

Teenage moms on the run

By GEOFF BOTTING

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One of the most popular and controversial dramas on TV these days is "14 Year Old Mom." As you can guess from the title, the series on NTV centers around a girl barely out of her teens who finds herself pregnant and with some difficult choices to make.

Though viewers may find the girl's predicament sad and even shocking, Weekly Playboy says it highlights a rapidly growing problem in Japan: unwed teenage mothers.



"The number of girls aged 14 or younger giving birth has increased about 2.5-fold in the last 15 years," surmises Kunio Kitamura, director of the Clinic of Japan Family Planning Association, commenting on the TV show. "It's a serious problem having junior high-school girls, who lack life experience, with children."

Health Ministry statistics seem to support Kitamura's assertion. Though the latest figures only run to 2003, they show that 21,634 teenage girls became single mothers that year, a 60-percent jump from 1990. As for girls aged 14 and under, 52 gave birth in 2002, compared to only 18 in 1990.

By the time the ministry rolls out its next set of statistics, 18-year-old Sayaka will be included in the numbers. She became pregnant age 15, gave birth at 16, and is now the single mother of a 3-year-old boy.

Why didn't she have an abortion?

"Because I didn't realize I was pregnant until just before giving birth," she tells the magazine. "I went to the hospital after my stomach started to ache. They just took me to the delivery room where I gave birth."

Essentially, the birth was able to sneak up on her due to her ignorance of the "facts of life" and also because of her baby's tiny size -- 1.9 kg at birth.

"So my stomach didn't get very big, and I thought to myself that I was just gaining some weight," Sayaka recalls.

And what of the father?

"He was 27. But by the time the baby was born, we had separated," she says. She managed to track him down afterward, but only to be told, "It's not mine."

Sayaka now supports herself and her young son with a part-time job that pays 60,000 yen a month in addition to government benefits of the same amount.

"It's borderline trying to live on that. When I'm in a bind, my parents help out."

Kitamura says cases like Sayaka's underscore a growing information gap among today's young. Though teenagers are becoming more and more knowledgeable and experienced when it comes to sex, when it comes to childbirth and abortion, they remain as ignorant as ever.

He explains, "For example, termination of pregnancy is allowed (under the law) for up to the 21st week of pregnancy. However, girls will often go beyond this period -- simply because they aren't aware of the provision -- and have kids. And here, we're talking about junior high-school students, who aren't (legally) allowed to marry."

A sad irony is that the number of unwed teenage mothers is growing while Japan faces a chronically low birthrate. The government has been offering young women financial and other types of incentives to have more kids. When kids have kids, however, it's a different problem altogether.

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