

STRATEGIES FOR THE REDUCTION OF SCHOOL DROPOUT OF THE GIRL-CHILD DUE TO PREGNANCY

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Abstract

Statistics show that more girls drop out of school between primary and the tertiary levels of education than males. One of the major causes of female dropout is untimely pregnancy. This paper focuses on the consequences of untimely pregnancy, strategies that can be employed in the prevention of teenage pregnancy and reduction of school dropout because of pregnancy. The actual fact is, the impact of adolescent pregnancy is not only felt by the girl, her family but the society at large. Educating and keeping girls in schools or empowering them with adequate skills and vocations are imperative for national development. It is therefore recommended that systematic and accurate sex education should be introduced in the school curricular from Junior Secondary One.

Keywords: Teenage, pregnancy, school drop out

Introduction

Past studies have confirmed that adolescents engage in many risky practices like unprotected sex, sex with multiple partners, alcohol/drug abuse, gambling etc. Risky sexual practices have potential dangers like unwanted and unplanned pregnancy and Sexually Transmitted Diseases infections. The dilemma of youth pregnancy is that though the sexual act was carried out by two individuals (male and female), it is the female that carries the product of the relationship and suffer the subsequent negative consequences. Teenage pregnancy refers to pregnancy which occurs when the girl child is below the age of twenty years old and is usually out of wedlock, unplanned and unwanted. Teen pregnancy though a global burden has a higher risk in Sub-Saharan Africa with the fertility rate of 108 per 1000 births occurring among girls aged 15-19 compared to 73 in South-Asia and 72 in Latin America and the Caribbean (World Bank, 2010).

According to Egbule & Ugoji (2000) the rate of pregnancy among adolescents is on the increase, more than quarter of the adolescents aged 15-19 are pregnant or have had children; that forty three (43%) of pregnancies occur in married adolescents and that about 12% of the pregnancies are unwanted. Teen pregnancy has serious adverse effects educationally, psychologically, medically and economically on the girl- child. These effects impact the girl child, her family and the society at large who would have benefited from her contribution in the future labour market. Considering the grave present and future consequences of teenage pregnancy, a nation striving towards global economic competitiveness should be concerned. There is a strong connection between teenage pregnancies and school dropouts. Teens that become pregnant in most cases, especially in developing countries are not able to progress to high school graduation. Early pregnancy has been identified as one of the factors that keep adolescent girls out of school. It is important to keep girls in school because girls who remain in school would likely attain higher level of education which will eventually yield greater economic outcomes. In Nigeria, as soon as a girl is confirmed pregnant, she is stigmatized and expelled from the school system. With this unfriendly policy, a young girl who probably got pregnant for a fault which is not totally hers, equally suffers lack of social, emotional and academic support as she is eventually pushed out of school into the society without certificate

and unprepared for the labour market. In some advanced countries like America since 1972 when the Title IX law was enacted, it has been illegal for schools to exclude pregnant and parenting students from school (Centre for School Health and Education, 2012). It is therefore necessary as a nation to explore strategies and interventions in reducing academic wastages through pregnancy of young girls.

This paper therefore examined the causes and effects of teenage pregnancy, strategies for the prevention of teenage pregnancy and interventions to reduce school dropout among pregnant teenagers.

Causes of Teenage Pregnancy

Past studies have identified many factors responsible for teenage pregnancy. One major factor attributed to teenage pregnancy is the lack of adequate information about reproductive health, contraception and the risk of pregnancy when one is not matured. Ironically the 21st century teenagers face more sexual temptations because of the proliferation of sexually oriented content from the media than the previous generations. Despite these sexual bombardments through the media, internet, bill boards etc., an average teenager is not well equipped to handle sexual temptations. There are no general systemic planned approaches to disseminate reliable sex matters to young children in Nigeria. Many young people are even confused or deceived by peers on reproductive issues.

The teenager's attitude towards sex also impacts on his or her sexual behaviour. Teenagers who are permissive or have negative attitudes to contraceptives may likely get pregnant early. Young girls that are sexually active yet do not deliberately take any caution on pregnancy will likely get pregnant. It is not a common practice in Nigeria to educate young girls on the use of contraceptives probably because most parents are shy or deceived that their innocent looking girl has not started indulging in sexual acts. Related to this is the attitude of an adolescent to school work or performance at school. Many of those who are not interested in school life or not performing well academically, many get pregnant early as a substitute or escape route from drudgery of school (Erusegbefe, 2005)

Family factors like parental separation, parents level of education, parents socio economic status etc. have also been identified as high risk factors for teens becoming pregnant. Kirby (2002) opined that a teen living with both biological parents may not likely get pregnant early or may more likely use contraceptives than teenagers living with none or neither parents. Also, adolescents with mothers who gave birth as teens/ and or whose mothers have only secondary education are likely to equally have babies as teens than their counterparts whose mothers were older at child bearing stage or whose mothers attended tertiary institutions. Teenagers from poor or disadvantaged background are likely to have sex at an early age and also not use contraceptives. These young teenage girls from poor homes may engage in early sex as a means of meeting their needs. While their counterparts from high socio-economic background with supportive parents who have resources to support their children's long term educational and career needs might not engage in sex for economic purpose and they might likely delay early sex. Young teenagers from rich homes may also use contraceptives because they can afford it unlike their counterparts from poor homes. The values, attitudes and behavior of family members especially that of parents may likely affect teenagers' sexual behavior; where parents have permissive attitude about teenage sex or premarital sex or negative attitude about contraceptives their teenagers may likely have early and unprotected sex. On the other hand Egbule & Ugoji (2000) opined that teenagers whose parents talk to them about sex and sexuality may likely postpone sexual activity and are more likely to use contraceptives.

The environment also plays a vital role in the sexual behaviour of young people. Adolescents who live in communities with more social disorganization and fewer economic resources are more likely to engage in sex at an early age. On the other hand, teens that live in high socio-economic environment, neighborhoods with strong levels of employment are likely to be more focused and articulate and this will reduce risky sexual behaviour and increase the use of contraceptives. The negative influence of the media on the sexual behavior of young people might be difficult to document in Nigeria. The negative and uncensored information from the television, movies and magazines affect teenagers' sexual belief, attitude and behaviours.

It is certain that when an uninformed girl engages in sex the resultant effect will be unwanted and unplanned pregnancy. Thus lack of adequate information, poor environment and parental factors can lead to early unprotected sex.

Effects of Early and Untimely Pregnancy of the Girl Child

Teenage pregnancy has many negative consequences for the girl, her family, her immediate community and the nation at large. For the teen girl early pregnancy has graver consequences that affect her educationally, socially, economically and culturally. In the old traditional Africa society, a young girl who had sex prior to her wedding night was usually returned in shame to her parents for lack of proper moral upbringing. In fact the first conjugal act between married partners was usually monitored by the groom's family and there must be the evidence of 'blood stained clothes' signifying the girl's virginity. So, culturally, if pre-marital sex was frowned at, how much more pregnancy outside marriage, particularly for a young unmarried girl. A young girl who got pregnant outside marriage was stigmatized and punished. The girl and her family face shame and stigma from the society. There is the stigma of promiscuity and second hand value attached to her personality. The normal African society has set a high values on virginity, post-marriage child birth and early pre-marital child birth is socially unaccepted, thus the teenage mother is looked upon as 'loose' and promiscuous. The introduction of Western Education has made girls to be in school like their male counterparts, thus you find teenagers in Middle or high schools. Our school policy particularly from Primary to Secondary does not permit or allow pregnant girls to remain in school except where it is not discovered by the relevant authorities. The first thing that happens particularly in Nigeria, when a teen is confirmed pregnant is to drop out of school through expulsion. This drop out of school leads to a major interruption of her educational pursuit. Chalasani, Kelly, Mensch & Soler Hampesek (2002) found in their study that girls who dropout or miss school because of pregnancy are less likely to return than their counterparts who drop out for other reasons. In a report by the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (2011) it was found that 50% of teen mothers receive a high school diploma by age 22 compared to nearly 90% who did not give birth during adolescent.

Aside dropping out of school, the adolescent girl is now left with just two options: to abort or to have the baby. Both options have its consequences; the former (abortion) may lead to death or other health complications particularly since it is mostly done in secrets and probably by quack medical personnel. Many young girls have lost their lives in the abortion process and some others have developed other health complications. When the young girl decides to keep the pregnancy as noted earlier, the school system does not have provision to keep pregnant girls in school, so she drops out and truncate a bright academic pursuit and future. This truncated academic prospect has devastated economic consequences for the girl and the nation at large. It reduces the opportunity of the young girl for socio-economic mobility. A girl who attains a high school and progress to acquire post-secondary education over the cause of a lifetime will earn more than a high school dropout. Alliance for Excellent Education (2008) estimated that over the cause of a lifetime, a single high school dropout cost the nation

approximately \$260,000.

The babies born to teenage mothers also partake in the negative consequences of teenage pregnancy. They may likely suffer higher risk of medical problems such as low birth weight due to improper fetus growth or early delivery. They may likely have the following problems:

Have fewer skills and be less prepared to learn when they enter kindergarten. Have behavioural problems and chronic medical conditions. Rely more heavily on publicly funded health care. Be incarcerated at sometimes during adolescence. Be unemployed or underemployed as young adult. Drop out of high school. Give birth as a teenager. (National Centre for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion 2011)

The community and the society at large also pay the price of early teenage pregnancy. The truncated academic prospect and socio-economic mobility of the girl child reduces the total expectation of her generation to the central pool. Many young girls who drop out of school because of pregnancy do not have certificate or skill that can enhance their been gainfully employed, thus they become liabilities and dependent on others for survival or some engage in menial jobs that cannot adequately sustain them and their babies.

Early child bearing has serious health and medical consequences on the teenager. There is the likelihood that the teenager may develop health challenges like Vesico Virginal Fisrulae (WF), obstetric complications, anemia, etc. Some of these health challenges may lead to untimely death or future child bearing future complications. Teenage pregnancy may likely lead to early marriage. The young girl is hush- hush and rushed into marriage unprepared. The findings of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy (NCTP, 2011) showed that teen marriages are twice as likely to end in divorces.

Strategies for the Prevention of Pregnancy among Teenage Girls

The burden of teenage pregnancy is grave on the teenager, her family and the society, thus it is imperative to develop interventions and strategies in preventing teenage pregnancy. There is the need to design and promote programmes that will help teenagers develop protective factors.. According NCTP (2011) examples of protective factors include:

- Perception of HIV risk
- Personal values about sex and abstinence.
- Attitude towards condom use.
- Individual ability to refuse sex or limit the partners.
- Communication with parents or other adults about sex, condoms and contraception.
- Individual ability to avoid risk and risk behaviours associated with HIV and other STD's.
- Avoidance of places and situations that might lead to sex.
- Intent to use a condom.

Such programmes should be evidence- based, medically accurate and age appropriate and it should run from basic classes to upper basic through to high school. Children and youths should receive sex education as part of the school curricular or youth development programmes (for youths not in school) to prevent teen pregnancy or reduce associated behavioural risk factors. Some States (Colorado, North Carolina etc) in the United States of America developed scientifically and medically accurate curricular that stress abstinence and discuss the health benefits of using contraception. In fact in 2009, North Carolina enacted a law requiring all students from grades 7-9 to receive comprehensive sex education unless their parents object. In Nigeria years ago, Sexuality Education was introduced and taught by School

Counsellors in Lagos State Public Secondary Schools but was later scraped. Equipping young people with adequate sex education knowledge will help them make informed sex decision which eventually will prevent teen pregnancy. Sexuality Education should be introduced as a school subject from Basic School to High school and it should be taught by School counsellors or psychologists. It should cover courses on sex, health, relationships, values, communication and assertiveness, goal setting and decision making. The subject should appear on the regular school time table. Interested stakeholders, faith based organization and NGO's interested in young girls completing high school can organize out of school programmes where they cover similar topics in the comprehensive sex education subject. This will reinforce the school's effort and young girls will be able to make informed decision. Abstinence should be emphasized among young people and use of contraceptives for those who cannot abstain.

Young boys and girls should be provided with opportunities of partaking in community service projects that will benefit their community, projects like this will keep them busy, productive, focused, acquire skills, discover their own strength and recognize their power to effect change (Shuger, 2012). When young people are profitably busy, they will have limited time for unprofitable venture. The schools should put in place strategies to get parents involved in the teaching of sex education. This can be achieved through the parent- teachers' forum or School Based Management Board of each school. The activities of the parent-teachers' forum should be well coordinated so that parents and other significant adults will be exposed to the importance of sex education, and the roles and support they have to play.

Special services targeted at girls should be set up at school levels and outside school programmes. Programmes similar to Girls Inc. of Memphis should offer activities to build girls capacity for college preparedness, responsible adulthood, economic independence, and personal fulfillment .Girls Inc. of Memphis as reported by (Shiger 2012) focuses on six areas, one of which is health and sexuality. It offers Prevention of Adolescent Pregnancy Programmes in elementary, middle and high schools. These programmes enable girls identify ways and reasons to avoid early pregnancy and prevent sexually transmitted infections. The programme includes three age appropriate components: Growing together for Elementary school students; Will Power, for Middle school students and Taking Care of Business for high school students. Interested stake holders and NGO's should be encouraged to set up outfits like this within and outside the schools. Though we have some organizations like The Girls Guide and Brownies in some schools but only few girls are members. Such girls focused groups should target all girls with well-articulated and evidence based programmes that will prevent or reduce early pregnancy and school dropout.

There should be intense research efforts by researchers and schools to provide data on rates of teen pregnancy, girls' school dropout, pairing teen birth and drop out statistics together in a format that will make stakeholders draw connections between these two issues. The data of such research effort should be made public so that stakeholders can be made aware of the connection between teen pregnancy and school dropout. Evidence based connection can spur more result oriented actions that will eventually reduce or prevent teen birth and school dropout. The Ministries of Education, Health and Women Affairs should set up a Pregnancy Prevention central monitoring unit that will coordinate all the agencies, programmes within and outside the school on pregnancy prevention and school dropout among young girls. It is imperative for a nation to have a systematic policy framework for pregnancy prevention among young people. The primary goal of this Pregnancy Prevention Programme therefore will be to design, deliver, coordinate and strengthen the relationship between those working to improve educational attainment of young girls thereby reducing teen pregnancy/ birth rates and high school dropout rates (Shuger 2012). This unit should also organize professional

development programmes for teachers in basic, middle and secondary school to provide professional development training for science and physical education teachers who teach sex education in schools. The consistent training will increase their knowledge on key topics in sex education and their ability to deliver the content effectively to their students.

Reducing School Dropout among Teenage girls due to Pregnancy

In spite of all interventions in the reduction of pregnancy among young girls, some may still get pregnant and have babies. It is therefore imperative to put interventions in place to reduce school dropout among young girls who in spite of efforts get pregnant. The Nigerian educational system before now does not accommodate re-entry for girls who get pregnant. The norm is to send them away from school. It is advantageous educationally and economically to keep girls in school to complete high school and possibly obtain post-secondary degrees. Educating the girl-child is so important and synonymous to educating a nation, which is why more than 50% of the Millennium Development Goals focus on women. Therefore pregnant teens must be helped to complete high school or post-secondary degrees, there is the need to come with programmes and services that will help them return to school after the delivery of their babies.

There is the need to provide grants for pregnant and parenting teens to enable graduate In the USA. Girls generally should be educated on the disadvantages of teenage pregnancy so that they do not see this scheme as a plausible one. Pregnancy Assistance Funds runs services where they provide grants to States and Tribes to provide pregnant and parenting teens and women with a network of support services to help them complete high school or post-secondary degrees through access to health care, child care, family housing and other critical support including information about how to prevent subsequent unplanned pregnancy (Shuger 2012). The National Pregnancy Prevention Unit suggested earlier must equally come up with a policy that will make grants available to pregnant teen girls. This grant will be made available to care for the health and well-being of the teenage mothers who are abandoned. Also, the policy should make provision for their return to school to complete high school or post-secondary degree. It should still be possible to re-engage teen mothers in the school process through programmes designed for them to transit back to the school environment.

There should also be provision for teen girls who have not been doing well academically and desire out of school programmes to go to alternative schools or Vocational Training Centres to acquire skills that will be useful in empowering them economically. For those who have recently drop out of school, there should be information about alternative routes to attaining high school certificates and other diploma programmes. Such programmes should have flexible school hours, work opportunities, child care, low teacher- student ratios to ensure more individual support, individual and group counseling and mentoring (Hale & Canter, 1998)

The National Open University Centre for Life Long Learning and Workplace Training (CLLWT) programme is opened to those who have dropped out of school either recently or long ago. The focus of CLLWT is to provide open distance and technology mediated learning to the vulnerable populace ; the less privilege, literate and semi-literate, the out of school youths etc who are by the very nature and design of their environment denied access to formal and/or further education. NOUN is in almost all the states in Nigeria, so school dropouts in any State in Nigeria can benefit from CLLWT of NOUN. CLLWT is the only department of NOUN with a mandate to extend access to education at all levels for people who otherwise would have been denied university education due to insufficient entry qualification, as it offers certificate and diploma courses that can qualify learners for entry into University

degree programmes. It also offers short term proficiency courses which require no previous experience. Even for certificate and diploma courses, the entry qualification is as low as J.S.III or age maturity. The CLLWT operates on the usual Open Distance Learning (ODL) aspects and characteristics, it is:

- Open Learning
- Distance Learning
- Flexible Learning
- On-line and e-learning
- Virtual Learning

CLLWT programme offers Pre-Foundation and Foundation courses for students who do not have acceptable tertiary entry requirement to remedy their deficiencies necessary for tertiary study. CLLWT programme is administered through the flexible study mode, self-study packs that are comprehensive and carefully designed to cater for the needs of these kinds of learners. So teens that have dropped out of school at whatever point in the past can benefit from the programmes. They can remedy their deficiencies and proceed to acquire Post-Secondary degrees and diplomas. This will enhance their opportunities in the labour market.

Suggestions and recommendations:

Based on the discourse in this paper the following recommendations are made:

- The school and other relevant stakeholders should increase the access of young girls to systematic and accurate information on sex and reproduction education.
- Sexuality education should be introduced as a school subject. It should be comprehensive, accurate and reliable.
- The policy of expelling pregnant girls from school should be revoked. It should be made illegal to expel a child because of pregnancy, schools should help pregnant girls workout how they can continue after delivery. Though they should stay at home during pregnancy and lactating period.
- The government should make provision for grants to assist pregnant girls and teens complete high school or earn post-secondary degrees. The grants should also help the baby gain access to health care, child care, family housing and other critical support. Some may frown at this kind of provision that it would encourage many teens to indulge in risky sexual behaviour. On the contrary it would help to preserve the future nation's workforce and leaders who in spite of all precautions found themselves with babies early.
- More alternative school should be set up. This alternative school should not offer substandard curricular or only skill acquisition courses. There should be programmes for the girl child who wants to advance to tertiary institution to obtain needed entry certificate like Senior Secondary School Certificate (SSCE) or National Education Certificate (NECO). There should also be creche in these alternative centers where the teens' babies are cared for by experienced baby soothers or nannies and health workers..
- Stakeholders should devise strategies and interventions on prevention of teen pregnancy and when pregnancy occurs teens should be encouraged to finish high school and attain post-secondary education when possible.

Conclusion

The role of women in a nation's economic development cannot be overemphasized, for women to make this contribution, obtaining secondary school certificate and post-secondary degrees is not negotiable. There must therefore be collaborative work across sectors to improve secondary school graduation through prevention of teenage pregnancy. The school must introduce comprehensive sex education into the curricula to aid young people especially girls in making informed sex decisions. The government should enact a policy that will make it illegal for schools to exclude or expel pregnant or parenting students from school. For those who have dropped out already, the new policy should accommodate their re-entry to the school environment. They can key into the National Open University CLLWT for diploma and degree programmes. Educational or vocational experience of the girl child could improve medium and long term outcomes such as literacy, numeracy and labour force participation (Chalasan, Kelly, Mensah & Soler-Hampejsek 2013) Educating the girl child will prevent future economic wastage thus early child birth should not truncate the promising future of the teenage girl

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