

Synopsis:

'TEENAGE MOTHERS'

Photographic documentary by

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In France in 2014, five thousand juvenile mothers* (aged 14 to 18) who may not have wanted to become pregnant, finally did choose to keep their babies – a difficult and unusual choice in modern western societies. They dropped out of school to build a new life, caught between the turmoil of their teenage years and the happiness of motherhood.

There are many underage mothers in the Thiérache region (in the north of France and across the border in Belgium). The nickname of "Pram Town" is often heard for towns such as Fournies with a population of only 13 000, where, in 2013, a family planning office was opened to provide young people there with information on sexuality, contraception, women's rights and options available in the event of pregnancy. More and more initiatives by social workers and other players are being organised in junior and senior high schools, listening to the teenagers and giving them support and answers to their questions.

The region of Thiérache was once prosperous, but this geographically isolated area has been hard hit by unemployment, starting in the 1960s when local industries closed down and then affecting small businesses. School students cannot go any further than the level required to be a skilled worker [CAP - certificat d'aptitude professionnelle] or the vocational training certificate [BEP - brevet d'études professionnelles] between junior and senior high school, and there are very few job prospects. Teenagers here cannot see much of a future for themselves.

For the underage mothers, a baby can offer a life and a future. Some are single mothers, some are with the father, and there are no regrets. Under French law, the young mother is entitled to keep the child, even if it is against the wishes of the father or her family.

Early in pregnancy there is often conflict between the girl and her parents whose reaction is a combination of incredulity and concern. With time the family rallies, and bonds can grow stronger, particularly between the girl and her mother. However, in a society where the average age for a mother having her first child is 30, the attitude of outside onlookers is often one of disapproval.

I met four such mothers – Amelie, Stacy, Laurine, and Melissa – each with a different story to tell, and all determined to be good mothers, good teenage mothers.

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* 2014 statistics, French National Institute for Youth & Community Education (INJEP), Paris

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