De-Stigmatizing Teenage Motherhood: Towards Achievement of Universal Basic Education in Kenya

Achoka, Judith Sarah and Njeru, Frida, Muthoni

Department of Educational planning, Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, P.O Box 190, Kakamega, Kenya.

Department of Criminology and Social work Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology P.O Box 190, Kakamega. Kenya.

Corresponding Author: Njeru, Frida, Muthoni

Abstract
Teenage motherhood is a situation in which a girl in teenage years, that is, 13-19 years is a mother or has a child. Globally, a third of teenage mothers live in India whereas the least affected country by teenage motherhood in the world is Japan. In Africa, it is estimated that approximately 5.5 million girls between 15-19 years are mothers. Of these 62% live in Sub Saharan Africa. In Kenya, 13,000 girls leave school every year due to teenage pregnancy. The relationship between teenage motherhood and schooling is explicit; when teenagers become pregnant and consequently mothers they abandon schooling altogether. Stigmatization and discrimination by teachers, parents, fellow students and the immediate society are the major causes for discontinuing school. In turn, the girls feel that they deserve to be punished for getting pregnant by dropping out of school or are too shy to return to school. By discontinuing school, teenage motherhood spells a blink future for both the teenager and her child. This situation can be reversed, given Kenya’s return to school policy. The policy calls for counseling for the girl, the parents, teachers and other students in the school. Nevertheless, the lack of legal backing or any official communication on how to implement the policy in schools makes it weak. Hence there is need to de-stigmatize teenage motherhood in an attempt to win back the girls to school. This paper elaborate on the question of teenage motherhood (causes and effects) and delves into the issue of teenage motherhood stigmatization and the need for the society to de-stigmatize teenage motherhood to enable the girls achieve education. The paper contributes to the ongoing debate on teenage motherhood. It also sensitzes the policy makers, educationists and the public on the need to recast their perception towards teenage motherhood and specifically on the social stigma associated with this old age problem.

Keywords: de-stigmatization, teenage, motherhood, education, policy

INTRODUCTION
Teenage motherhood is a situation in which a girl in her teenage years becomes a mother as result of getting pregnant (Brady, Stephanie & Ventura, 2012). Teenage motherhood is a global phenomenon affecting both developed and developing countries (Treffer, 2003). According to Lucker (2010), it is a complex reality of contemporary society. Among the developed countries, the United States of America (USA) leads in the rates of teenage mothers whereas Japan and South Korea are the least affected (Lowen, 2012). In developing countries the sub-Saharan Africa has the highest numbers of teenage mothers (Were, 2007). A study carried by Porta (2010), found out that 53% of the girls in the Sub Saharan Africa are already teenage mothers by the age of 18 years. In Kenya, approximately, 13000 girls leave school annually due to teenage motherhood (UNDP, 2010). There is a correlation between teenage motherhood and education (Treffer, 2003). Girls that bear children in their teen years are more likely to drop out of school once they get pregnant (Oyaro, 2008). In addition those who have completed high school are less likely to pursue college education (ibid, 2008). Teenage motherhood is a hindrance to educational attainment which a basic right and a valuable resource in the society today. Studies indicate that the demanding roles of motherhood and the social ridicule the teenage mother gets from society conspire such that eventually the teenage mother gives up schooling altogether (Obanya, 2009; Oyaro, 2008 & Mulongo, 2005). This negative treatment of the teenage mother leaves her with emotional scars to heal and most importantly a blink future to face as she forfeits schooling. The role played by education brings to the forefront the necessity to remove barriers that hinder educational attainment. Educational attainment is a prerequisite for upward social mobility (Njeru, 2004).This paper explores the causes and consequences of teenage motherhood as one of these barriers with an aim of changing the current discourse of teenage motherhood from that of
ridicule to that of capability. Although the paper is limited to secondary data, it nevertheless, adds into the existing literature in the analysis of factors inhibiting the girl child education. More specifically it gives a critical analysis of the need for the society to de-stigmatize teenage motherhood.

Causes of teenage motherhood

In some countries, early marriages and traditional gender roles are important contributing factors to teenage motherhood (Rosen, 2004). For example, in rural India teenage motherhood is a common practice (ibid, 2004). Early marriages are also common in Kenya, particularly among the nomadic communities (Oyaro, 2008). Another cause of teenage motherhood is lack of education on safe sex. In many countries, particularly in Sub Saharan Africa many teenagers are not aware about their growing bodies and what is required of them to stay safe (Erulker & Matheka, 2007). They may not know what to do when their peers and older boys and men pressurize them to have sex (Ibid, 2007). Additionally, many teenagers have no idea on the types of contraceptives available to prevent pregnancy (Debbie, 2002). When they do, they use the contraceptives incorrectly leading to failure (Ibid, 2002). This is in contrast to countries whose adolescents are equipped with balanced and comprehensive information about sexuality (East, 2006).

According to African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC), (2002), another cause of teenage motherhood is drug and alcohol abuse. Under the influence of drugs and alcohol one is impaired cognitively and this may lead the individual to do things that he could not have done when sober. Many teenagers engage in sexual activities when they are drunk after taking drugs (ibid, 2002).

Studies have also shown that teenagers who were abused in their childhood years are more likely to engage in sex and become pregnant than teenagers who have no such history (Allen, 2003). For example in South Africa 11-20 % of teen pregnancies are as a result of rape whereas 60% of teenage mothers had unwanted sexual experiences preceding to their pregnancy (ibid,2003).

Poverty is also another contributing factor to teenage pregnancy. According to Quinlivan (2006) girls that are exposed to family strife and deprivations in childhood are more likely to become teen mothers. In addition, the same study found out that a girl is more likely to become pregnant if her mother or older sister gave birth in their teens (Ibid, 2006).

Consequences of Teenage Motherhood

Teenage motherhood has several consequences both to the mother and her child as well as her future children (Oyaro, 2008). First and foremost, for the teen mothers, there is research evidence that they are unlikely to continue with their schooling (UNESCO, 2012). If they were through with high school then they are unlikely to join college (ibid, 2012). The demands of motherhood are just too much to think of something else. Other times the stigma associated with teenage motherhood inhibit many teenage mothers from attempting to continue with their education (CSA, 2008). This is from the teachers, parent and even their fellow classmates (Oyaro, 2008).

Without good education there are fewer chances for socio-economic mobility. This explains the reason of high poverty levels and dependency ratio among teen mothers (Chevalier &Viltanen, 2003). To improve the socio-economic status of teen mothers we therefore must ensure that teen mothers continue with their education.

Secondly, teenage mothers do not have the emotional and intellectual maturity that is needed to provide for another life (Brady et al, 2012). This poses a danger to both the teen mother and her child. More often than not teen pregnancies are hidden for months resulting in lack of anti natal care which brings a number of health consequences (Therese,2000).For example, it can lead to low birth weights and in severe cases death of the infant (ibid,2000). Early motherhood which is usually experienced by teenagers has also been found to affect the psychosocial development of the infant. For example one study found out that children born of teen mothers are experienced intellectual and language delays (Porta, 2010). They also had behavioral issues (Ibid, 2010). Other studies have found out that teen mothers are less likely to stimulate their infants through affectionate behaviors such as touch, smile or verbal communication (Treffers, 2003). This causes loose bonding between the mother and her child thus affecting the future relations between the two (Wekesa, 2010).At the same time teen mothers are likely to be less sensitive to the infants needs unless they are given adequate psychosocial support (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2001). A study by Lowen (2006), found out that children born to teen mothers have poor academic achievements and are unlikely to complete high school education. Another study by Sentel et al (2009) found out that daughters born to teen mothers are more likely to become teen mothers themselves compared to those born to older mothers. For sons, those born by teen mothers are three times likely to serve time in jail (Ibid, 2009).

Thirdly, teen pregnancy and motherhood can also influence younger siblings. A study by East and Jacobson (2011), suggests that younger sisters of teen mothers are less likely to emphasize education and employment becoming young mothers themselves. In turn male siblings are more tolerant to non marital and early births as well as being more susceptible to risky behaviors (ibid,2011).
Teenage Motherhood and the Attainment of Universal Basic Education

According to Wekesa (2010), the recognition of centrality of education and its effect as a multiplier of other rights has led to an increased interest internationally and nationally. Education lays a foundation of knowledge and skills to pursue higher levels of education, earn a living, attain technological advancement and compete effectively in a country’s economy (Macmillan, 2011). The attainment of universal basic education is one of the Millennium development goals (MDGs). Kenya is one of the 189 countries which in the year 2000 committed themselves to the attainment of MDGs by 2015 (Wesyanju, 2008). To this end, Kenya has made great strides especially in the field of education. According to the UNESCO report 2012, Kenya’s primary school enrollment is approaching 100%. Nevertheless, these efforts are being thwarted by a number of factors in the Sub Saharan Africa, Kenya included. One of these factors is teenage motherhood amongst others such as poverty and lack of educational financing (Obanya, 2009).

According to Eloudou-Enyegue (2004) teenage motherhood in developing countries continue to constrain girls and young women from participating in education. The WHO 2009 report, approximately 16 million girls become pregnant annually worldwide. Of these approximately 5.5 million are in sub Saharan Africa which has one of the highest level of teenage pregnancies in the world (Globalgiving, 2012 & Were, 2007). This is threatening the gains being made in attainment of universal basic education.

In Kenya, A study carried by the Center for the Study of Adolescent, found out that approximately, 13,000 girls leave school every year due to teenage pregnancy (CSA, 2008). These girls who are in their teenage years are usually in primary and/or secondary school or have just enrolled in college. According to Oyaro (2008), girls who become pregnant are less likely to continue with their education. There are a number of reasons that prevent girls from continuing with education once they get pregnant and/or subsequently give birth. A major factor that hinders girls from continuing with their education is lack of support and/or stigma from their parents, teachers and the community (Olunike, 2012). The later is a subject of debate with some arguing that stigma is a preventive tool that shields other girls from falling into this unfortunate situation (GOK, 2009). Those against it argue that it is insensitive, inhumane and does not help in any way but serve to aggravate the already damaged ego of the teenage girl for the rest of her life (Wekesa, 2010).

Ways in Which Stigma is Propagated to the Detriment of Attainment of Education for the Teenage Mother

In the post colonial Kenya, the intertwined history of colonialism and Christianity has influenced both the indigenous and contemporary perspectives and practices of sexuality (Ahlberge, et al., 2009). Thus, the institution of marriage is recognized and sanctioned as the morally recognized institution for sexual expression (ibid. 2009). Therefore sex and child bearing out of the marriage institution are looked down upon. As a result of this orientation it goes without saying that a school going girl who is pregnant is deemed to have violated this highly regarded norm. For this purpose she is identified with an “immoral tag. According to Furstenberg (2003. P.12), she is irresponsible, out of control and in need of social constraints in the eyes of the society. Within the school environment the teenage mother is seen as “a threat that has the potential to set off an epidemic of immoral and promiscuous behavior” to her fellow students (Wanda, 2006. p.56). Teenage motherhood is also perceived as a deviance (Mulongo, 2005 & phoenix, 1991). Thus, rendering the teenage mother a misfit in the society.

According to Twenge (2002), even the teenage mother’s close family members do not make it easier for her. Instead, they snap a judgment of immorality on her (Oyaro, 2008). The same treatment is extended to her peers who tease and taunt her once rumor of pregnancy start circulating (Wekesa, 2010). This leaves the girls with emotional scars that follow them to their adulthood (ibid, 2010). The media also participates in the stigmatization of the teenage mother. According to Lucker (2010), they do it by not highlighting the complex and troubling truths of teenage motherhood especially what they go through on a daily basis as they try to bring up their socially unwanted child.

The same stigma is carried forth by the policy makers who do not include the voices of teenage mothers in their policies, yet they are major stakeholders (Driscoll et al., 2005). Perhaps that explain why policies associated with teenage motherhood fail. Thus, by not giving the teenage mothers a chance to explain her story, the society tears them down with stigma (Sentil et al 2009). Likewise, the media by not unearthing these truths about teenage pregnancies the media fail to bring a human face to teenage motherhood when they ought to (Thembii, 2012 &Lucker, 2010). These insensitive labeling of teenage motherhood send negative messages to the teen mother’s self esteem (Cheralier and Viltanen, 2003).

According to Nelson and Norman (2009), the teen mother reconstructs her identity as that of a failure and a looser in life. In a nutshell, the society is solely to blame for the failures of teenage mothers. It fails to
listen to the teenage mothers’ side of the story and condemns them wholeheartedly. Thus, teenage mothers feel unwanted and end up being worse than they were before they conceived. The society equips them with a different identity of nothing good can come out of their situation. Therefore they shield their ambitions and future dreams including furthering their education. With no future to hold on the teenage mothers languish in poverty and misery in their adult years. This is not only for themselves but also for their children and the society at large. What then is the way forward for the society? According to Wekesa (2010), there is needed to recast the discourse of teenage mothers from that of immorality to that capability. Nevertheless, the policy is a key step towards the attainment of basic education for teenage mothers. It can be improved if clear implementable guidelines are put in place with the involvement of all stakeholders. This in addition, to society’s change of attitude towards teenage motherhood will recast a bright future for the girls that fall into the family way before they realize their education.

**CONCLUSION**

This paper has analyzes the global trends in teenage motherhood as a persisting contemporary problem. It outlines the causes of teenage motherhood as poverty, early marriages, traditional gender roles, lack of adequate information by teenagers on their sexuality, drug and alcohol abuse and peer pressure. Teenage motherhood has negative consequences to first and foremost; the teenage mother herself, her future children and the society at large. To the teenage mother she has to face the social stigma as she tries to bring up her unwanted child. Children born of teenage mothers are more likely to become teen parents themselves in addition to having low educational achievement. The society in turn is robbed of productive members of society. These negative consequences of teenage motherhood can be reverted if the society became more supportive to the teenage mothers.

Additionally, this calls for a shift the academic discourse of teenage motherhood from that of stigmatization to that of de-stigmatization of teenage motherhood. The shift in the discourse of teenage motherhood is a fruitful one. Studies have shown that teenage mothers who are supported by family, teachers, peers and the community at large to deal with the demands of motherhood continue with their education becoming role models and useful members of the society. Thus, it is of great importance that girls who become mothers in the course of their education. This is the surest way to secure a bright future despite their challenge of early motherhood.

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