feel trapped in their life situation' (Buschel, C., et al. 2005, p. 32). Quine et al. write of research with rural young women, finding that teenage pregnancy was not considered to be a 'catastrophe, rather a mistake that was adjusted to. Limited education and employment opportunities meant that becoming a mother gave girls a purpose and role in life' (Quine, S; et al. 2003, p. 5). Another rural study found that while lack of educational and employment opportunities affects both rural young men and women, there are generally more employment opportunities in the towns and surrounding farms for young men than young women (Tremellen, S. 1996). In communities structured with narrow opportunities or lack of diversification of roles for women, it seems likely that there is 'no modelling for the idea of going into the workforce, but there is plenty of modelling for becoming a mother' (Quinlivan, J. 2006, cited in Porter, L. 2006, p. 16).

Much current sex education is inadequate in that it fails to focus on gender roles, negotiating skills, sexual identity and relationship choices; topics which 'students wanted to know about' (Jackson, S. 2004, p. 128). The literature presents all Australian young people as 'crying out for sex education that (goes) further than the standard biology...to talk...about the social aspects of negotiating sex' (Cooke, D. 2007). Traditional understandings of gender create power imbalances in rural teenage sexual relationships. Responses from rural young men in recent research were 'in line with the dominant construction of sex which privileges male pleasure' (Tremellen, S. 1996, p. 19). One Australian study found that 32 percent of young men aged 14-26 believe it is acceptable to force a woman to have sex under certain circumstances (Evans, A. 2001); a figure that may increase if studied in a rural context. Rural research has found that young women believe they cannot negotiate power in a sexual relationship and feel that teenage pregnancy is always a 'possible price to pay for having a boyfriend' (Tremellen, S. 1996, p. 19).

For women, suggesting to a man that he use a condom reveals her sexual intent, something that they have been socialised to hide (Evans, A. 2001). Evans (2001) writes of gender identity being learnt from a very young age, influencing sexual relationships in which women may have 'no choice over sexual or contraceptive decisions, or they may behave submissively or in other socially prescribed ways' (Evans, A. 2001, p. 90). Similarly, while young rural men revealed in a confidential survey that they believed sex to

be linked to love and emotional intimacy, their public responses followed a purely physical and often patriarchal view of sex. Hillier et al. (1996) write, 'it seems likely that some boys may also experience a disjunction between their varied individual experiences and what is expected of them as males in the high visibility of small rural communities' (Hillier; et al. 1996 cited in Tremellen, S. 1996, p. 20).

In country towns, where gender differences are 'exaggerated' and 'rigid' (Quine, S; et al. 2003, p. 8), socially prescribed rural norms also mean that young women feel under sexual surveillance in a way that young men do not, and are often shouldered with a reputation for being a 'slut' (Tremellen, S. 1996), something they fear more than any physical consequences of sexual activity (Quine, S; et al. 2003). Social judgement is a frightening consequence of rural teenage pregnancy and can lead to social isolation (The Bridge Youth Service. 2006).

Rural research with single and pregnant young women reveals judgement in antenatal classes from older partnered pregnant women and staff (Crosier, P. , & Cook, J. 2004), a reality often used to explain a lack of attendance in antenatal and other support services by rural young women (Buschel, C., et al. 2005, Crosier, P. , & Cook, J. 2004). Often without transport, the negotiating of public territory by rural young mothers to access services and support can be a 'time of increased likelihood to encounter...public judgements' (Lane, L. 2007, p. 48). The literature highlights the need for rural young mothers groups and youth friendly services to counter the social isolation that comes from this judgement (Crosier, P; & Cook, J. 2004; Bull, D., et al. 2002; Buschel, C., et al. 2005; Smith, M. M., & Grenyer, B. F. S. 1999; Lane, L. 2007; The Bridge Youth Service. 2006).

Heightened visibility and a lack of confidentiality in small rural towns also complicates the ability of young people to acquire contraception, services and information and probably impacts on the occurrence of unprotected sex and ensuing teenage pregnancy (Quine, S; et al. 2003; Skinner, S. R., & Hickey, M. 2003; Buschel, C; et al. 2005; Evans, A; et al. 2001; Tremellen, S. 1996). Bull et al. (2002) write 'while young people in the larger cities can quite confidently access services without fear of being known to workers, this is often not the case in rural towns. Whether names and addresses will be required is probably irrelevant - names and addresses will possibly already be known' (Bull, D., et al. 2002, p. 9).

The literature speaks of financial barriers to acquiring contraception because of a decreasing availability of bulk billing GPs in rural areas (Williams, H., & Davidson, S. 2004; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2003). There is also a limited choice of GPs and services in rural areas and this can frustrate attempts in acquiring the morning after pill (Quine, S; et al. 2003; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2003). GPs unpractised and unhelpful in dealing with sexually active rural young people are another barrier. Karvelas (2005) writes dryly of the 'minefield for an older GP in the back of Bourke confronted with teen sex issues' (Karvelas, P. 2005, p. 5).

Choice about abortion is limited in rural areas (Quine, S; et al. 2003; Nader, C. 2006). Williams and Davidson (2004) write of the reliance on termination amongst Australian teenagers with unplanned pregnancies and how a 'disproportionately high teenage abortion rate means this is not translated into a high teenage birth rate' (Williams, H., & Davidson, S. 2004, p. 95). However, for rural teenagers, sometimes unplanned pregnancy may result in teenage parenting because of barriers to seeking an abortion such as a lack of local services, poor confidentiality in small country towns, and distance and cost of urban abortion services (Quine, S., et al. 2003; Nader, C. 2006).

Lower educational and career opportunities and belief in future opportunities can also influence choice to not seek an abortion (Evans, A. 2005), which may have particular

significance to the rural context. Evans (2001) writes of three factors influencing choice, and groups them at the individual level (abortion and career aspirations); the institutional level (education, family, relationships and religion); and at the cultural level (ethnicity and area of residence) (Evans, A. 2001), and it is useful considering where 'being rural' may intersect with all three.

Understanding teenage pregnancy in rural Australia needs research that captures the voices of the rural young people involved. 'Investigating the spirit' (Jackson, S. 2004, p. 126) of how matters of sexuality are being handled in peer groups, families, schools and communities will reveal the particular structural, ideological and social context that rural young people find themselves living within. Information gained can be used to equip young people with the 'skills necessary to steer their way safely through an increasingly sexualised society' (Williams, H., & Davidson, S. 2004, p. 97).

Appendix 2 ~ Details of research questions

Research questions:

Was there a knowledge-practice gap and why?

What quality of health care do young rural women have?

Is there awareness of contraception and is it available?

Is there an awareness of risk of STIs? How do young people view condoms?

Does coercion play a role in teenage pregnancy? (3 levels)

Is there a discrepancy between sexualized images of young people in media along with the expectation that young women won't get pregnant?

Why do rural teenagers get pregnant?

How do teenagers make the decision about what to do about the pregnancy? Who decides?

Why do rural young women become pregnant at twice the rate of metro?

Was it important for these teenagers who decided to go through with the pregnancy to finish school?

What effect does pregnancy have on career aspirations?

Why do rural young women finish school at higher rates than metro?

What role does traditional gender identification play? Gendered construction of femininity and motherhood? Is there a values-based approach that problematises teenage sexuality.

What about the invisible male? What role does the baby's father play?

Do teenage mothers experience social isolation?

Appendix 3 ~ Instructions and interview schedule

φ Welcome

As you may know, the aim of today is to hear from young women who are pregnant or parenting living in rural areas. What you tell us will help us understand the how it is for teenage mums and how health services and the community generally can respond in a better way.

- φ The first part of the day we'll be asking you to get into pairs and ask each other questions. Deb will tell you more about that next. The main thing to know is that we don't need to take your full names and your information will be confidential. You can even choose another first name to use. We'll compile all the interviews and your names – even the false ones – won't be attached to any information.
- φ We really appreciate that you're taking part in this day, and to say a small thank you, we have bags with a CD voucher and a beautiful spray made by one of our workers, and a few other things. After lunch Helen's going to run a workshop in jewellery making and glass painting.
- φ Julie's going to take photos which may be used in general women's health publications like the Annual Report or banners. Is that OK with everyone? If you don't want your photo taken, please let Julie know.
- φ Toilets, drinks, childcare.
- φ Thanks to Helen, introduce her for the ice-breaker.

Ice breaker

- φ Your bags contain a business card for a counsellor in Violet Town. We have arranged for Jenny to be available for you if you feel you might need to talk to a counsellor in the next week or so. You can phone her and arrange a time that suits both of you, and WHGNE will pay for her.
- φ You would have seen the explanatory statement, and there's a copy in your info pack too. If you have any complaints about this research process, the explanatory statement has the name of the person to contact. There's a consent form that we need you to sign. Looks like this. It says: (read it) Can you sign them now?
- φ Right now, we're going to get you into pairs so you can interview each other. Find someone about your own age that you don't know. We can't have two Benalla people together! We'll probably have some Seymour people together, so see if you can find someone you don't know very well. After this, we'll stop for morning tea, and then, we'll get into different pairs.
- φ Deb's going to give you some tips for doing the interviews:

After morning tea:

Can we have all the people who **asked** the questions last time on one side.

Now find another person you don't know very well from the group who **didn't ask** the questions before. Again, we can't have two Benalla people together.

Double check that everyone gets to be interviewed once and gets to interview someone else once.

Instructions for the young women

We want to use a narrative approach in this research. By this, we mean that we're using story telling. Narrative comes from a Latin word that means 'to know', so we tell what we know through little stories or examples. Stories and examples about one person can be the easiest way to understand what's happening in our society.

The personal is political. For example! At Women's Health Goulburn North East we talk about lack of access to health services because of discrimination. It sounds pretty vague, and we can all wonder what this means to us. But when I tell you that a young woman came to our front desk asking for help because she needed to see a doctor and none of them would see her because she looked a certain way, with tattoos and nose and eyebrow piercing - it becomes easier to understand.

And we can see that it's not her fault she can't see a doctor. It's their judgemental values that is the problem. Often we think that we, as individuals, are not good enough, or don't do as well as other people. Maybe we don't have a career, or don't earn much money, or don't look like a model, and we tend to blame ourselves for not measuring up. BUT, the reality is that society is set up to favour certain segments of the population. If we're not wealthy; if we don't finish our education; if we don't get the job we applied for, there are often barriers facing us that don't face others. It's easier to be a doctor if you went to the 'right' school. And if you can pay the uni fees. And if you live in the city. And if your mother or father is a doctor because they have the connections. So whether you are smart enough, as an individual, doesn't matter as much as a lot of other things.

In the interview, don't think you have to give the right answers. There are no right answers.

You each have a list of questions to ask the other person. (Or you can look at the questions together.) You may have heard in other kinds of research, that the interviewer has to be completely objective and not talk about any of their own experiences, but a narrative approach (the one we're using) is more like a conversation. The person asking the questions, the interviewer, can feel free to react openly to something the other person has said, and can share their own thoughts and what happened to them. It's very much like a conversation – just one where one person asks the questions, and keeps an eye on the time to make sure there's time to cover all the questions.

Have a look at your cover sheet and question sheet. Before you ask the first question, fill in the details at the top of the form.

About you (the person doing the interview)

Are you from Benalla? From Seymour? Other? Where _____

Your first name (or false name) _____

Your age _____

Pregnant now? Yes No

Do you have other children? Yes No

If yes, how old are they? _____

About the person answering the questions

Is she from Benalla? From Seymour? Other? Where _____

Her first name (or false name) _____

Her age _____

Pregnant now? Yes No

Does she have other children? Yes No

If yes, how old are they? _____

- (1) **Start the recording (check with any one of the helpers if you have trouble!) and say "My first name is ... and I'm talking to" (You can use first names or false names)**
- (2) Make sure to ask every question (if you want, you can look at the question sheet together) and after the answer, prompt the other person to give examples of what happened to her, e.g. when she answers a question, say:
 - φ "Can you give me an example of that?"
 - φ "How did you feel about that?"
- (3) Give her time to reflect and don't worry about quiet pauses in the conversation. Try to get a story that's 'rich and thick'! (This is a research term that means it has so much description you can picture what's happening.)
- (4) Most importantly, you can say you won't answer a particular question if you don't want to!

Interview questions

1. Can you tell me a little bit about how your life has changed since becoming pregnant or becoming a mother?
2. How did you feel when you learnt you were pregnant for the first time?
3. Was that pregnancy planned?
4. What kind of support do you have from others? Who is there for you?
5. How has your friendship group changed since before you were pregnant? (prompt: Are many of your friends also mothers?)
6. If you could change anything about the support you get from people close to you, what would you change?
7. How did you get on with the doctor or health professional who looked after you while you were pregnant? (Who were they? e.g. doctor, community midwife, chemist, social worker Did you feel they treated you respectfully?)
8. What would you change about the support you get from health or community services?

9. Does the baby's father play a role in your life?
10. What role would you like him to have?
11. What did other people (family, friends) think the father's role should be?
12. When people started to know about your pregnancy, was the reaction different towards you, than towards the father of the baby?
13. What conversations did you have with the baby's father about using contraception?
14. What was his attitude towards contraception?
15. Did you know that teenagers in the city are half as likely to become mums as rural teenagers. Why do you think this is?
16. Was the decision to keep the baby entirely your own decision or did you feel pressure from others? Did you consider alternatives to having the baby? What happened?
17. Is information available in your town on the pill, the morning after pill and other contraceptives? Is it possible to have an abortion in your town?
18. What was the approach of your school towards sexual health education?
19. Who do you feel comfortable talking about sex with? (e.g. mother, a friend)
20. Was there pressure from your friends and peer group to start having sex?
21. Pressure from anywhere else to start having sex?
22. Was there pressure from the baby's father to have sex?
23. Do you think the community accepts teenagers having relationships that involve sex?
24. Is there still a double standard where it's OK for boys to have sex but not girls?
25. Do girls still get called either called 'sluts' or 'frigid'?
26. What would need to change for teenage girls to feel good about having a sex life?
27. Thinking back to before you became pregnant, was having a career an important goal for you?
28. Was finishing education an important goal?
29. What do you think is the ideal role for women to have in society?
30. What are your plans for the future?

Appendix 4 ~ Details of sample

	Age	No of children	Ages of children	Town
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1	20	1	19 mths	B
2	18	P		S
3	25	2	8 and 2 y.o.	B
4	20	1	9 months boy	W
5	25	3	6, 2, 1 y.o.	B
6	20	2	3 y.o. , 9 mths	B
7	20	P		S
8	15	1	10 mths	S
9	21	2	4 yrs and 2 yrs	B
10	22	1 and P	19 mths	B
11	21	1	23 months	S
12	21	1	3 years	S
13	18	P		S
14	21	1	3 and a half yrs	T
15	19	1	3 weeks	S
16	23	1 and P	2 and a half yrs	S
17	21	1 and P	2 years	B
18	18	1	23 months	B
19	24	1	4 years	B
20	19	1	6 months	B
21	25	1	6 years	B

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