Interplay of informal and formal social support systems for single teen mothers in Rwanda's Gicumbi District

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ABSTRACT
This study explores how informal social support systems can work with formal social support to assist single teen mothers. It draws from 30 interviews, including single teenage mothers (10), some of their mothers (6), and professionals from formal social support systems (14), to explore informal and formal support mechanisms for single teen mothers. Data analysed revealed that family members, friends, peers, neighbours, and community care circles are important informal supporters. At the same time, governmental and non-governmental organisations working with teen mothers from village to district levels are critical formal support systems. Both informal and formal support systems are complementary in the lives of teen mothers. Furthermore, the research demonstrated the potential for enhancing the responsiveness of these systems to the challenges faced by single teen mothers through coordinated efforts in Rwanda. Finally, this study is helpful for social work professionals in coordinating all support systems to address the diverse needs of single teen mothers from a homegrown solution perspective. Having roots in informal social support systems, homegrown solutions can inspire formal social support systems in applying locally driven approaches to addressing teen motherhood issues.

Keywords: single teen mothers, social support, informal social support system, formal social support system, homegrown solution

Introduction
Global research has indicated that approximately 21 million girls aged 15–19 years in developing regions experience pregnancy, with approximately 12 million of them giving birth (Sully et al., 2020). In sub-Saharan Africa, the birth rate for adolescent girls aged 10-14 years is situated at the highest rate of such girls,4.6 per 1000 women (Reva et al., 2023). According to the last

Rwanda Demographic Health Survey (RDHS 6), 5% of girls between the ages of 15-19 had begun childbearing, among whom 4% had given birth and 1% were pregnant when this survey was carried out (United Nations Fund Population Activities, 2022). Unfortunately, a large number of pregnancies among single teen mothers may be unreported, and some of their children are not registered in civil books. In Rwanda, like many parts of the world, single teen motherhood is associated with physical, psychological, mental, and social challenges (World Health Organization, 2021; Kagabika & Irabona, 2021; Gatsinzi, 2021; Uwamahoroet al., 2020; Uwizeye et al., 2020; Coast et al., 2021). School dropout, lack of family support to take care of the baby, stigma, violence (both physical and psychological) by family members, and refusal of parents to provide their pregnant daughters with shelter, food, clothing, etc., are some of the problems met by teen mothers, as reported by the Gender Monitoring Office (2017). Kagabika and Irabona (2021) reported poverty, relationship challenges, social stigma, forced dependence, limited economic access, parenting stress, population growth, and health risks as significant teen motherhood challenges in the Kirehe District of Rwanda.

In addition, teen mothers can experience depression associated with pregnancy complications, hardships with preterm births, and postpartum complications (Putri et al., 2023). Teen mothers face multiple and complex challenges that call for the intervention of different people, including social workers who are dedicated to linking people with systems and communities for sustainable social transformation (Muleya & Mlilo, 2023). Through mediation and advocacy, social workers intervene to ensure that vulnerable people enjoy their rights (Ife et al., 2022). This duty takes special attention from social workers when it comes to single teen mothers who are struggling to adapt adolescence to motherhood and related responsibilities.

With the appropriate support, resources, and strategies, overcoming these challenges is challenging yet attainable. To this end, robust social support systems are needed. Afita and Nuranasmita (2023) described different types of social support, from informal and formal structures that help needy people cope with adverse situations. They distinguish between instrumental support (tangible or practical assistance like a house, clothes, food, financial such as money, loans, bills payments, etc.), emotional support (comfort, empathy, encouragement, understanding, etc), and informational support (advice, guidance, or helpful information to someone facing a problem). Former researchers explored informal social support based on close relationships, social ties and social values (Gültürk, 2019; McReynolds, 2021; Montejo, 2021). They are in line with Home Grown Initiatives (HGIs) in Rwanda that include traditional participatory practices based on kinship ties and self-help mechanisms to reinforce social cohesion for socio-economic development

(Uwihanganye et al., 2020; Isirabahenda, 2023; Hasselskog, 2017; Gordy & Efendic, 2019). They are related to people's inherent potential, skills, social networks, access to physical and financial resources, and ability to influence social institutions (Rambert & Mornay, 2017). Gültürk (2019) suggests a similar idea, indicating that humans' evolutionary advantage lies in sharing the responsibilities of protection, resource acquisition, and offspring rearing.
In the context of this study, informal support systems may play a crucial role in providing emotional, practical, and social support to single teen mothers. However, those systems have limitations that can impact their effectiveness. For instance, they face limited resources to provide extensive support. The support is not consistent and not always available. There is a lack of expertise in addressing complex issues, bias and subjectivity, inability to keep privacy and confidentiality, lack of diversity in terms of perspectives and experiences, stigmatization where people are hesitant to share specific challenges, lack of easy access to supporters living far, over-reliance on the support that undermines own coping skills and independence, limited scope and temporary nature (Hangerter et al, 2019; Khan & Hess, 2020).

In contrast, formal support systems are government or non-profit organizations (Tino, 2018) that address various social issues and people's needs. These systems employ professionals who provide structured services of different types. Government organizations focus on systemic issues and policy implementation, while non-profit organizations look at the specific needs of underserved, vulnerable people (Dennis, 2017). Professional social service providers work with these formal social support systems to provide single teen mothers with diverse aids to promote their well-being and long-term success, as well as that of their children.

However, Lung (2019) recognizes the shortcomings of institutions that provide formal services to the needy. Formal social support systems face limitations, including limited accessibility, delays and lengthy processes in service delivery, high turnover of qualified staff, poor cost effectiveness, services creating dependence on external aids, inability to manage service effectively, and lack of adequate follow-up (Nuri et al., 2024). The review above reveals that both informal and formal support systems play essential roles in addressing the complex challenges of teen mothers. In addition, both types have distinct strengths and limitations. However, no study has assessed social support systems for single teen mothers and how they can work in tandem to influence their life trajectories, especially in Gicumbi District, where this study is located. This study answers the following questions: (1) What are the types of informal and formal social support systems for single teen mothers in Gicumbi District/Rwanda? (2) How can informal and formal social support systems work together to influence the experiences of single teen mothers in Rwanda in the context of homegrown solutions?

Methodology

Study design

A qualitative explorative research design was adopted to deepen our understanding of social support systems available to single teen mothers to help them overcome multifaceted challenges. The data in this study were collected from six selected sectors of Gicumbi District in Rwanda.

Sampling

The study adopted a purposive sampling technique to select ten single teen mothers, six mothers of teen mothers, and 14 professional service providers. Officers in charge of social affairs in 6 selected sectors of Gicumbi District indicated the systems they work with to tackle issues of teen motherhood, and those meeting predefined criteria were taken as participants. We interviewed mothers who have supported their daughters and teen mothers who have received support from at least three social support systems. This was to learn about informal and formal supportive systems in Gicumbi that contribute to teen mothers' growth. The last category of participants includes 14 professionals qualified to work with the target group and who, for the past two years, have been working in an agency or office that provides aid to single teen mothers. Conveniently we selected social affairs officers from six sectors of Gicumbi, a representative of women at the district level, a health and sanitation officer, a family promotion and gender director in Gicumbi District, a coordinator of prevention and gender-based violence (Twugarire Turugarijwe project) under Byumba diocese commission of justice and peace, a counsellor from Rwanda Organization of Professional Trauma counsellors (ARCT Ruhuka/Gicumbi), Coordinator of Diocese training centre for youth (China Keitetsi), Maison d'accès à la Juctice (MAJ) translated as access to the justice department in charge of women and child rights in Gicumbi District, Caritas Byumba, and coordinator of community health workers in Gicumbi District.

Data collection methods and instruments

Our data generation methods were diverse, including life story interviews with single teen mothers to capture their insights, feelings, experiences, responsibilities and engagements related to their new status (Atkinson, 2012). We also used semi-structured interviews with parents and professional service providers for 45-60 minutes. This comprehensive approach, conducted over four months, from December 22nd, 2023, to April 2024, ensured a holistic understanding of the participants' experiences. In support of interview guides, interviews were conducted in Kinyarwanda within interviewees' homes and offices. They were audio-recorded and transcribed from Kinyarwanda to

English. Of course, some speech originalities have been challenging to transcribe, especially participants' emotions.

Data analysis

After completing the interviews, we examined the data by pulling out the concepts and checking which ones needed more attention to be examined in detail. Afterwards, we organised the codes and conducted data coding to maintain participant confidentiality. Participants were coded by writing the initials of their titles followed by the serial number. For instance, STM-1 means the first single teen mother, PSTM-1 means the first parent of a single teen mother, and PSP-1 means the first professional service provider. Employing inductive coding, we categorised the data and identified themes, which facilitated the elimination of irregularities in the gathered information and ensured content validity and reliability. Data triangulation incorporates diverse perspectives and experiences from ten single teen mothers, their six parents, and fourteen professional service providers from different institutions mentioned on the previous page. This helps capture the complexity and richness of the phenomenon under study and more effectively validates findings by cross-verifying information from different participants.

Ethical considerations

Authorized by the Directorate of Research and Innovation of the University of Rwanda and the Mayor of Gicumbi District, the interviewees were informed about the study's purpose and asked to participate voluntarily. This study also considers voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent, emotional safety, and reciprocity.

Results

Through interviews, valuable findings were collected, starting with diverse perspectives and experiences of different participants. From the nuanced perspectives of single teen mothers experiencing the realities of premature parenthood to the viewpoints of their mothers trying to support them and the insights of professionals working to provide essential services, a comprehensive understanding of informal and formal support systems begins to take shape. Data also show the need for the dual working of social support systems in the light of homegrown solutions to respond to the tricky situation of teen mothers.

Demographic information of participants

This section presents findings on the participants' demography, age, education level, qualification, marital status, and duration of job experience with teen mothers.

Table 1: Demographic information of single teen mothers

Participant Code	Age during pregnancy	Age during research	Education level	Occupation
STM-1	13	20	Primary	Trading
STM-2	16	17	High school in progress	Student
STM-3	18	20	Vocational Training	Tailoring
STM-4	16	20	Vocational Training	Tailoring
STM-5	16	19	Primary	Farming
STM-6	15	17	Vocational Training	Tailoring
STM-7	15	20	Vocational Training	Tailoring
STM-8	14	20	Primary	Farming
STM-9	13	17	Primary	Farming
STM-10	14	17	Primary	Farming

Source: Fieldwork, 2024.

The table above shows that all teen mothers are single as they are still young. Their age ranged from 17 to 20 during research and 13 to 18 during pregnancy. Except for one who regained school, one who helps her mother in trading activities, and four who joined a vocational training centre to learn tailoring, others are involved in farming.

Table 2: Demographic information of single teen mothers' mothers

Participant code	Age	Education level	Occupation	Marital status
PSTM-1	39	Primary	Trading	Married
PSTM-2	47	Primary	Farming	Widow
PSTM-3	66	Primary	Farming	Married
PSTM-4	54	Not educated	Farming	Married
PSTM-5	62	Primary	Farming	Widow
PSTM-6	45	Primary	Farming	Married

Source: Fieldwork, 2024.

Only one parent did not attend primary school, while five know how to read and write. Two are widows, and four are married. They are mature because their ages range from 39 to 66. This means they can take care of their daughters and grandchildren.

Table 3: Demographic information of professional service providers

Code	Age	Sex	Education level	Qualification	Occupation	Marital status	Experience in working with teen mothers
PSP-1	50	Male	Masters's	History	Teen Mothers Coordinator project	Married	Two years
PSP-2	48	Male	Bachelor's	Social work	Director of gender and family promotion	Married	Six years
PSP-3	57	Male	Bachelor's	Education	Coordinator of the training centre	Single	Seven years
PSP-4	37	Male	Bachelor's	Sociology	Social affair officer	Married	Two years
PSP-5	52	Male	Bachelor's	Social work	Counsellor	Married	Four years
PSP-6	40	Female	Bachelor's	Social work	Advocate	Married	Fourteen years
PSP-7	28	Male	High School	Community Health	Health and sanitation officer	Married	Two years
PSP-8	38	Male	Bachelor's	Public Administration	Social affair officer	Married	Six years
PSP-9	53	Male	Bachelor's	Public administration	Social affair officer	Married	Eleven years
PSP-10	48	Female	High School	Education	Women representative	Married	Eight years
PSP-11	41	Female	Bachelor's	Sociology	Social affair officer	Married	Nine years
PSP-12	46	Female	Bachelor's	Sociology	Social affair officer	Married	Nine years
PSP-13	49	Female	Bachelor's	Psychology	Counsellor	Married	Five years
PSP-14	42	Female	Bachelor's	Public Administration	Social affair officer	Married	Twelve years

Source: Fieldwork, 2024.

The professional service providers' ages ranged from 28 years to 53 years, and the majority fell within the 40-49 age range. Out of 14, eight are males,

and six are females. Many are males because of their current employment. Except for one, others are married and parents. Regarding qualifications, except two who did education and one historian, others did social sciences, including social work, clinical psychology, sociology, public administration, and community health. Concerning education level, except for one who did not attend university and one who holds a Master's level, others are bachelor's degree holders. The youngest, who works with teen mothers, has two years of experience in service, while the oldest has 16 years of experience.

Informal social support systems for single teen mothers
Informal social support systems reported by single teen mothers include family members, friends, peers, neighbours, and community care circles. The single teen mothers recognized their parents, siblings, and extended relatives as immediate supporters who provided emotional, practical, and financial assistance. For some teen mothers, it was not easy to be understood by their parents, but finally, they did so. STM-1 reported the following: "*My parents became furious when they discovered my pregnancy, but with time, my mother took me to the health centre for consultation and vaccines. They love my son and give me what I need on their means*". (STM-1)

Initially resistant to the idea, parents often struggle to accept teen pregnancy due to concerns about their daughter's future; however, with time and support, they eventually come to terms with the situation, embracing their role as grandparents and offering unconditional love and support to both their daughter and grandchild.STM-3 said:

> You can imagine how difficult it is to be a mother at my age. [15 years] I would not have made it this far without my mother's support. I did not even know how to wash a newborn. She has been there for me every step of the way, helping me to care for my baby. Before, I feared to ask something or did it through my sister. My sister is my saving grace throughout this journey of teen motherhood. Despite being younger than me, she has stepped up in ways I never imagined. I felt forced to work hard because of this baby, but my sister, after class, came to help when I was exhausted. She is my right hand. She listens to me. Having her by my side reminds me that I am not alone; together, we can tackle anything that comes our way.

Based on these narratives and stories of other single teen mothers, positive regard from parents and siblings is crucial. It offers emotional support and validation, helping them feel valued and supported in their role as parents despite their young age. Furthermore, single teen mothers stated how friends, peers, and neighbours help them live the complexities of parenting positively,

maintaining social connections, a sense of community, healthy relationships, responsible behaviour, and emotional resilience.

> My friends have been amazing. Even though some are younger than me, they have stepped up to help me when needed, whether watching my baby for a few hours or just being there to listen. I do not know what I would do without them. I laugh when they come when I meet any challenge. My mature friends give me advice or something tangible, like clothes for my baby (STM-4).

Friends and peers offer a sense of normalcy and social connection, allowing single teen mothers to maintain critical social bonds and engage in activities outside their parental responsibilities. Their assistance focuses mainly on displaying love, which eases some of the burdens associated with parenting. They also offer aid at school through explanations, discussions about lessons, help in taking notes when she misses class for different reasons and sharing school materials.

In contrast, the babies' fathers did not come around to see even them. Single teen mothers express negative feelings towards their genitors because they do not benefit from their assistance. They cry when reminded of them. STM-5 expressed her anger:

> Please do not remind me of that animal who cut through the fabric of my hopes and dreams. When I remember his promises, I become very sad. Imagine that he created this life and does not want to see him. He left me after the announcement of a pregnancy. I am confronted with the harsh reality of abandonment and the weight of parental responsibility that rests solely on my shoulders. However, the love I hold for my child consoles me. Nevertheless, I will report him to the local government whenever he returns.

The example illustrates a common frustration among single teen mothers that their goals for the future have been stopped or delayed. In the Rwandan context, childbearing in teenagers is seen as sexual violence, even for consensual sex. This is the reason why the babies' fathers refuse their responsibility, and those who are not put in prison disappear.

More importantly, teen mothers realize the unique role of community care circles that serve as a platform for mutual support, sharing resources by savings and credits, and encouraging in times of need. Community care circles are informally formed, and members join voluntarily. They work like self-help groups used by some NGOs. STM-10 claimed that:

> Being together with others is good. I know that being part of a supportive group changed everything. Before, I felt overwhelmed and isolated, grappling with feelings of shame and uncertainty about my future. When we met, we shared experiences and problems, and then I

recognized that I could do something as a mother and realized that my worth was not lost by sexual violence. We exchanged ideas and words of wisdom, empowering each other to embrace us with confidence and pride. Being part of that community helped me realise that I was not alone and that I could do something about my situation. Joining a group was, for me, a turning point in accepting my teen motherhood journey. (STM-10)

Community care circles lead to self-discovery and self-development, where teen mothers can share experiences and learn survival skills, fostering a sense of camaraderie and empowerment. From the perspective of all interviewed parents, providing their daughters with unconditional support was considered necessary despite the difficulty of their roles and responsibilities. PSTM-1 spoke about assistance and encouragement:

She likes studying, and I keep her child while she goes to school. Even if this child prevents me from doing some activities, I immensely love him. I go to cultivate with him until 11:00 a.m. because I must prepare lunch. My daughter comes to breastfeed her baby in midday. Ahaa…Leaders have told us about children's rights, and we have reduced quarrels.

Parents are concerned about their teen daughters' and grandchildren's welfare. In some circumstances, they share the responsibility with neighbours. PSTM-2 reported:

… I am happy to have Mukamana (unreal name) as a next-door neighbour because I call her whenever I need her contribution. Sometimes, I send my daughter to her for advice because she is a clever woman. You cannot understand how my daughter loves her. It is like her aunt…

Parents link their daughters to good neighbours, mindful of their valuable assistance. Furthermore, some parents allow them to join community care circles where teen moms are told parenting tips and strategies for survival skills, as one parent pointed out:

… Initially, I refused her to go there, saying she would bring another child, but we were pleasantly surprised by how my daughter changed. The advice and friends she gained from the group comforted her. She learned money-saving tips and is now saving money even if she gains little…(PSTM-4).

The support and camaraderie teen mothers found within the group encourage them to explore their strengths and use them. These community care circles and other informal social support systems discussed above are closely linked to homegrown solutions because they often arise within the community

(Rwanda Governance Board, 2017; Rutikanga, 2019; Isirabahenda, 2023). They display Rwandan values of mutual assistance, cooperation, and collective well-being. They may be effective because they are tailored to single teen mothers' specific needs and contexts, even if their resources are limited.

Formal social support systems for single teen mothers

Formal support systems commonly encompass government programs, community organisations, educational institutions, and NGOs designed to offer financial aid, parenting classes, healthcare services, and counselling.

Local government comes first because it provides essential services, implements policies, and coordinates community resources to address these young mothers' unique needs and challenges. At the district level, teen mothers are in the attributions of the Family Promotion and Gender unit under the Directorate of Good Governance. Most interventions are decentralized at the sector level, where social affairs officers coordinate inner and outside resources reserved for single teen mothers. They also coordinate some support from different people.STM-2 said: "*I went to the sector office because they invited us to meet supporters. I have been selected to be assisted by Caritas, which helped me return to school. I am given school fees, uniform, and school materials*".

Government officials play a pivotal role in addressing some of teen mothers' needs. They facilitate access to essential health services, ensuring that teen mothers and their children receive proper medical attention. Parents claimed that social affairs officers are irreplaceable supporters:

> When my daughter got pregnant, we became hopeless. Due to our poverty, we were initially overwhelmed by the multitude of needs and uncertainties. I sent her to the sector office. The intervention of the social affairs office proved to be a lifeline for both her and our family. She went to the sector to look for aid. They connected her to a health centre issuing mutual health insurance for crucial medical care and support throughout her pregnancy and postpartum period, ensuring the well-being of both her and the baby (PSTM-3).

> …the provision of nutritious porridge flour helped address dietary ensuring the health and vitality of her newborn. You know, we are poor. The financial assistance offered by these services alleviated some of the financial burdens, but the aid is insufficient. I have other children. I wish the aid would be increased to find food and clothes. (PSTM-2).

In addition to counselling aimed at addressing the emotional well-being of teen mothers and nutritional and legal support, social affairs officers serve as

mediators, facilitating assertive communication and reconciliation processes between teen mothers and their families.PSP-12 reported:

> One girl became pregnant at 15 years old and decided to abort. She even bought drugs for that, and I decided to accompany her. We agreed that after delivery, she would give me her baby for her safety and compliance with prenatal care. However, surprisingly, after delivery, she refused to give me her baby, saying she loved it so much. She is now happy and thankful for my intervention.

Local government guidance also significantly influences the decisions of single teen mothers to make informed choices for themselves and their children. Teen mothers are encouraged to join community care cycles to facilitate their full reintegration. PSP-14 stated:

> Today, we encourage all citizens to join community-based groups to share, save, and take advantage of credit opportunities to improve the quality of their lives. Teen mothers are also concerned. We call those groups *"Empowering Together"* in respect of mutual support, understanding, and empowerment principles (PSP-12).

These community-based groups are frameworks in which young mothers become empowered to navigate the journey of early motherhood with strength and shared wisdom. Other governmental agencies identified include schools for reintegration, health facilities for medical care, Rwanda Investigation Bureau (RIB) and courts for justice, and Isange One Stop Center for counselling. Their roles are complementary, and their collaboration should enable teen mothers to have some of their needs met.

Moreover, in Gicumbi District, the local government actively engages with stakeholders to provide essential services to teen mothers. It works with non-governmental Organizations, including national or international organizations dedicated to advocating for and safeguarding the well-being of teen mothers and their children. They provide access to counselling, family reintegration, healthcare, education, life skills training, social justice, legal rights, conflict management, and eradicating stigma and discrimination.

> We have special occasions with governmental agencies to raise awareness of teen mothers' rights and the right agency to attend. We assess available opportunities for their benefit, prioritising advocacy for empowerment and awareness campaigns. Of course, each organisation receives particular attention depending on its mission, but our roles are complementary. Again, we do not work simultaneously in all sectors of Gicumbi District, as one teen mother can be supported by more than one organization (PSP-1).

This approach is essential in examining the safety, acceptability, and effectiveness of all kinds of interventions in teen mothers' lives, not just health care interventions but those in other fields such as education, criminal justice, parenting roles, and life skills. However, it is neither regular and inclusive nor permanent. Despite this, every NGO has a notable contribution. For instance, one reported:

> I tell you…I had suicidal ideas, but the lady I met in the office has been hope in my darkest moments. She gave me time. I remember I was crying because my situation was overwhelming. I will never forget that lady who listened to me and counselled me. She opened my eyes. She offered me time to explore my feelings, fears, and aspirations. Today, I love myself, and I forgive the perpetrator who does not even want to see his child. (STM-9).

Counselling is offered by all professionals working with single teen mothers. It provides a vital outlet to manage their emotions and confront the challenges of early parenthood. Through counselling, these young mothers can gain valuable coping strategies, rebuild self-esteem, and develop a sense of empowerment to navigate their journey without harmful ideas or attempts. Parents appreciate the contribution of NGOs. In her terms, one mother said:

> I saw God in good people who healed my daughter. I took her to the priest whose project helped us even give peace to our daughter. They are people of compassion and wide hearts, I can say. Without them, we would not have been able to overcome our obstacles. May God bless them for their dedication to serving vulnerable people like us. I am forever indebted to them for their generosity and kindness (PSTM-4).

Single teen mothers become empowered by the assistance they receive from social services professional providers. The encouragement, guidance, materials, and education provided to them help them develop parenting skills and pursue education or employment opportunities, ensuring a better future for themselves and their children to some extent.

The need to harmonise informal and formal support systems
The participants showed how the symbiotic working of informal and formal social support systems addresses complex and multifaceted challenges in a sustainable, culturally sensitive, comprehensive, and sustainable way. However, some teen mothers are not satisfied with the offered assistance compared to their expectations. They feel frustrated by the limitations or inadequacies of social support systems. The direct supporters are short of means and cannot cover all necessities. In institutions, teen mothers encounter bureaucratic hurdles, long waiting times, or insufficient resources that hinder their ability to access the help they need. They somehow perceive some social support systems as failing to address their complex needs fully or failing to

provide meaningful assistance in the short term. Single teen mothers expressed the need for more support provided by NGOs:

> Even though the UgariraTurugarijwe gave me a tailoring machine, my financial struggles persist. I tried to make money, but prices at the market increased. It is spent on food and clothes. I cannot let my siblings die of hunger. Saving is tough for me. I need other support, such as domestic animals like cows and goats, which can help. I ask myself………. How will I cut off this poverty cycle? Let me work hard and hope that God will do something. (STM-4).

Family size seems to be another challenging factor because teen mothers live within their families and share what they get with siblings. Again, family and friends play a crucial role, but they often lack resources, and in most cases, their support is neither relevant nor consistent.

> One notable limitation of informal support is the potential for inconsistency, insufficiency, and variability in the quality and type of support provided. This is because it relies heavily on personal relationships, and the availability of assistance depends on the current satisfaction and willingness of supporters within the teen mother's network. For example, her mother may be supportive today, and tomorrow, the situation changes and harasses her daughter. Moreover, informal supporters have limited resources and miss the structure and expertise offered by formal systems, potentially leaving gaps in addressing essential needs such as healthcare, education, and financial stability. (PSP-4).

Professional service providers observed the limitations of informal support networks because many teen mothers tend to come from the most vulnerable segments of citizens and can become pregnant again if they are not beneficiaries of adequate support. One local leader reported that problem as follows:

> Financial support and assistance programs to reduce economic hardships (NSDS) are insufficient. Nutritional-Sensitive Direct Support at the sector level does not reach all teen mothers. Again, 30000RWF in three months is insufficient, but ……. can help. They are also reserved for poor pregnant women until their children reach 2 years old (PSP-7).

Most single teen mothers face financial limitations and attend social welfare offices hoping to get money. However, funds are not enough to help all of them. NGOs face an inability to assist all needy young mothers. PSP-1 announced:

> …we have identified 600 teen mothers, among which only 150 were supported. So……funds are not sufficient. This means those we do not support continue to suffer or get insufficient aid from other supporters. I have also observed that one single case can benefit from the same interventions of many agencies at the same time, while if there is a kind of collaboration, the support can reach many teen mothers. Maybe my question is, who will be responsible? Even if we have a forum of meetings, it is not regular, and local leaders are very busy handling many activities simultaneously (PSP-1).

All participants showed the limitations of both informal and formal social support systems. Therefore, to effectively overcome these limitations, it is crucial to harmonise their strengths. Informal support systems, such as family and friends, offer intimacy and emotional connection but can lack organisation and resources.

On the other hand, formal support systems like government agencies or non-governmental provide structured assistance but may struggle to connect personally or comply with rigid policies. To harmonise them, individuals can leverage informal networks to provide emotional backing and personal insight while tapping into formal systems for resources and expertise. This could involve establishing community partnerships where formal organisations collaborate with informal networks to understand individual needs better and provide tailored support. By bridging the gap between these systems, teen mothers can access comprehensive support that addresses emotional and practical needs, fostering a more holistic approach to social support that reinforces homegrown solutions and self-coping mechanisms.

Discussion of findings

The study explored informal and formal social support systems available for single teen mothers in Gicumbi District/ Rwanda and how they can work together to assist single teen mothers holistically and in a way that strengthens homegrown solutions to overcome multifaceted problems they face. The findings revealed that to overcome their problems, single teen mothers need support from different systems. Oakley (2018) found the same when she said that in their journey, single young mothers rely on a mix of informal and formal social support systems to help them holistically meet the demands of both adolescence and motherhood. More specifically, the participants pointed out the family members as the primary respondents to problems and life stress of single teen mothers. However, their resources are very limited in catering to all their needs. Narratives showed that teen mothers turn to friends, peers, neighbours, and social institutions for emotional, material, and financial support. A particular emphasis has been put on community care cycles that changed teen mothers' mindsets regarding self-concept, mothering, income generation, and money saving. This has a special meaning, mainly because it

matches the Rwandan philosophy of homegrown solutions for self-reliance. Moreover, it reflects the circles of support model that shows the necessity of different supporters for one single teen mother to have her needs met.

Furthermore, participants pointed out various formal support systems that intervene in the lives of teen mothers. These systems focus mainly on support with a long-lasting impact (Diaz, 2018; Peterson, 2018). However, those systems also have limitations, and the study expressed why collaboration between informal and formal support systems is necessary. It ensures that urgent needs are met and the support network is more dynamic and responsive while simultaneously addressing long-term structural issues. For instance, the perception of neighbours, friends, and extended family impacts parents' reactions. So, if young people agree, the professionals open an exchange with the parents to allow free expression (Rurka et al., 2023).

The study indicated that informal networks complement formal services by providing emotional support and practical assistance adapted to the specific circumstances of single teen mothers. This fits Taylor's idea who said that coping is influenced not only by internal resources, such as coping resources and styles but also by external resources, which include time, money, education, a decent job, friends, family, standards of living, the presence of positive life events and the absence of other life stressors (Taylor, 2012). In summary, the combined efforts of informal and formal social support systems may create a more holistic environment based on social values of solidarity, mutual support, self-resilience, etc., which foster a greater likelihood of success in the parenting journey of single mothers.

Based on this study, social workers find the profound implications for social work practice with single teen mothers in coordinating formal and informal social support systems. Recognising the interplay between these networks enables social workers to develop more comprehensive and effective interventions tailored to the unique needs of every single case. This approach empowers social workers to adopt a strengths-based perspective, building upon homegrown structures within the community while advocating for systemic changes that strengthen informal and formal support systems. Through collaboration, coordination, and cultural sensitivity, social workers can create a supportive environment that empowers single teen mothers to navigate the challenges of parenthood with confidence and resilience, ultimately promoting the well-being of both mothers and their children.

This study was limited to social support systems for single teen mothers in six sectors of Gicumbi District while covering the whole district, considering all teen mothers would be more critical. Again, further researchers should explore

parenthood and parent-child relationships in single teen motherhood and how support influences those relationships.

Conclusion

Managing the challenges of single teen parenthood can be a difficult journey, especially for teenage mothers who have the responsibility of raising a child while still struggling with their adolescence. In this context, support systems play a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of the teen mother's life and that of her child. These support structures, categorized into formal and informal systems, offer unique advantages and challenges. Informal support often comes from family, friends, and community networks, providing more personal and immediate assistance. On the other hand, formal support systems, such as government programs and non-governmental organisations, offer structured aid and resources. Examining the importance of these two types of support systems, it is recommended to create a collaborative forum among them to provide a holistic impact on the well-being of single teen mothers for sustainable home-grown solutions. Social workers' involvement is recommended to coordinate care from all supporting systems and to advocate and empower single teen mothers so that they have a bright future.

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