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HEADLINE: For the black mommy: 'Mocha Manual' aims to inform with familial tone

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When you're expecting a baby, much of what you face transcends age, economics and ethnicity. The Mocha Manual to a Fabulous Pregnancy (Amistad/HarperCollins, \$14.95) from Kimberly Seals-Allers offers culturally specific tips for African-American moms.

The new personal finance and careers editor at Essence magazine and mom of two, Seals-Allers, 34, birthed this book nine months after delivering her now-20-month-old son. She wrote it during her maternity leave ("I was typing while breast-feeding," she says).

A Queens, N.Y., native, Seals-Allers penned Mocha Manual because "when I was pregnant it was very hard for me to find information for black women that wasn't targeted to being a low-income or teenage mother. I didn't really feel anything was geared to today's black woman, written in a younger tone... I wanted to have something that felt like your friends, your sisters and your aunties giving advice."

A reporter who interviewed about 10 doctors for the book, Seals-Allers discovered that whether black moms-to-be were high school dropouts or held doctorate degrees, they had the highest incidences of premature births and low-birth-weight babies -- and they were three to four times more likely than white women to suffer pregnancy-related deaths.

Many of these maladies can be scientifically traced to stress. Black women tend to suffer disproportionately from other stress-triggered disorders such as hypertension and diabetes, putting even more pressure on their pregnant bodies. Add to that what the author calls the "Strong Black Woman" thing -- or African-American females' inclination to nurture family, friends and the community at their own expense -- and the statistics are hardly surprising.

To broaden the book's perspective, Seals-Allers included "Mocha Mix: What the Sisters Say" essays from famous moms of Black heritage including CNN newscaster Soledad O'Brien, Baby Phat mogul Kimora Lee Simmons and actress Lela Rochon. Seals-Allers also canvassed more than 150 "real women" for anecdotes and advice on the good, the bad and the stressful. After all, expecting isn't always a bundle of joy.

"I totally enjoyed being pregnant," she says, "but there were plenty of other women who said, 'This is the worst thing that ever happened to me.' And that's OK, too." So she included "The Darker Side of Pregnancy," a chapter that addresses depression. "The nine months of

maternal bliss is not everyone's experience," she says. "Because we [black women] tend to carry so much more on our shoulders -- and you throw in the hormonal mix -- it turns into a really volatile cocktail."

One major concern Seals-Allers discovered among black moms-to-be was the fear they would have to return to work prematurely. A former business reporter for Fortune magazine and The Times in London, she tackles the topic and offers an action plan in "Mocha Money: The Nine-Month Guide to Fabulous Finances."

"I wanted to give women options," she says. "No one had really laid out a plan to say, 'Here's how you can do it.' I have always had a problem with the commercialization of pregnancy -- buying the right stroller, the right crib. But no one talks about how you're going to pay for that baby."

Historically, "We [African Americans] have been a bit preoccupied with the visual examples of success. But I feel people should take this time to look at their values and say, 'What is really important to me?' Pregnancy is a really good time to stop yourself and say, 'Can I make some sacrifices to spend more time with my baby?'"

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GRAPHIC:

Photo: WRITE ON: Kimberly Seals-Allers, with daughter Kayla and son Michael Jaden, wrote Mocha Manual while on maternity leave.;

Photo: Seals-Allers found little information for black women that wasn't targeted to low-income or teen moms.