

Perception of Adolescent Pregnancy among Secondary School Educators and Students in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

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Abstract

The motive of this study was to explore the views of educators and learners on adolescent pregnancy. The study examined factors contributing to adolescent pregnancy and explored secondary school educators' and students' perceptions of the influence of teen pregnancy on school performance. Adolescent pregnancy is a prevalent social issue with far-reaching consequences, including implications for the academic achievements of young mothers. The scope of this problem has reached an alarming rate, impacting social, cultural, political, and economic spheres in many African countries, Tanzania in particular. Social cognitive and social-ecological theories guide this study to come up with a comprehensive understanding of how educators and students perceive adolescent pregnancy in secondary schools. It explored educators and students in five secondary schools in Kinondoni Municipality and employed in-depth interviews with secondary school educators and focus group discussions with students to gather rich, context-specific data. The findings revealed that adolescent pregnancy had effects on the students, schools, parents/family, community and the nation as a whole. Some of the Cultural practices were also revealed to be among the contributing factors to the occurrence of teenage pregnancies. The researcher recommends the following: secondary schools should implement comprehensive sex education programs; educators and parents should play a crucial role in delivering accurate information to students; and early interventions should be developed to identify at-risk students early.

Keywords: *Adolescent pregnancy, education, perceptions, school educators, students*

Introduction

Adolescent pregnancy is a problem that is observed worldwide and is believed to be a factor in lower academic achievement and increased rates of school. Adolescent pregnancy drops out According to the World Health Organization (WHO), adolescent pregnancy is regarded as a

pregnancy that transpires in a young girl within the age range of 13 to 19. Globally, 15% of adolescent girls give birth before they turn 18, which is referred to as early pregnancy or early childbearing (Doğan & Köse, 2022). Globally, adolescent pregnancy is a health concern since girls as early as 13 years old get pregnant (Mrinde, 2014). In developing countries, in the given year, approximately 21 million girls between the ages of 15 and 19 and 2 million girls under the age of 15 are estimated to experience pregnancy every year (Wado et al, 2019; Darroch et al, 2016; UNFPA; 2015). This is highly risky for the girls who are biologically children but expected to give birth to children.

Moreover, different initiatives have been implemented in wealthy countries like the United States of America to address teenage pregnancy, whereas interventions like legislative and programmatic measures such as education, clinical services, and community-wide coalitions are observed (Brindis et al., 2022). China, for instance, utilizes sex education as a critical tool to influence public opinion and prevent teenage pregnancies (Liu, 2019). Similar efforts have also proven successful in industrialised nations, where educational initiatives like school lessons delivered through public libraries and general sexual education through media are utilized to reduce the number of young mothers and safeguard children from sexual incidents (Goldfarb, & Lieberman, 2021). The incidence of teenage pregnancy is a matter of public health concern in less developed nations like Brazil as it adversely affects not only the mothers but their families as well. The increasing dropout rates and meagre income levels of young girls under 15 make them more susceptible to sexual activity (Cruz et al., 2021). Surprisingly, teenage pregnancies in South Africa are mounting in rural rather than urban regions, such as Limpopo, Mpumalanga, and Eastern Cape, leading to a host of socio-economic repercussions, including gender-based violence, compromised family finances, school absenteeism, and deficient health education and services (Barron et al., 2022). In Ethiopia, it is imperative to take steps to prevent teenage pregnancies due to the significant physical and psychological ramifications for both young girls and society overall (Mezmur et al., 2021). Meanwhile, unrestricted access to maternal and reproductive healthcare in Kenya is crucial in overcoming social and economic barriers that limit the provision of necessary services (Willie, 2021). However, different studies report that adolescent pregnancy is a matter of global significance, affecting societies and education systems in developed, developing, and underdeveloped nations alike (Maputle et al., 2015; Ramalepa et al., 2021).

There is a clear correlation between early childbirth and education, as it often leads to teenagers dropping out of school as a result of their pregnancy (Madeni *et al*, 2011) and will end up with less education. As per the World Health Organization (2020), adolescent pregnancy is identified as a social issue that hinders girls from pursuing their education. According to the Tanzania Demographic and Health Survey (TDHS) data, in 2016, around 52% of teenagers without formal education had begun childbearing, while only 6% of women who completed secondary education had done so. In addition, the risk of pregnancy among teenage and adolescent girls is linked to their level of education and employment status (Mbelwa & Isangula, 2012). Based on the reports by the United Republic of Tanzania (URT, 2018), the dropout rate due to pregnancies experienced a significant rise, going from 6.8% in 2016 to 21.9% in 2018. The highest dropout rate was observed in the final year of ordinary secondary education (form four classes). In addition, Tanzania has one of the highest rates of adolescent pregnancy in the world, where approximately 23% of females aged 15 to 19 years old become pregnant (URT, 2018). The evidence in this situation suggests that girls who bear children at an early age are at risk for health complications later on. This is particularly true for those between the ages of 15 and 19, who may not only be at risk for mortality during childbirth but also may be more likely to seek out unsafe abortion methods that can lead to serious injury or death (URT, 2018).

According to Spencer (2011), the topic of pregnancy is of public concern and necessitates education in every country, irrespective of their level of development. If teenagers and adolescents lack formal education and are unemployed, the likelihood of becoming pregnant increases. Approximately 27% of females aged 15-19 have either given birth or are anticipating their first child, as per the data provided by (TDHS, 2016). According to the report, the probability of adolescent females who have not received any education starting their childbearing journey is five times higher than those with upper secondary or advanced education (52% compared to 10%). Furthermore, economic status plays a role in the incidence of teenage childbearing, with rates ranging from 13% among adolescent women from the most affluent households to 42% among those from the least affluent households (TDHS, 2016). This article aimed to investigate and understand the attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge of secondary school educators and students towards adolescent pregnancy and to explore the perceived impact of adolescent pregnancy on educational performance.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study can be explained through social cognitive theory and social ecological theory. Social cognitive theory suggests that individuals learn behaviour through their environments and observation of others. This theory implies that the attitudes and beliefs of secondary school educators and students on adolescent pregnancy are primarily influenced by their social environment, particularly their families and peers. Furthermore, this theory posits that individuals have the ability to shape their own behaviour and decision-making through self-efficacy (confidence in their ability to perform a specific behaviour) and outcome expectancies (expectations of the potential outcomes of a behaviour). The social-ecological framework posits that people's attitudes and behaviours are shaped by the interaction between various social systems, including the individual, relational, community, and societal levels.

In the context of adolescent pregnancy, the social-ecological framework suggests that educators' and students' perceptions towards adolescent pregnancy will vary depending on the influence of various social systems. For instance, an educator who is part of a school community that emphasises sexual education and contraceptive use may view adolescent pregnancy negatively. Similarly, a student who is part of a community where teenage pregnancy is stigmatised may view adolescent pregnancy negatively. The perception of adolescent pregnancy is complex and multifaceted, influenced by various factors operating at the individual, social, and societal levels. The theoretical frameworks presented in this paper provide a comprehensive understanding of how educators and students perceive adolescent pregnancy in secondary schools. By understanding the underlying factors that shape attitudes towards adolescent pregnancy, educators and policymakers can develop effective interventions and strategies aimed at reducing teenage pregnancy rates.

Research Methodology

The case study research design was employed to acquire comprehensive insights and understanding. It was used to investigate the perspectives of both students and educators methodically and thoroughly. It included 30 participants (15 educators and 20 students between the ages of 15-20), selected from five different secondary schools within Kinondoni Municipality: Matosa, Mbopo, Njechele, Boko, and Twiga. Educators and students were purposeful sampled based on the following selection criteria:

- The educators must have been staff of the identified secondary schools for not less than five years.
- The educators must have been involved in the school discipline committee
- The educators must have been involved in school guidance and counselling
- Students must have been enrolled in the identified schools at any level of study (form one to four)
- Students must be 13-20 years old

It was assumed that those who met the criteria would have a basic knowledge of the subject matter. The criteria for selection ensured gender balance whereby 10 female educators and 5 male educators, as well as 12 female students and 8 male students, were engaged in the study. To conduct thorough interviews with educators and students, a partially pre-planned set of questions was used in combination with semi-structured interviews as well as two group discussions specifically designed to gather inputs from students. Consent was first obtained from the participants before the interviews and FGDs were recorded with a digital voice recorder. Thematic analysis, which involves the identification, analysis, organisation, description, and communication of themes present in a data set (as defined by Brann and Clarke in 2006, and Creswell in 2014), was employed to analyse the data via QSR NVIVO version 14. Various themes were noted throughout the procedure and classified, arranged, and construed to derive significance from the gathered information.

Findings and Discussions

The study's objectives were to examine the perceptions of educators and students on adolescent pregnancy, factors contributing to adolescent pregnancy, and the impact of adolescent pregnancy on academic performance. The outcomes of the study are presented and discussed in line with these objectives.

Opinions of Educators and Students Regarding Adolescent Pregnancy

The educators held varying perspectives on adolescent pregnancy. Some educators acknowledged that life has changed as compared to the time they grew up and described early pregnancy as lacking respect and self-

control; some teenagers do not listen to what they are advised by their elders. Participant 7 contributed by saying:

From my experience, when I compare the times I grew up, socialisation has changed very much. The young generation is equipped with the knowledge (i.e., social, economic, political, cultural, environmental, etc.) that my generation did not have at their age. With Western technology, the traditional way of teaching teenagers how to deal with sexual life has been challenged and perceived by the young generation as outdated. What you hear from teenagers is dating, going out with friends and sometimes living with boyfriends before marriage, and not listening to their parents/guardians, which is perceived as disrespect.

From the findings, educators seem to blame teenagers for not respecting adults and for losing self-control over their sexual behaviours. Supporting this finding, Nkosi and Pretorius (2019) assert that teenagers lack self-control and respect for their elders and often refuse to listen to them. The findings align with the research by Jørgensen et al. (2019) and Cohen-Gilbert et al. (2015), suggesting that schools tend to hold the victims responsible for engaging in risky behaviour or experiencing early pregnancy. With this perception, educators may avoid supporting pregnant students or students' parents in collective efforts to address the problem.

These findings align with the social cognitive theory, as they suggest that individuals learn through observation, modelling, and reinforcement from their surroundings. In the case of adolescent pregnancy, educators' and students' perceptions are influenced by their social environment and experiences. These perceptions may either reinforce or contradict the dominant cultural norms regarding pregnancy in adolescents. Furthermore, during the interview, educators noted that adolescent pregnancy poses a significant public health issue that negatively impacts not just adolescent mothers but also their families, communities, and the entire nation. Participant 3, during the interview, said:

Adolescent pregnancy is very dangerous to young mothers because they might easily experience birth complications, which may cause premature delivery, disabilities and death of mothers and babies. Adolescent pregnancy interrupts the girls' education, which limits the opportunities for higher education and career advancement, hence poverty, which will also affect the development of the baby.

This finding is supported by Sciacca et al. (2021) and Palomino Pérez et al. (2018), who argued that adolescent pregnancy is a public health

concern that has significant consequences for both individuals and society, affecting their personal, social, psychological, and physical well-being. It has also been noted that due to extended health and social issues, numerous pregnant teenagers, particularly in developing nations, are compelled to leave their educational institutions (UNFPA-UNICEF, 2021). This indicates that teenage mothers often face higher risks during pregnancy and childbirth, and some of the potential dangers involve giving birth prematurely, having a baby with a lower-than-average weight, and experiencing difficulties during the delivery process. Furthermore, teenage mothers may experience social isolation and stigma, which can result in psychological problems like depression and anxiety. During the focus group discussion, the students noted that teen pregnancy has a social and psychological impact on teens as they believe that they should not practice sex before marriage because this is against social and cultural norms. Students added that teenagers who are pregnant often struggle to share the news of their pregnancy with their parents and close family members because they fear they will not be able to accept or empathise with their situation. A participant (B) during FGD said:

It is frustrating and overwhelming when a teenage girl discovers that she is pregnant because this is perceived as bringing shame to the family. In addition, pregnant teens become very stressed knowing that they have to be out of school and not sure if the man responsible for the pregnancy will accept and be ready for a child because many rejects taking responsibility. This situation leads some teenagers to attempt abortion and even suicide, especially when they face hard times and blame from parents, close relatives and friends.

According to students, pregnant teenagers often face a lack of support from the father of their child and may even be forced to leave their household. This exposes them to feelings of isolation and rejection, which can force pregnant teenagers to attempt suicide. Participant (G) shared views during FGD 2:

Pregnant teens become very stressed knowing that they have to be out of school, and not sure if the man responsible for the pregnancy will accept and be ready for a child because many rejects to take responsibility. This situation leads some teenagers to attempt abortion and even suicide, especially when they face hard times and blame from parents, close relatives and friends.

These findings echoed those of Phaswana-Mafuya et al. (2016) which revealed that some families believe that getting pregnant before one is

married is unacceptable and very wrong due to social and cultural norms. According to Capuzzi and Golden (2013), pregnant teenagers may consider suicide to be the sole solution to their distress and depression resulting from stress, owing to their inadequate coping abilities. This finding is consistent with the results of this research. This finding calls for more research in this area to examine the reasons children abuse because recently, they had been many reports of mothers abusing their children. As per previous research, parents who experience stress are prone towards violent behaviour directed at their children (Sriskandarajah et al., 2015).

Factors that Contribute to Adolescent Pregnancy

During the second objective, various factors related to adolescent pregnancy were examined; both educators and students were able to identify several of these factors. According to educators, reproductive health education plays a crucial role in minimising teenage pregnancies. However, certain parents were unable to discuss matters relating to sexuality with their children due to cultural and social constraints. Participant 2 noted this:

Many teenagers in Tanzania receive inadequate or inaccurate information about sexual and reproductive health, including contraception and safe sex practices. In addition, parents and community members at large, due to strong cultural hold, have continued to deny the right to reproductive health education among girls. As I grew up, I never had any conversation about sexual life with my parents, and I never asked parents questions related to sex because of fear of being perceived as sexually active.

The WHO report confirms the notion that adolescents lack knowledge about sexual topics and family planning, including the utilization of contraceptives. Additionally, many teenagers cannot apply this knowledge due to insufficient sex education in some countries (WHO, 2020). The UNFPA report states that safe and voluntary family planning is a fundamental human right; however, a significant number of women who desire to avoid pregnancy, approximately 225 million, are not utilizing reliable and safe family planning techniques (UNFPA, 2013). This report outlines various causes, as per the (UNFPA, 2013), that contribute to issues surrounding lack of information or services and inadequate support from their partners or communities. In a focus group discussion, students pointed out that teenagers' inadequate access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education in schools has resulted in a lack of communication and increased risky sexual behaviour.

Students added that inadequate parental involvement and support contribute to adolescent pregnancy. Participant (K) contributed by saying:

Many teenagers grow up uninformed and unsupported on sexual-related issues because they receive most of the sexual information from their peers who have practiced. There is a lack of communication between parents and teenagers on sexual and reproductive health matters because this is mostly considered taboo. Teenage girls are mostly asked by their parents that they should not engage in sexual practices until they get married (FGD 1)

Previous research conducted in Sierra Leone has discovered a similar outcome, where elders were found to intimidate teenagers instead of engaging in conversation with them (UNICEF, 2010). Studies with similar findings have pointed out that discussing sexuality between parents/caregivers and their children is a protective measure against various sexual behaviours, especially for girls, which includes postponing sexual debut (Markham et al., 2010). Educators have identified poverty and a lack of economic opportunities as factors that make teenage girls more susceptible to engaging in risky behaviours, such as selling their bodies for money. Participant 12 during the interview added by saying:

Poor living conditions due to poverty, where some families live in overcrowded environments, insufficient spaces where some parents are sharing a room or a shack with their children ... expose children to early sexual activities.

On the contrary, poverty was recognized by students as a significant factor as it deprives parents of the ability to provide essential needs for their children. Some families encourage early marriages as they believe that their children will get a better life especially when the expected husbands are thought to be worthy. Participant (A) exemplified this as follows:

The status of teenagers in secondary schools in Tanzania (i.e., rural/urban) differs very much. It is easy to observe and understand those who come from families with good economies and those coming from poor families. Some teenage girls get involved in sexual practices to earn money for their daily basic needs and also want to be seen as others. In addition, some families encourage early marriages for worth gain. (FGD 2)

Studies have revealed that adolescents from impoverished families tend to denigrate themselves and see themselves as inferior to others, which

drives them to pursue early sexual relationships in search of attention and acknowledgement; thus, they have a higher likelihood of becoming pregnant (Bantebya et al., 2015). The current findings are in connection with Glinski et al. (2015) who argued that over half of girls born into impoverished households in developing countries were wedded at a young age. The report released by UNICEF states that young girls belonging to economically disadvantaged families have a greater likelihood of getting married before reaching the age of 18, as compared to girls coming from affluent families (UNICEF, 2019). According to educators, inadequate parental/family participation in discussing sexual topics such as intimate relationships, contraception, and sexual health, coupled with insufficient information about reproductive health, are factors that contribute to teenage pregnancies. Talking about sex is not a frequent subject of conversation in families, and it is even more restricted in numerous African nations due to cultural norms, values, and taboos. Participant 13 shared the following:

I think that cultural values and beliefs make it difficult for parents to talk to their children about sexual issues as they seem to be sensitive. In Tanzania, and I believe in other African countries, parents do not provide themselves time to talk to their children, especially when they start to grow up and become teenagers.

During FGD, students were of the view that in many African societies, discussing topics related to sex, sexuality, and reproductive health is considered taboo. Traditional cultural beliefs and values often discourage open conversations about these subjects, leading to a lack of communication between parents and teenagers. Participant (J) said:

It is very frustrating when growing up without proper guidance, especially on sexual issues. I believe that if parents had open and honest communication about sex with their children would contribute largely to the decisions that teenagers make about sexual intercourse and there would be a reduction in adolescent pregnancy. Unfortunately, what teenagers hear from their parents is mostly warnings and threats. For example; if you engage in sexual behaviour before marriage, you will destroy your life. (FGD 1).

According to Nabugoomu et al. (2020), parents play a crucial role in preventing teenage pregnancy by recognizing and addressing the specific needs of their children and offering them emotional and psychological support. Nevertheless, the occurrence of teenage pregnancies is greatly influenced by cultural practices that promote silence around sexual issues. Previous research has discovered similar results, suggesting that culture

plays a significant role in discouraging discussions about sex (Amakali-Nauseb et al., 2017). This pattern is also observed in Tanzania. A study conducted in rural Tanzania found that communication primarily takes place between individuals of the same gender. Specifically, there is a significant amount of communication between mothers and daughters. However, adolescents perceive this relationship to be strict, intimidating, unapproachable, and unavailable. As noted by Bushaija et al. (2013) and Nundwe (2012), in East Africa, parents often find it easier to discuss topics like politics, sports, and games with their adolescents, rather than addressing matters concerning sexual and reproductive health. Studies have indicated that conversations about reproductive health issues in Sub-Saharan Africa tend to be imbalanced and authoritative. Instead of open and straightforward dialogues, these discussions usually involve subtle warnings and lack directness (Kajula et al. 2014).

Perceptions of Educators and Students Regarding the Impact of Teenage Pregnancy on Academic Performance

Educators believed that adolescent pregnancy had a significant impact on school performance due to various psychological, social, and health-related factors. Educators revealed that teenagers are afraid of sharing their status with parents/guardians and carry their pregnancy in a very stressful situation. Educators added that this is due to fear of being rejected by parents, stigmatization and fear of being isolated by friends and sometimes fear of being expelled from school. All these, according to the educators, contribute to psychological as well as health problems which result into poor school performance. Educators added that even for the teenagers who manage to stay with parents/guardians until they give birth they perform poorly because they spend much of the time looking after the pregnancy with inadequate support from the parents and close relatives. Participant 8 said:

School performance of some of the pregnant teenagers drops to a very low level which makes educators start questioning. This is due to the fact that the teenager might be in a state of frustration and do not know what to do. Sometimes the man who is responsible rejects the responsibility and intimidates the teenage not to mention him. Some of the pregnant teenagers end up suffering from anemia because of poor food intake, and the fact that they do not attend clinic. The lack of sufficient support from close family members can escalate stress levels and frustration among some teenagers, ultimately resulting in poor performance.

During FGD students indicated that carrying a baby inside someone's womb is not a joke, and it might be a very tough journey. Students

continued by saying that after a teenage girl discovers she is pregnant she becomes frustrated and stressed which destroys her school performance. Students added that some girls suffer from pregnancy sickness which makes them very weak and, in the end, affects their school performance. Participant (10) contributed by saying:

I think becoming pregnant is very tough and a teenager is too young to handle the pregnancy and the school works. This means that concentration on school activities and even home-chores become poor for the pregnant girls which results in poor performance in their studies. For some teenage girls, their school performance becomes poor due to various reasons like pregnancy complications and stress. Sometimes it might be due to the fact that a teenager is too young to handle the pregnancy as well as caring for the baby. (FGD 2).

The qualitative findings mentioned above align with previous studies that have suggested a link between adolescent pregnancy and the disruption of learning, leading to lower academic performance. These studies have highlighted school absenteeism as a contributing factor to potential school dropouts (Newman, 2018; & Ramalepa,2021). The teen might be forced to drop out due to rearing problems like the child and their own health, as well as financial problems. In a study conducted by Shefer et al. (2012), similar results were observed, indicating that teenage mothers who re-enroll in school often experienced a decline in their academic performance.

Many of them transitioned from being high achievers to becoming average or poor performers due to the challenges of balancing pregnancy and schooling. The findings are also supported by Rugimbana & Mwira (2023) who noted that apart from girls' failure to access to education, employment opportunities are also being jeopardized as they fail to participate in educational activities due to school dropout or interrupted schooling. Maemeko et al. (2018) also found that adolescent pregnancy serves as a catalyst for poverty, significantly impacting the academic performance of young girls. Based on social-ecological theory, when it comes to adolescent pregnancy, the perception of educators and students may be influenced by various factors on different levels of the social-ecological model. At the individual level, personal beliefs, values, and attitudes may shape an educator or student's perception of adolescent pregnancy. For example, an educator who believes in abstinence-only education may view adolescent pregnancy as a negative outcome that can be prevented by avoiding sexual activity.

Conclusion

The perception of adolescent pregnancy among secondary school educators and students is varied and influenced by several factors. The findings from the studies reviewed in this paper show that secondary school educators have a negative perception of adolescent pregnancy, while students have a more accepting attitude towards it. The educators' perception is based on their beliefs about the negative consequences of adolescent pregnancy, such as the impact on the education and future opportunities of young mothers. On the other hand, students' perception is influenced by their beliefs about pregnancy and parenting being a natural part of life. The perception of adolescent pregnancy among secondary school educators and students is complex and influenced by various factors, including beliefs, education, and cultural norms. It is important to provide comprehensive sexual education in schools to promote positive attitudes towards adolescent pregnancy and reproductive health. Furthermore, educators must be trained to provide non-judgmental support to pregnant students to ensure that they can continue their education and become successful parents.

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