

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Women's Month

OUR RIGHTS AS FILIPINO GIRLS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS

An open letter from a young mother

I was pregnant at fifteen and went through so much as an adolescent mother.

I am Simbiat* from Mindanao and I am sharing my story to fellow young girls who went through abuse, discrimination and neglect. In the celebration of National Women's Month, I would like to share my life, my mistakes, and my triumphs to help other young girls like me to stand up, to be brave enough to speak up and say, **we are girls, we are important, and we have rights.**

I was in school when the news about my pregnancy first broke out. Of all people, my teachers were the ones who spread the news about me in class. I was really embarrassed! I did not share with them my situation for fear that I would be ostracized. But it happened anyway... I have hunches for a while that I might be pregnant because I have been missing my period for several months already. It was not my choice to be pregnant. I was at a point in my life that I was seeking love and care from my mother and stepfather.

I was not the brightest in our little Muslim family in Cotabato. People would always compare me to my older brother who excelled in class. At home, I had to do all the household chores as the only girl among the siblings. This left me little time to study. Whenever I needed something like a mobile phone or a laptop to help me with projects or research required in class, my needs came second only to my older brother.

I was also accused of many things that I did not do. It came to a point that I rebelled because my school uniform and school stuff were burned for not "telling the truth." I sought refuge elsewhere. I made the mistake of getting into a relationship that I am not ready for. I was young and needed guidance, love and protection.

Three years have passed, I am now a young mother to a baby girl. I was married right away before an Ustad because it is in the Islamic law that I can be married to the man who got me pregnant. My relatives wasted no time to have the ceremony. While I do not regret having married my boyfriend because he is a good provider and a loving husband, there are experiences of teenagers my age that I missed a lot. At nineteen, I have to be a responsible mother, wife and a provider to our child.

Along with the responsibility is the realization that I had to grow up faster than I ought to. My involvement in Save the Children Philippines' training on gender-based rights opened my eyes to what it means to be heard of. I have learned that my voice counts and my views matter.

"As a girl, I have the right to be heard. It is my right to be cared for and be treated equally inside and outside of home and of community. I realized that I have the right to express my thoughts and feelings even if I am young."

I am now in a university taking BS in Education because I wanted to be a teacher. This open letter is to tell you, young girls, that **the mistakes we made do not define us**. Learn to **love yourself, respect yourself**, and **know that you have rights** as a girl and as a woman to be valued. **It is never too late to speak up and stand up**.

I am Simbiat* from Mindanao, enjoining all Filipino girls to celebrate the National Women's Month because **girls' rights are human rights!**

* not her real name

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NOTES TO THE EDITOR:

A study conducted by Save the Children in 2015 showed that a child's first 1000 days, from conception until the second birthday, is the most important time in a child's growth and development. The care and nutrition provided to the mother during pregnancy affect the chances of a child for survival and of leading a productive life. Teenage pregnancy increases school drop-out rates thereby affecting the education of the teenage mother. Poor education limits their employment opportunities and can further perpetuate the inter-generational cycle of poverty and inequality. All these will consequently affect the health, nutrition, development and well-being of their babies.

Save the Children Philippines believes every child deserves a future. We are actively advocating for legislative measures that will address the prevalence of adolescent pregnancy in the country and support the pending bills, more particularly on the development of a national policy on the prevention of adolescent pregnancy through a multisectoral approach and with the participation of adolescents and young people, and providing appropriation for its implementation, as well as the possibility for a multi-year funding to ensure sustainability of program implementation.

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