

## Teenage mums in Jamaica overcome prejudice

**16-year-old Eshe Nelson from Reading went to Jamaica with Unicef to see how children and young people were tackling the issue of sexual health in the country and why young mothers in Jamaica are getting help where their own education system is failing them.**

Sophia Thomas was a shy, hard-working 15-year-old student at a high school in Kingston who, because of a lack of information, thought it was normal to miss her period. It wasn't until she started feeling dizzy that her mother took her to a doctor where she discovered that she was pregnant. A second doctor confirmed her deepest fears and two months later she gave birth.

Teenage girls in Jamaica often become excluded from school once they are pregnant and do not receive support from their families. And in a country where teenagers account for about one-in-five of all pregnancies, it means there are a lot of young mothers and mothers-to-be who struggle to continue their studies and secure a future for them and their kids.

In Jamaica I saw the problems these teenagers face, as well as some solutions that are on offer. Sophia told me that when her school principal found out she was pregnant he referred her to the nearest Women's Centre, and surprisingly he invited her to return after the birth because she had been doing so well. Despite this she still felt that "all would be lost".

There are seven Women's Centres across Jamaica and an additional six outreach stations. Over the last 30 years they have collectively helped 35,000 girls back into mainstream education after their pregnancy.

Run like a school, each Women's Centre is open Mondays to Thursdays, from 9am until 3pm. 15,000 young women go through the programme each year, of which about 1,000 will return to normal schooling once their baby is born. All the students have to learn the core subjects such as maths, sciences and history. Continuing these core subjects makes it easier for the girls to integrate back into mainstream education.



There is time each day for practical services like learning to build their self-esteem and counselling sessions. Individual and group counselling plays an essential role in the work of the Women's Centre. With only 10 to 15 students in a group counselling session, the intimate environment provides the perfect opportunity to talk to the young mothers about sexually transmitted infections and give them sex and relationships education.

Many adults believe talking about sex with a young person simply encourages them, but the guidance nurses and social workers at the Women's Centre think that with proper information young people can make better decisions in the future.

Embarrassed by her situation, Sophia stopped going to church as she couldn't face the criticism. However things started to look up at the Women's Centre. She tells me that it was here she met "non-judgemental adults", got a "sense of hope and belonging" and started to believe she "could fulfil her dreams" again.

She stayed at the centre for two terms before going back to school. But she couldn't face going back to her previous school, even though they didn't know about her pregnancy, so she changed school. She took her exams there but left to work and earn money for her family. Having found a job in customer services she decided to return to studying and take her A-levels. She then went on to do a degree in management and accounts.

Other former students at the centre include a girl who became pregnant at just 14. With help from the centre, she worked hard and after leaving the programme went on to study for a degree in social work, as well as training in nursing and management. She's now happily married, with two more children and working in the Ministry of Education.

All the centres have day nurseries. The young mums bring their child with them each day and see them during every break time, ensuring a strong bond is built between the mother and her child.

There is also material support because sometimes just a helping hand isn't enough. One young girl was brought in from an outreach station following the deaths of her father, brother and the baby's father. She was left with little support and struggled to get back into school. But thanks to the Women's Centre she is now at a teacher training college, for which the centre pays the tuition fees. She is one of the many girls who, as she says, "struggled through all misfortunes".

As for Sophia, she now works as the finance manager for the Women's Centre and has been married for five years. Her 19-year-old daughter, like her mother, is a hard worker and is studying finance and law at university. Sophia has only had the one child and although she wishes she had been older when she got pregnant, she is clear about one thing: "I don't regret having a child".



These struggles and triumphs should be inspiration to us all. My visit helped me realise that no matter how impossible it may seem to fight on, we can. Like these women we should be motivated to succeed and let nothing stand in our way. Jamaica like everything has its problems, but the people there are never without solutions; that is why it never fails to amaze me.

### About this story

This story was produced by Eshe Nelson, age 16, who visited Jamaica as part of a delegation of young people from Unicef. Photos courtesy of Anna France-Williams/Unicef.

Sophia Thomas asked for her name to be changed.

### 7 comments

HEY

Hey Eshe its me, cousin Keeley, hope ur enjoying uni and missing you. Come and see that paramoral activity. Everyone's missing u.

Bye xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Keeley Dickinson (age 14) from Newbury, 01 December 2009 15:58

ESHE

Hey, eshe its me keeley  
hope you are enjoying uni  
Keeley (age 14) from Newbury, 22 October 2009 13:10  
Teen mums in Jamaica

I thought your article was interesting and encouraging. I am proud of you and wish you every success in a future in journalism.  
Your article raised many issues and highlighted that prejudice and disapproval is alive and kicking - certainly some of the responses you received reflect that.  
Why should young women be punished for being teen mums when it takes a male and a female to create a human life? And in many cases, the man is older and sometimes controlling and / or irresponsible.

At the end of the day all parents and their children should be supported and welcomed by society - not judged.

Rose (age 17) from London, 18 February 2009 14:47

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