



Lived Experience of Student Teenage Mothers¹ in Higher Learning Institutions in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania: Drives, Challenges and Support Systems

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Abstract

This article explores the lived experiences of student teenage mothers in higher learning institutions in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. It specifically analyses the factors behind their drive for higher education, the challenges they face, and the support systems available for them. Data were collected by interviewing a sample of twenty (20) student teenage mothers from The Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy (MNMA) and doing a documentary review. The data were analysed by using content analysis methods based on the Self-Determination Theory. The findings show that various factors drive student teenage mothers to carry on with their pursuit of career education, including empowerment and independence, improved career forecasts and networking, and social connection. However, they face several challenges which can be grouped into three namely: financial challenges, psychological challenges, and challenges related to balancing between academic and parenting duties. The article finally explains the support systems such as counseling and guidance, mentorship, childcare services and community, and peer support.

Introduction

Recently, the higher learning institutions in Tanzania started admitting teenagers to pursue various certificate and diploma courses apart from advanced diploma, bachelor's degree, master's degree and PhD courses. Consistent with the country's agenda of expanding women's access to education, the government has also widened their opportunities in the education system from primary to tertiary level (United Republic of Tanzania (URT), 2015). So, many teenagers are now in higher education institutions taking certificate or diploma courses. Unfortunately, some female teenagers fall victim to unplanned pregnancies while in college (Kakuru, 2022). This has resulted in an increase in the number of teenage mothers in those institutions. Becoming a mother at a young age exposes female students to numerous challenges. For them, striking a balance between academic demands and parental

¹ Student teenage mothers in this article is used to refer to the teenage students who are at the same time mothers



responsibilities is not an easy feat (Kassa et al., 2018). In short, motherhood at a young age negatively affects girls' education. It decreases their chances of getting quality education as it imposes long-term penalties on their career development, thus perpetuating the cycle of poverty from generation to generation (Achoka & Njeru, 2012; Kassa et al., 2018).

This article delves into the lived experiences of student teenage mothers in higher learning institutions, shedding light on their motivations, challenges, and available support systems. Evidence from previous studies shows that student mothers face several challenges in their attempt to complete their education because of being overwhelmed by parental responsibilities (Brown & Nichols, 2013; Kassa et al., 2018; Kakuru, 2022). However, none of the mentioned studies focused on student teenage mothers in higher learning institutions in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania.

Various studies show that student mothers face challenges that vary in intensity depending on factors, such as policy and sponsorship availability. For instance, Kakuru (2022) explored the life of young mothers who lived in poor urban areas politically labelled as informal settlements that are ineligible for delivery of social services in Uganda. The findings showed that student mothers in Uganda's higher institutions face several challenges at the household, community, and institution levels. Those challenges include financial and time constraints. Kakuru (2022) also explains that the standard regulations of Ugandan universities do not consider students' responsibilities outside university life. According to him, the universities lack the counselling services required to meet the emotional needs of student mothers. However, Kakuru's study did not focus on teenage mothers' motivation to go for higher education and the support systems available in Uganda. Thus, the current study seeks to investigate the life experiences of higher education teenage students who are also mothers by focusing on the drives, challenges and support systems.

Concerns about teenage pregnancy and motherhood among female students are prevalent in low-income and middle-income countries (LMICs) in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). The life of an adolescent girl drastically changes when she conceives, especially if the pregnancy is unplanned. Adolescent pregnancy and motherhood affect their health, education and employment opportunities (Tull, 2020). Again, Tull's research did not address issues of student teenage mothers who are pursuing their studies in higher learning institutions. Therefore, the study specifically aimed at targeting student teenage mothers.

Lived experiences of student mothers enrolled in Philippine higher learning institutions have been explored by various scholars (Sicam, Umawid, Colot, Dagdag, Handrianto, 2021) who came up with four major themes: challenges faced by student mothers, advantages of being a student mother; managing time in dual roles; and support by others. They reported several challenges the student mothers faced in their dual roles. These challenges included bullying, time management, and financial problems. Sicam et al. (2021) show that despite their challenges, they were inspired to continue their career education. Even though they had trouble managing their time, they tried their best. They also got support from their teachers, classmates, parents, friends, and relatives. While their research offers illuminating insights into how to make tertiary education more accessible and transformative, especially to student mothers who have to handle dual roles as students and parents, it does not provide information about their lived experiences in higher learning institutions, especially those in Dar es Salaam. For this reason, the current study investigates the lived experiences of student teenage mothers in higher learning institutions in Dar es Salaam, focusing on their drives, obstacles, and support systems.



Ogunji et al. (2022) also investigated student mothers' challenges in higher education in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. They also aimed to identify the support systems available for including student mothers in higher education. Findings revealed challenging obstacles that significantly impacted the academic performance of the student mothers. It was then discovered by Ogunji et al. (2022) that student mothers' major source of support came from their husbands, but they also got support from other sources regarding scholarships, grants and loans. The findings also revealed that student mothers felt very much excluded from mainstream academics due to their inability to measure up with fellow students. Yet, the study did not specifically deal with student teenage mothers; instead, it dealt with student mothers in general.

Mathias and Ezekiel (2021) studied motivational factors and challenges that student-mothers face in Tanzania's Higher Education Institutions and found that most of the student-mothers did not plan to have children while studying. Still, they just found themselves falling victim to pregnancy due to several factors, including university policies that allow female students to have children, uncertain support, health and age factors, religious beliefs, and ability to manage parenting roles. On the other hand, the findings of Mathias and Ezekiel's study showed that the student mothers faced different challenges, including balancing time for studies and parenting, financial constraints, poor funding, dealing with babysitters, accommodation problems, and psychological problems. Mathias and Ezekiel concluded by calling for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to empower female students with appropriate skills to make informed decisions in their relationships to improve their studies and well-being. This study is vital to the current study because it offers a primary understanding of the drives and challenges facing student mothers in higher learning institutions in Tanzania. However, the study does not offer information on the support systems for student teenage mothers in higher learning institutions.

Schmidt and Umans (2014) found that female students faced more problems adjusting to their study programs, were troubled by regular cultural challenges and limitations, and received little support. Likewise, Brooks (2013) found that family quarrels and disagreements were major barriers to student mothers' education. The findings showed that the student mothers' husbands were unhappy with their wives' education and ultimately withdrew the necessary support to them (wives). Archer (2013) explained that this hindrance was due to the failure to see the importance of education for mothers.

Bullen, Kenway and Hey (2000), in their study on new labour, social exclusion and educational risk management, found that about 70% of student mothers in New York universities postponed their education because of a lack of support from society and their families. This shows that the support system has a direct effect to student mothers' education such that it ruins student mothers' education if it is not well organized. Therefore, though the studies done by Bullen, Kenway and Hey (2000) did not focus on student teenage mothers in higher learning institutions in Dar es Salaam, they shed light on the significance of support systems to student mothers in general. Their insights are useful to the present study which focuses on the support systems for student teenage mothers in higher learning institutions in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

This paper, therefore, expands knowledge on the experiences of student teenage mothers, who have not been the focus of previous studies in higher learning institutions in Dar es Salaam city. The paper focuses on the drives, challenges, and support systems for student teenage mothers in higher learning institutions in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

The study is underpinned by the Self Determination Theory, which was put forth by Deci and Ryan (1985) and is about human motivation and personality. The theory postulates that people's tendency



to advance towards growth and psychological needs are the basis of self-motivation, constructive social development, and personal well-being. The dominant idea is that human beings have inborn predispositions for personal improvement regardless of the nature of their immediate environment or situation. It is assumed that when people experience independence and psychological relatedness, they automatically gain self-determination to pursue their goals and interests. This theory is relevant to studying the lived experiences of teenage student mothers in higher learning institutions because it gives important perspectives on the factors, challenges, and ways to improve their education in higher learning institutions. Students in higher learning institutions in Tanzania experience independence differently than secondary school students bound by school regulations. Thus, higher learning students advance to marital relationships and become teenage mothers, but they maintain the rigour to pursue their goals and interests. This theory is the basis of the study's analysis of the drives, challenges and support systems for student teenage mothers in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, higher learning institutions.

Method

This study was conducted in Dar es Salaam, the largest city in Tanzania, with many higher learning institutions that offer diverse certificate, diploma and degree programs at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. A qualitative research design was applied, and data were gathered from different sources to better understand the situation of young student mothers in higher learning institutions in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania (Babbie, 1990). Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy (MNMA) was purposively selected to represent other higher learning institutions in Dar es Salaam because it has the largest number of youngsters admitted to pursue certificate and diploma courses. A sample of 20 respondents taking various certificate and diploma courses at MNMA was used. The sample was selected using the convenience sampling technique to include available certificate and diploma students. Data were collected through interviews and documentary reviews. Data analysis was done using the content analysis technique.

Results and Discussion

The study was envisaged to explore the lived experiences of student teenage mothers in higher learning institutions in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. It focused on their drives, challenges, and support systems. This section presents and discusses the findings obtained. The section has three sub-sections: one for the drives or motivations of student teenage mothers, another for the challenges facing student teenage mothers, and the last for the support systems available for student teenage mothers.

Motivations of Student Teenage Mothers

Student teenage mothers often strongly desire to further their education to build a better future for themselves and their children. They understand that obtaining higher education can open doors to employment opportunities and improve their socio-economic status (Mathias and Ezekiel, 2021). The findings from the study revealed different factors/motives that drive teenage student mothers to continue their studies in higher learning institutions in Dar es Salaam, MNMA in particular. These factors/motives vary from personal aspirations to desire empowerment and personal growth. This concurs with the Self-determination Theory by Deci and Ryan (1985), which postulates that people advance towards growth tendencies and psychological needs, which are the basis of their self-motivation, constructive social development, and personal well-being.

Empowerment and Independence: The respondents argued that most student teenage mothers view education as a means of empowerment. They aspire to build a strong foundation of knowledge and skills that would enable them to overcome social and economic problems. One of the student teenage mothers said:



I dedicate myself to my studies to protect myself from family bullying. My goal is to be financially independent in the future, both for myself and my child.

Another student teenage mother said:

I do not want to depend on my parents or any other family member. Now, I feel guilty because my parents look after my child and me.

Results suggest that early parenthood frequently creates conflicts with family members. Thus, teenage mothers are inspired to make responsible decisions when determining how to support themselves. They acquired a sense of self-reliance in their learning and child-rearing endeavours. This finding is consistent with Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-determination Theory, which holds that people's growth tendencies and psychological needs are the basis of their self-motivation. Self-driven student mothers are more likely to succeed because they can identify and overcome personal challenges.

Improved Career Forecasts: The findings show that higher education is essential for securing better employment opportunities and achieving economic stability. Student teenage mothers know that obtaining a certificate or specialised skills can significantly enhance their chances of finding well-paying jobs, providing financial security for their families. This motivates student teenage mothers to persist in their studies regardless of the setbacks they meet. One of the students said as follows:

... my dream is to become a professional Human Resource Officer in public services. I expect to get a good salary which can support my child and family.

Therefore, the desire to achieve in career life is a driving force for student teenage mothers to achieve their education goals in higher learning institutions, especially MNMA. Young women have their dreams just like others; thus, having children does not stop them from pursuing their career education in higher learning institutions.

Networking and Social Connections: The findings show that higher learning institutions offer an environment where teenage mothers can connect with other students with similar goals and challenges. Like other students, teenage mothers want social connections that will enable them to build valuable networks of support, friendship, and collaboration. One of the respondents argued as follows:

.....having a child while studying at a higher learning institution is a big challenge. However, I have friends who encourage me to continue with my studies.

Even though university policies permit female students to become parents, the student teenage mothers complained that balancing the demands of both parenthood and academics is cumbersome. The results show that peer pressure and being freed at higher education institutions make girls indulge in behaviours that later on cause them to become teenage mothers. The findings are thus in contrast with the findings of Mathias and Ezekiel (2021), who found that a student mother's decision to have a child is based on her capacity to manage dual roles. As such, going home after giving birth is a more stressful decision than continuing with studies. Student teenage mothers will likely receive social and financial support through social networks. Additionally, experience shows that student teenage mothers who decide to return home after giving birth are more likely to give up on their academic goals.

Challenges Faced by Student Teenage Mothers

According to the data collected in this study, student teenage mothers encounter challenges that differ from those faced by non-parent peers. Fulfilling childcare responsibilities, studying, and attending



classes are overwhelming to them. Also, the lack of affordable childcare options and limited financial resources pose significant barriers to student teenage mothers. Furthermore, the shame associated with teenage motherhood was reported to be a factor which leads to feelings of isolation and self-doubt, making it essential to address the emotional well-being of these students. This paper generally analyses three categories of challenges facing teenage student mothers in higher learning institutions (MNMA).

Financial Challenges: The findings show that financial constraints are a primary obstacle teenage mothers face in higher learning institutions. Many young mothers in higher learning institutions reported struggling to afford childcare while pursuing their educational goals. They added that limited access to affordable and reliable childcare options could greatly disrupt their ability to attend classes regularly and meet assignment deadlines. The financial burden also affects their ability to provide for their children's basic needs, such as food, clothing, and healthcare. One of the student teenage mothers said:

My parents pay for my college tuition and other educational expenses; I don't have any loans [from higher education institutions. I now need additional funds for my child, whose father is also a student]. It is not an easy situation...

This finding is consistent with Scam et al. (2021) and Ogunji (2022), whose findings show that student mothers face financial difficulties. However, findings suggest that teenage students have limited access to finance as they mostly depend on their families compared to other student mothers who have alternative sources of finance.

Managing Academic and Parenting Responsibilities: The study's results showed that it is difficult for student teenage mothers to balance their parental and academic obligations. Some said that the rigorous coursework, tests, and deadlines caused them a lot of stress. They further reported that scheduling childcare and missing classes add to the stress, making it difficult for them to carry out their duties efficiently.

One of the respondents stated:

Juggling parenting duties and academic work [simultaneously] is a laborious task....One day, I recall missing an exam because my child was sick.

This means that student teenage mothers handle academic and parenting duties simultaneously. Student mothers' challenge of dual responsibilities has been reported by other scholars (Sicam et al., 2021; Ogunji, 2022; Kakuru, 2022), whose studies found that student mothers face difficulties in managing the time to perform their dual duties. Since student teenage mothers are younger than regular student mothers, the situation is probably worse for them.

Psychological challenges: The findings show that student teenage mothers in higher learning institutions face psychological difficulties. Interviewees stated that their emotional well-being and mental health are affected by their lived experiences as teenage mothers. They are often burdened by societal judgment and the fear of failure; thus, they sometimes experience heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. One of the respondents reported that:

....I'm going through a really difficult moment because [being a parent and a student is not easy]. I occasionally feel like I'm going crazy, but I don't know what to do.



The findings suggest that student teenage mothers become frustrated due to their challenges, especially in balancing parenting and learning roles. The parental roles interfere with their studies, which causes them to be more stressed and psychologically troubled.

Support Systems for Student Teenage Mothers in Higher Learning Institutions

Recognising the needs of student teenage mothers, many higher learning institutions have established support systems to facilitate their academic journey. These support systems often include dedicated staff who provide guidance and resources tailored to these students' unique circumstances (Mathias & Ezekiel, 2021). This paper reveals that counselling services, mentorship programs and flexible course schedules are major support systems designed to empower student teenage mothers. However, it seems that the comprehensive support mechanisms are ineffective enough to tackle student teenage mothers' challenges.

Counselling and Mentorship Programs: Counseling and mentorship programs can play a vital role in the holistic development of student teenage mothers. Professional counsellors who understand young mothers' specific challenges can provide invaluable guidance and support. These programs focus on helping them address personal and academic issues, provide stress management strategies, improve time management skills, and set achievable goals. Peer-based or facilitated by experienced professionals, mentorship programs offer role models who have successfully navigated through similar circumstances to inspire and guide student teenage mothers towards success. Higher learning institutions and MNMA have established gender desks that deal with this issue. Other support comes from the office of the Dean of Students. One of the Wardens revealed:

We provide guidance and counselling services in our office. [Depending on the nature of the problem, we provide both group and individual counselling. During orientation sessions, we provide necessary information to] enable teenage students to commit themselves to studying.

The findings show that educational institutions recognise the challenges of student teenage mothers and, therefore, have established mechanisms for providing them with counselling and mentoring services. However, guidance and counselling play a significant role in addressing the challenges of teenage mothers in the student body. In higher learning institutions, guidance and counselling are integrated into the office of the Dean of Students and gender desk. Sometimes, it is difficult to provide effective guidance and counselling services and meet the needs of different categories of students, particularly adolescent students. Higher learning institutions must either improve the services they offer to adolescent students or establish special guidance and counselling programs tailored to the needs of student teenage mothers.

Flexible Course Schedules and Childcare Services: The findings show that the student mothers adhere to the standard schedule of classes, making it challenging to balance their parental and academic responsibilities. The study has revealed that higher learning institutions must recognise the need for flexibility in course scheduling to accommodate student teenage mothers effectively. Offering a variety of class times, including evening and weekend options, allows them to balance their parenting responsibilities and academic commitments more efficiently. Additionally, on-campus or subsidised childcare facilities can provide their children with a safe and trusted environment while attending classes, ensuring peace of mind and promoting regular attendance.

Community and Peer Support: Findings show that MNMA has peer educators who create awareness on how to deal with adolescent issues and provide referral services if required. Apart from institutional support, this study has revealed that forming youth networks within their communities



and seeking peer support also plays a crucial role in the lives of student teenage mothers. Collaborative spaces where they can share experiences, exchange parenting tips, and give one another emotional support that can alleviate feelings of isolation and foster a sense of belonging. Engaging with other student parents through student organisations or parenting groups can create a support network where their specific challenges can be addressed, and they can get practical and emotional assistance. Therefore, institutions must allow and initiate social organisations among student teenage mothers to give them platforms to socialise and discuss solutions to their challenges. Further, clubs, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations (CBOs), and faith-based organisations (FBOs) have potential roles in supporting guidance and counselling services.

Conclusion

This study has discussed the lived experience of student teenage mothers in higher education institutions where it has been revealed that various factors drive student teenage mothers to carry on with their pursuit of career education, including empowerment and independence, improved career forecasts and networking, as well as social connection. So far, the study has delved into the challenges facing teenage student mothers, where it has been revealed that they face financial and psychological challenges, as well as challenges related to balancing academic and parenting duties. Furthermore, the study explains the support systems such as counselling and guidance, mentorship, childcare services and community and peer support. Therefore, the lived experiences of student teenage mothers in higher learning institutions demonstrate their resilience, determination, and unwavering commitment to preparing a better future for themselves and their children. While they face unique challenges, the presence of support systems within higher learning institutions and nurturing communities and peer networks can significantly contribute to their success. Higher education institutions can support and guarantee that these young women continue to thrive academically, personally, and as parents by identifying and addressing their needs. By doing so, they can collaborate with other development actors to pave the way for a more promising and inclusive future for these student teenage mothers.

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