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# Former Teenage Mothers: Challenging “Your Life Is Over” Discourse and Showcasing Strengths

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## ABSTRACT

In past decades, teenage motherhood has attracted discrimination and stigma and was considered to breach accepted life transitions and societal norms. This article presents findings from a PhD project that explored participants’ reflections of their personal transitions and mothering journeys in the years and decades after becoming teenage mothers. The researcher employed a qualitative, biographical approach guided by feminist standpoint theory and constructivist grounded theory. In-depth interviews were conducted with 22 Australian women who gave birth as teenagers, and whose eldest child had reached adulthood. A majority of women interviewed perceived that family and friends viewed their lives and prospects as being over due to their adolescent pregnancy. However, findings reveal that while participants experienced stigma, many discussed teenage motherhood as a positive aspect of their life trajectories, and they wanted this counter story to be heard. Findings present unique accounts of the potential impacts on teenage mothers of deficit thinking and labelling. Further, findings provide a platform for former adolescent mothers to assert their own maternal identities and prospects, and provide insights that can inform social work practice.

## IMPLICATIONS

- Experiences of stigma can compound the inequalities experienced by some teenage mothers.
- Challenging stigma is a critical step towards promoting social justice and positive mothering identities for teenage mothers.
- Social workers can play a key role in upholding important messages that challenge an enduring deficit discourse about teenage mothers.

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In the past in western industrialised countries such as Australia adolescents often were married by the age of 18 years (Robinson, 2013; Summers, 1994), and early family formation was not considered to be problematic (SmithBattle, 2020). From the 1970s, however, many teenage mothers began to face considerable scrutiny and stigma

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(SmithBattle, 2020; Summers, 1994). Adolescent pregnancy often occurs before normative milestones, such as education and an employment pathway (Ellis-Sloan, 2024). Social attitudes towards women who mother outside the bounds of economic security can attract a punitive mentality under a neo-liberal regime (Jensen, 2013). As articulated by Ellis-Sloan (2024, p. 465) “... the problematisation of teenage motherhood has been linked to contemporary expectations of womanhood which demand economic activity and non-reliance on welfare”. Hence, young women’s decisions to mother outside the bounds of economic security are perceived as a social threat to capitalist structures due to their deviation from neo-liberal ideals of economic productivity (Jensen, 2013).

A number of authors have identified and discussed deficit discourses surrounding teenage motherhood (Ellis-Sloan, 2024; Slater, 2018; SmithBattle, 2020). Such discourses include notions that young women’s pregnancies have ruined their life opportunities and reduced them to a future of welfare dependency (Slater, 2018; SmithBattle, 2020). Correspondingly, previous research into the qualitative experiences of young mothers has captured ways in which they can be told by people within their family and social networks that their lives are ruined, that they will live with regret, and that they will be unable to attain educational or career goals (Anwar & Stanistreet, 2015; Ellis-Sloan, 2019; Kirkman et al., 2001).

Discourses that imply that young mothers are destined to substandard lives are however contentious. Longitudinal studies have revealed health and economic inequalities experienced by women who give birth within their teens, can persist beyond adolescence (Güneş, 2016). Some authors have implied that poorer outcomes are caused by age at conception (SmithBattle, 2020). Yet, others have asserted that background characteristics are an important point of consideration (Furstenberg, 2016; Güneş, 2016; SmithBattle, 2020). Notably, Furstenberg (2016) conducted landmark longitudinal research in the United States that followed 323 teenage mothers across their lives between the mid-1960s and mid-1990s. Furstenberg (2016) discussed their findings within a framework of disadvantage, observing similarities in outcomes between teenage mothers, and those who delayed childbearing within impoverished settings. Subsequently, they argued that early childbearing is primarily “a marker rather than a cause of economic disadvantage” (Furstenberg, 2016, p. 1). Further, some longitudinal studies indicated that young mothers can persevere towards educational and vocational goals; yet, for many, their route towards such attainment can be delayed (Ellis-Sloan, 2019; Güneş, 2016; Leadbeater & Way, 2001). Exposure to stigma can further compound challenges experienced by teenage mothers (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017). Past and more recent qualitative research has uncovered ways in which young mothers are exposed to stigmatising social attitudes, which can be problematic for social participation, and can negatively impact self-concept (Corrigan & Rao, 2012; SmithBattle, 2020).

Some studies that have accounted for young mothers’ outlooks in the stage of adolescence indicate that they can be optimistic about their future prospects (Anwar & Stanistreet, 2015; Kirkman et al., 2001). Specifically, young mothers may preempt benefits of young motherhood in their future, inclusive of increased freedom when their same-age counterparts are tied to child-rearing obligations, and that their lives will be enhanced by children as a source of pride and pleasure (Anwar & Stanistreet, 2015; Kirkman et al., 2001).

Ways in which optimistic interpretations translate across time are less apparent. Teenage motherhood is a widely studied topic, yet qualitative experiences beyond adolescence and into former teenage mothers' life span has received significantly less academic attention (Ellis-Sloan, 2019; 2024). Further, limited literature in the Australian context reports on research documenting the experiences of former teenage mothers transitioning across the life span.

Prevailing academic perspectives often portray young mothers' life trajectories in a negative light (Ellis-Sloan, 2019; SmithBattle, 2020). As argued by Ellis-Sloan (2019, p. 100), there is a tendency within existing literature to impose parameters "from a middle-class perspective which define what is and isn't "normative"", subsequently equating and labelling difference in deficit terms. However, international studies that have examined former teenage mothers' subjective experiences provide a contrast to a deficit lens. For example, some studies have identified that teenage mothers may experience delays in their educational and vocational progress (Ellis-Sloan, 2019; Güneş, 2016). Nonetheless, such divergence is not necessarily associated with negative meanings within former teenage mothers' personal accounts (Ellis-Sloan, 2019; 2024). Further, motherhood can provide a sense of achievement, and an impetus towards long-term positive changes (Benitez, 2017; Brand et al., 2015; Ellis-Sloan, 2019; 2024; Leadbeater & Way, 2001). Findings in this article contribute to a limited body of research that allows former teenage mothers to define their personal and maternal identities, thereby contributing to more nuanced insights into their lived experiences.

## Method

The overarching research question of the study reported in this article was "What themes can be identified about former teenage mothers' lives as they transition across their life span from adolescence to middle age?" The primary aim was to identify themes relating to the ways in which former teenage mothers navigated various phases of their lives. Secondary aims included exploring the ways in which dominant societal values around early motherhood are experienced by former teenage mothers, including any implications for personal and social identity.

The research employed a qualitative, biographical approach to explore the retrospective accounts of participants' lives, inclusive of ways in which they navigated and made meaning of their lived experiences (Robinson, 2013). The overarching theoretical framework of the research integrated feminist standpoint theory, which was selected in light of areas of social disadvantage such as high rates of economic inequality, domestic violence, and social stigma faced by teenage mothers (Güneş, 2016; Kan et al., 2021; SmithBattle, 2020). Feminist standpoint theory places particular value on the socially situated knowledge of oppressed groups and can therefore provide scope to raise the voices of women in the context of their social positioning and subsequently can offer recourse to assert their own social identities (Hesse-Biber, 2012). In line with qualitative, feminist approaches to research, the author acknowledges her own positioning as a social worker and former teenage mother. Being an insider in this study, the author found it was important to be mindful of her own biases, understandings, and experiences. She engaged in critical reflexive processes inclusive of journaling throughout the study (Charmaz, 2014).

## Recruitment and Sample

This study utilised criterion sampling specifically. Criteria for participation in this study was restricted to women who were previously teenage mothers and whose eldest child was above the age of 18 and below the age of 40. Sampling women who met this criterion ensured that participants had experienced a number of years of life post teenage motherhood, to enable them to comment on their transition into further life stages. Restricting the age of the eldest child ensured that results were reflective of contemporary issues faced by this population, and out of recognition that the social and political climate surrounding teenage mothers is considered to have changed across time (Higgins et al., 2014; Robinson, 2013). While grounded theory (discussed further below) often employs theoretical sampling methods (Moser & Korstjens, 2018), theoretical sampling was less of a consideration for this research.

Ethics approval was granted by James Cook University Human Research Ethics committee. In total, 22 former teenage mothers took part in this study. Interviews took place across a timeframe of two years between 2020 and 2022. All participants were residing in Queensland at the time of the interviews. Two participants in the study identified as being of Aboriginal Australian heritage. All other participants identified as being Caucasian Australians. Table 1 represents participants' ages at the time of interview, ages at the birth of their eldest child, and the age of their eldest child.

Participants were recruited via social media from local Facebook community groups within the Maryborough, Hervey Bay, and Gympie regions of regional Queensland. A research flyer was posted to invite eligible women to participate in a study on life after teenage motherhood. This flyer outlined possible outcomes of identifying strengths, as well as supports that other women may benefit from as they transition from teenage motherhood into and across stages of adulthood. Seventy-two women contacted the author via Facebook Messenger requesting further information. Once potential

**Table 1** Participants age at the time of interview, age at birth of eldest child, and age of eldest child

Pseudonym	Age at time of interview	Age at birth of eldest child	Age of eldest child
Tinsley	44	17	27
Bethanny	37	18	18
Dorinda	45	17	27
Erika	49	17	32
Kyle	38	18	20
Gretchen	54	17	38
Soraya	48	18	30
Leah	54	17	37
Luanne	55	19	36
Bronwyn	57	17	40
Theresa	48	19	29
Melissa	42	17	25
Carrol	49	18	31
Camille	36	18	18
Brandi	47	17	30
Adrienne	42	17	25
Yolanda	56	18	38
Vicki	54	18	36
Kameron	39	19	19
Denise	40	17	23
Shannon	37	19	18
Kelly	40	19	21

participants had this information and indicated they would like to participate in the study, the author scheduled an interview time.

Key topics in the interview schedule included experiences of new motherhood, transitions to early adulthood and mid-life, and the achievement of goals and mothering milestones. In line with the feminist standpoint underpinnings of this study, the author was particularly interested in participants' socially positioned knowledge (Hesse-Biber, 2012). Therefore, participants were asked about their perspectives of early family formation, and their experiences of oppressive features of the sociopolitical order such as social stigma also.

The findings of this study indicated that understanding former teenage mothers' lived experiences across their life span entails an appreciation of the disadvantage, stigma, and oppression that many participants needed to navigate. Key emergent themes related to contrasts between dominant social constructs of deficit teenage mothering and more positive lived experiences.

## Data Analysis

Data were analysed via a grounded theory approach to allow for an inductive approach to theory development (Charmaz, 2014). While a range of philosophical perspectives have influenced developments in grounded theory, this research was particularly influenced by constructivist grounded theory, which conceptualises research findings as being a coproduction of reality between researchers and participants (Charmaz, 2014). Constructivist grounded theory was selected due to its compatibility with feminist approaches that seek to create knowledge from the vantage points of oppressed people (Charmaz, 2017).

Three phases of coding were undertaken: the initial coding phase; next, an intermediate stage of focused coding; and then, theoretical coding. The initial coding phase consisted of coding transcripts line by line. A vast range of codes including those relating to childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, adulthood, mid-life, and mothering experiences were identified. During focused coding, three major categories, which subsumed "common themes and patterns" across the data, were identified (Charmaz, 2014, p. 189). Specifically, while participants' life stories were highly varied, codes frequently contained themes and patterns within the data around "experiencing adversity", "a climate of social scrutiny", and "resilient behaviours or actions". During theoretical coding, the relationships between these categories were explored (Charmaz, 2014). This article reports on focused codes pertaining to "a climate of social scrutiny".

Data were collected and analysed until no new themes and patterns were constructed through a process of theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2014). Member checking was undertaken and entailed providing a summary of findings to participants. In total, three participants volunteered to provide feedback for member checking. One participant simply affirmed that she felt my interpretation of the findings was correct, and two participants provided additional feedback that was integrated into the research findings.

## Findings

Themes reported here describe reactions to negative narratives, changed life trajectories, and countering stigmatising messages with stories of accomplishments. Specific themes

are experiences and impacts of “your life is over” messages; motherhood as a positive aspect of life trajectories; and challenging stigma constructs and identifying a need for uplifting messages.

### Experiences and Impacts of “Your Life Is Over” Messages

Thirteen of the 22 participants discussed exposure to messages projecting the notion that they would be destined to welfare dependency or that their lives were over because of adolescent parenthood.

For example, Soraya, who was pregnant during high school, recalled the limiting social beliefs about her career prospects at that time:

That stigma, “that’s it, your life’s over, you’ve got kids now ... you’re not gonna have a career, and you’re not going to have—you know, you’re not going to be the doctor or the lawyer or the scientist, you’re not going to go to uni, you’re not going to do this, you’re not going to do that”—so basically once you had a kid that was the end of you.

She discussed encountering dissuasion from pursuing her ambitions, yet went on to complete high school regardless:

I was determined that I was finishing school. And I’m so glad I did, that I didn’t drop out. People asked, you know, “What’s the point of finishing school? You’re not going to get a job, because you’ve got a baby, you know” ... I’m like, “Well not really, she’s not going to be baby forever.”

Camille similarly recalled pushing back against messages that her life was over during adolescence:

I was very—definitely very, argumentative. My mum had a few friends who would come over when I was pregnant and they’re like, “Oh,” you know, “You’re going to be on welfare,” you know. “This baby’s going to ruin your life,” so I just kind of went, “Excuse me, no, it doesn’t define me.”

Conversely some of the women described internalising stigmatising messages in ways that were detrimental to their confidence:

Kameron recalled messages that her life was over that had influenced her self-concept:

What was said to me was, dad was like, “There goes your life,” and mum said, “There goes your career” ... at the time I’m like, yeah, I have, I’ve really f\*\*\*ed up, but yeah I’m only just learning now that actually had a big impact on the way I saw myself.

Adrienne recalled responses that implied pity and a sense of looming destiny:

A lot of people felt sorry for me. There was a lot of like—I didn’t have anyone sort of say any nasty things to me—it was just they were like, “Oh no, you poor thing” like. It was like doom, you know. It was like my life was over!

She similarly felt that such responses had impacted her confidence and subsequently influenced a detrimental relationship decision and influenced her to endure unsafe circumstances:

Oh, I believed it, I believed my life was over, and I thought, well, who’s going to want me now? You know? ... I think that definitely contributed to my decisions in my next relationship ... I really do, like you know, because I felt like I was—I had nothing to offer anybody, you



know, I had baggage, I had a child, I had nothing to offer anybody—so, yeah, as soon as the first man showed me any attention it was like, “Oh my gosh, he likes me.”

Ways in which social processes were influenced by deficit assumptions were apparent. Yolanda became a therapist in mid-life. She felt that establishing her career had been delayed by limiting societal beliefs about young mothers. She reflected on the limited support available to explore her options while pregnant in high school:

Nobody ever said, well look, how about you go in this way, what if you do this, why don't you do that. Nobody ever said, “Oh, you're quite intelligent” ... it was an expectation at that time that you would probably just ... go off and have babies, “You're just gonna go and be a single teenage mum.”

Overall, there were many examples of societal messages reported by participants that their lives were over. Such messages had impacted confidence, relationship, or vocational choices for some participants.

### **Motherhood as a Positive Aspect of Life Trajectories**

A second key theme highlights how some teenage mothers found ways to reject negative messages amid social scrutiny. Contrary to dominant beliefs that teenage motherhood symbolised an end of opportunities, some participants discussed motherhood as representing a meaningful new beginning as the below situations and quotes demonstrate.

At the time of falling pregnant, Shannon was living an unstable lifestyle. Reflecting on where her life may have taken her had she not fallen pregnant, she indicated that motherhood had saved her: “I think I would have ended up dead ... I was still lost for a damn long time, but I do think it just changed the course of where I was taking myself and my life.”

Luanne discussed growing up in a poor and dysfunctional household. She described her journey towards overcoming poverty and creating a positive family environment. Her son had been a catalyst for such changes: “The life I was living was going to put my son in the same growing-up aspect of what I had, and I didn't want that for him.”

Motherhood as a positive aspect of participant life trajectories was evident in the ways in which some participants discussed long-term advantages of young motherhood, and satisfaction with their current personal circumstances.

Dorinda discussed a delay in her career trajectory due to early family formation, yet expressed the benefits of child rearing being complete at a relatively early age:

I can compare, because my brother [has] got children, and they're little and they've got a stable nuclear family ... [my brother and his partner are] in really good jobs and they were really set up before they had children, whereas I wasn't, financially. Now, I'm the best I've ever been—compared to my brother—I want to say that I'm better off than he is, “cause my children are off my hands, and I'm moving into that grandparent period, where I will have more time, and more money.

Leah similarly identified unique benefits of a transition from parental obligations at an earlier age. She expressed: “If I had kids at home, I still wouldn't have [travelled overseas] for the last seven or eight years—I'd still be in that caring mode ... it gives me freedom.”



Kelly emphasised her timing of motherhood resulted in a welcomed reduction in parental responsibility at this stage in her life:

I honestly think it's the best thing we ever did. I've got friends that I went to school with [who] ... are in their late thirties that are having first and second children now, I'm like—yeah no, I couldn't do that [laughs].

Further, notions of success could be linked to intrinsic worth placed on a mothering role. As articulated by Melissa: “I define success as being a decent human, liking yourself, and in my case, raising good human beings. That for me is success—everything else is awesome, but I'm not monetarily motivated.”

Some participants put career aspirations on hold for a period of time due to child-rearing obligations, yet expressed satisfaction regardless. Tinsley expressed: “I was very happy with the way my life was, with my family, my kids ... I've never felt like I've missed out on anything.”

In contrast, however, Brandi discussed a sense of having missed out on freedom and choice, including of the ability to follow her career goals. Her story was told within the context of domestic violence in which her career decisions were controlled by her partner, and she experienced a lack of support. Grief was evident in her account but also pride in her positive mothering accomplishments:

... it was a conscious decision. I negotiated it and said I am giving up who I am as a person to take care of this person, this person being my son. I will trade my life for his life, and you know what? I don't regret that—he, my son, is an amazing person and he is a caring person, he is a kind person, he's got his sh\*\* together.

In this sense, motherhood represented a positive aspect of many participants' life trajectories, yet could be accompanied with a sense of loss of freedom or loss of a career aspiration for some participants.

### **Challenging Stigma Constructs and Identifying a Need for Uplifting Messages**

Some participants described overtly challenging deficit discourses or recommended a need for more uplifting messages for young mothers about fulfilling their aspirations.

Carrol owned her own business. She refuted notions that young mothers cannot succeed, referring to her own success: “What is the difference between when you're young and when you're older when you're a mum? Nothing ... look at me. I can be retired in another five years.”

Camille, who was working in a retail management position discussed her life accomplishments and added: “[Young mothers] can do anything they want: they can study, they can travel—you either just take your kids with you, or have a really supportive family.” Camille expressed a hope that by participating in this study she could contribute information that life goes on beyond adolescent motherhood. She remembered being unable to find information to counter deficit assumptions: “When I was pregnant with my son, I couldn't find anything on the internet. I really wanted to hear about other women who had their kids and still carried on with their lives.”

Equally, the dangers of stigma limiting the prospects of young mothers, and the subsequent importance of positive messages was understood by Vicki:

There ... [are] studies [that have] been done in that, if you expect a child to be a certain way and treat them as if they already are, they tend to become what the expectation is ... [so] give [young mothers] the idea—not the expectation as in pressure—but the idea that you are going to continue on and have a wonderful career and in the future marry a wonderful man or woman, and have a wonderful life ... instead of, “Oh, you ruined your life now. It’s all over.”

Similarly, Dorinda identified that there is a need for more positive social messages, expressing: “Any progress in teaching young mothers that their lives are not over, ... [but] moving in an exciting and different direction, is important”.

## Discussion

This study explored former teenage mothers’ retrospective reflections of their personal life and mothering journeys. Findings included participants’ experiences of a climate of social scrutiny. Specifically, many participants had been exposed to messages that their lives and prospects were over, which could have detrimental implications. However, contrary to a widespread problematisation of teenage motherhood, while being aware of deficit discourses, many participants discussed their maternal trajectories in positive rather than deficit terms. Some participants challenged stigma constructs and identified a need for uplifting messages. Participants’ powerful accounts of being told that their lives were over are reflective of existing qualitative literature that has identified ways in which young mothers can be told that their lives are ruined and that they will be unable to achieve positive outcomes (Anwar & Stanistreet, 2015; Ellis-Sloan, 2019; Kirkman et al., 2001). Unique findings of this research confirmed the detrimental impacts of hearing negative social beliefs had on some participants’ lives, self-esteem, decision making, and actions to seek options or career opportunities.

Social processes that dissuade young mothers from believing that they have meaningful options are problematic for gender equality. As discussed, some adolescent mothers face existing educational and vocational inequalities, which place them at risk of economic disadvantage across their life span. Discourses that undermine young mothers’ abilities to make vocational decisions in ways that are free from barriers and coercion may further compound preexisting inequalities experienced by this group of women, thereby undermining their rights to have equal access to education and employment (Australian Government, 2024).

Findings from this study contribute to a limited body of knowledge that illuminates former Australian teenage mothers’ subjective experiences and realities from adolescence to middle age, thereby contributing to more nuanced understandings from the standpoint of the women themselves. Many participants in this study discussed what pregnancy in adolescence had represented to them. They reported enjoying motherhood, seeing their pregnancy as providing positive direction in their lives, and consciously rejecting deficit discourse to see the successes in their lives. They discussed unique benefits of their reproductive timelines, or described motherhood as being a valued maternal identity with intrinsic worth. Descriptions of motherhood as a positive new beginning included ways in which motherhood had been a catalyst to overcoming adversity. Participant accounts of young motherhood as providing

positive direction are consistent with some literature that has identified that early pregnancy can provide a sense of purpose that can have long-term transformative potential over time (Brand et al., 2015; Ellis-Sloan, 2019).

Participants' descriptions of subsequent benefits of early family formation included reduced parental responsibility and financial obligations associated with child rearing at relatively early ages. Such findings build upon studies conducted with teenage mothers in the initial phases of motherhood, illuminating how positive outlook on future prospects (Kirkman et al., 2001) can translate into satisfaction in adulthood and mid-life for some former teenage mothers.

Emphasis on motherhood as a valued maternal identity with intrinsic worth was evident in many of the women's accounts. Some participants discussed happiness with their lives, despite not following a conventional timeline, and it was evident that some placed a sense of success on their mothering role in ways that were independent from external benchmarks of success. Such findings echo existing research, which highlighted that divergence from normative pathways is not necessarily associated with negative subjective meanings in young mothers' lives, and that being a mother can provide a subjective sense of accomplishment (Benitez, 2017; Ellis-Sloan, 2019; 2024).

Background factors have been described to significantly influence long-term outcomes of former teenage mothers (Furstenberg, 2016; Güneş, 2016). Teenage mothers, particularly those from underprivileged groups within the community, can experience long-term social inequalities (Furstenberg, 2016). Nonetheless, a range of vocational accomplishments as discussed by participants reflect international longitudinal studies that have underscored that many young mothers can achieve educational and vocational goals, particularly across the passage of time (Ellis-Sloan, 2019; 2024; Güneş, 2016; Leadbeater & Way, 2001).

Negative aspects of some of the women's life trajectories are acknowledged. For instance, this article emphasised one participant's experience of the grief of losing personal freedom and career options. From a feminist lens, such findings highlight the importance of considering the meaning that women place on their own lives in defining success, and the importance of women having meaningful choices in how they balance their lives (Slote, 2016).

The impact of negative messages about teenage motherhood on subsequent relationship decision making was evident for some participants. One participant's story was described in the context of enduring considerable challenges and unsafe domestic circumstances, while receiving limited support. Her experience underscores the challenges that women within this social group can face, described within the literature to include disproportionately high rates of domestic violence (Kan et al., 2021), as well as the importance of access to support for young mothers (Ellis-Sloan, 2019).

Uplifting messages can assist to safeguard members of stigmatised groups from self-stigma—a phenomena whereby stigmatising ideas are internalised, resulting in an erosion of self-worth (Corrigan & Rao, 2012). Some participants overtly rejected stigma constructs and identified a need for more uplifting messages for young mothers. Participant recommendations included greater access to information that young mothers can succeed, assurance that their lives are not over, and

encouragement that they can achieve life goals. As discussed, stigma has been identified as a phenomenon that can reduce opportunities for a range of stigmatised groups including teenage mothers (SmithBattle, 2020). It follows that such recommendations are an important point of consideration for social work practitioners concerned with promoting social justice and human rights for adolescent mothers.

### **Recommendations for Social Work Practice**

Social workers can play a key role in upholding messages that challenge the enduring deficit discourse surrounding teenage motherhood. Uplifting messages can be actualised through counter oppressive interventions that recognise young mothers' strengths and capabilities (Baines & Clark, 2022). Affirming messages that former teenage mothers can achieve their goals is a key recommendation from participants in this study. Such uplifting messages can recognise young mothers' strengths and capabilities, and counter the impact of negative discourse (Baines & Clark, 2022). Such support of young mothers fits with a commitment to social justice and human rights (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2020).

### **Limitations**

Due to resource constraints of a PhD research project, this project was not a longitudinal study and, instead, focused on the retrospective reflections of participants. Limitations of retrospective approaches include the potential, due to lapse in time, that there may be memory issues in being able to accurately recall experiences. Further, as data were gathered at a specific point in time, it is not possible to assess variations at specific points in the life span. Limitations are noted regarding the age range of participants. Sampling did not attract women who had been 16 years or younger at the time of first birth. Development concerns vary considerably between younger and older teens (Gilmore & Meer-sand, 2015), and the findings of this research may not reflect the experiences of women who give birth prior to the age of 17. These findings are not generalisable due to factors such as sample size, and that all participants were residing in the state of Queensland. Another limitation is a lack of data collection on demographic information such as participants' educational background, income, marital status, and employment status.

### **Conclusion**

Retrospective reflections of former teenage mothers reported in this article reveal their experiences and subjective realities pertaining to deficit discourses of teenage motherhood. Many women in this study were exposed to negative social stigma and detrimental messages of adolescent pregnancy signalling that their life was over. Some participants rejected these messages, yet for others, impacts were evident of reduced self-concept, and constrained ability to make significant decisions and pursue life opportunities. However, contrary to deficit assumptions, many participants discussed their maternal trajectories in positive terms, including early motherhood as representing a new beginning, as having unique benefits, and as

experiencing a valued maternal identity with intrinsic worth. Some participants challenged stigma constructs and recommended a need for greater access to social messaging that young mothers' lives are not over and that they can have positive futures. Social workers can promote greater social justice and human rights for adolescent mothers by integrating participant recommendations for positive discourse about teenage mothering into their practice.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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