

# 10-year-old moms

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It's bad enough that the Philippines has one of the highest teen pregnancy rates in the world, with 24 babies born to teenage mothers every hour, or more than 500 babies a day. It's terrible that there are 10-year-old mothers, as in the case of the child in Zamboanga City who was impregnated by her grandfather. According to the report by Inquirer reporter Julie Alipala, the child's mother, a washerwoman, had no recourse but to leave her two young children in the care of her father-in-law so she could go about her work. When her 10-year-old's belly began to swell, she thought the girl had been possessed by an evil spirit—only to be told that the child was now with child.

It's a heart-wrenching story that easily finds parallel in many households where the mother has to leave home to earn a living abroad. Among the estimated 2.2 million overseas Filipino workers in 2016, 53.6 percent are women—forced to leave their young, vulnerable children in the care of relatives who, as current headlines have indicated, turn out to be sex predators.

Incest is known to cut across classes, but it is conceivably more prevalent in impoverished households where earning a meager and desperate living trumps lingering concerns and scruples about safe and quality childcare.

And in small closed communities where conservative views are dominant, women and girls are sadly regarded as mere objects to do with as a predator wishes. The lack of education among the majority in such marginalized areas also perpetuates the view that a woman's chastity is her greatest asset, hence the stigma attached to reports of rape and incest. Which might explain why no charges were filed against the grandfather and the case was settled by the barangay: The mother might have feared the shaming of her daughter in a public court.

Zamboanga social welfare officer Maria Socorro Rojas said that in 2017 alone, the number of sexually abused children in the city was 126. It was not clear how many were victims of incest as authorities lumped the cases together as rape. And well they may be. "Minors cannot give informed consent, so it is rape," maintained lawyer Katrina Legarda of the Child Protection Network, an NGO that provides abused children with medical and psychosocial support.

Just as alarming is how girls giving birth have been getting younger. In 2017, 52 girls gave birth at ages 10–13, 552 at 14–16, and 2,645 at 17–19, noted Dr. Kibtiya Uddin, assistant city health officer of Zamboanga. The latest data gathered over three years by the Philippine Statistics Authority recorded at least 40 babies born to girls as young as 10.

Experts cite the internet, porn sites, the natural curiosity of the young to experiment with sex, the lack of parental guidance because of the OFW phenomenon, and even the lack of sex education and access to contraceptives among minors, as among the factors driving child sex and resulting pregnancies. They are correct. Given parents' reticence to talk about sex to their children, and with schools stressing abstinence over information, most girls have little idea about how the human body works, how to protect themselves, and what safe sex is.

But one must also take a closer look at the Philippine legal system, and check how laws may have encouraged child pregnancies. Child protection advocates point out that in the Philippines, the age of consent is 12, one of the lowest in the world. With the trend of young girls having sexual relations with older men—mainly for security—it may be necessary to raise the age of consent, thus giving young girls the leeway of putting more years in school and gaining more maturity before embarking on this life-changing decision.

Local government units must also enforce laws addressing violence against women and children, and prosecute incest offenders and rapists to the fullest extent. With rape no longer a private crime, law enforcement officers, even concerned neighbors, may now file charges in behalf of an abused child should the family balk at the prospect.

Also, social workers must offer not just psychosocial support to abused children, but options as well on how to rebuild their lives, such as going back to school, or earning a living from tech-voc courses. Provisions must be made as well for the babies born out of this terrible crime.

As outrageous and damning as the case of the abused 10-year-old may have been, this child mother represents the Philippines' daughters. Let not their hopes for the future be permanently dashed.