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Teenage pregnancy: The cost of seeking our pound of flesh

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Abstract

The disturbing effects of unplanned teenage pregnancy coupled with the damage done by societal stigmatization often lead to deep and, sometimes, lifelong psychological, mental, emotional and physical trauma. All-round support rather than stereotyping would give these teen girls wings to fly again.

Keywords: Africa, Stereotyping, Stigmatization, Support, Teenage mother, Teenage pregnancy, teen girls

Introduction

Teenage girls who stumble accidentally into motherhood through youthful exuberance, romance inquisitiveness, or rape encounter brutal labelling, stereotyping, discrimination and stigmatization by the African society. They face unrelenting moral judgment, shunning, and shaming from their close relatives and friends. Many people believe these girls deserve punishment, punitive, and harsh measures (Whitehead, 2001), so they can learn their lessons as well as serve as a deterrent for other girls. The majority of the hurt and disappointed family members and friends take some stances that can further jeopardize the future of these teens and their children. Most of these girls suffer deep emotional, psychological, mental, and physical trauma due to incessant societal rejection and stigmatization. Therefore, to avoid stigmatization, some stop attending schools, antenatal appointments, social or religious gatherings. Shut out of necessary support systems, they become isolated, stranded, depressed, and more vulnerable. With nowhere to turn, some commit suicide, while some are thrown to the boys who impregnated them, and they suddenly become wives and mothers. Some of these girls die from domestic violence, while some die during childbirth or suffer serious complications. Some even sell out their children. With the support of their families and friends gone into the thin air, they are abandoned to face the cruelty of life! Some of these girls do not make it back to school or continue the apprenticeship they once were enrolled in. Life becomes difficult for them and their babies.

Although many studies have shown that many factors contribute to the increasing number of teen pregnancies in the society (Mangâ€™matu & Kisimbii, 2019), we only want to dump our anger on these "culprits" who have disappointed us. Meanwhile, many teens and youths are committing unsafe abortions to escape our wrath, whereby, many have lost their lives.



Source: Internet

Fig 1

Most times, African society forgets that it takes two to tangle. They spare the boys who impregnated these beauties and indict only the pregnant girls because the majority of people believe that females who engage in premarital sex should be negatively assessed than males (Crawford and Popp, 2003). This situation warrants challenge as it is a major source of social exclusion, serious emotional, mental, and psychological trauma capable of having lifelong impacts on pregnant teenagers and their children if not appropriately interrupted.

Recommendations

Stigmatization Awareness

The purpose of stigmatization awareness is not to promote or excuse teenage pregnancy and the resultant unprepared journeys to motherhood; rather, it is to sensitize people about the negative effects of stigmatization on pregnant teens/teen mothers. Families, schools, religious bodies, and the African government should be passionate about this damage control strategy because some negative effects of stigma on teenage mothers may be difficult to manage and may affect their children in many ways, as the quality of emotional, physical, health and spiritual care afforded the accidental mothers may influence the health of their children. Community awareness programs will help to empower people to give up toxic attitudes and support pregnant and young moms. This can be achieved through the traditional (radio and TV jingles, role-plays, fliers adapted to local languages, and newspaper advert/editorials) and social media campaigns.

It is essential to support these teenagers so they would not miss their dreams and aspirations in life. Everyone deserves a second chance!

Expansive Support

It would be beneficial if the African government can uptake policies that will encourage and support young mom's return to school after child delivery. These policies should look into feasible childcare arrangements, flexible classroom schedules, and training of heads of schools on how to create zero tolerance for stigmatization in school environments. Furthermore, the importance of the healthcare sector in

safeguarding the lives of pregnant/nursing teens and their children cannot be overemphasized. There should be provision of infrastructures and training of healthcare workers to provide friendlier healthcare and counselling services through antenatal and post-natal clinic sessions designed just for pregnant and teenage mothers devoid of stigmatization, judgment, and discrimination. Community nurses and healthcare workers may also provide home service follow-up care for pregnant teenagers and teenage mothers. Training and empowerment of the community and religious leaders to support parents of pregnant/teenage moms through counselling and the creation of support groups will be helpful. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) with related vision could help by offering mentorship programs and financial assistance to aid return to school, apprenticeship re-enrolment, or trading capital.

Shift of Focus

Yakubu et al identified common factors influencing teenage pregnancy in Sub-Africa as:

- **Sociocultural factors** such as: peer influence; poverty; religion; early marriage; early sexual debut; lack of parental guidance; parental neglect; unwanted sexual advances from adult males; coercive sexual relations; unequal gender power relations; absence of affordable or free education; lack of comprehensive sexuality education; non-use of contraceptives; male's responsibility to buy condoms; and inappropriate forms of recreation.
- **Individual factors** such as: excessive alcohol use; substance abuse; low educational status and self-esteem; curiosity; inability to resist sexual temptation; and excessive cell phone usage.
- **Health service-related factors** such as: lack of comprehensive sexuality education; contraceptives cost; contraceptives myths; inadequate skilled health workers; long waiting time and lack of privacy at clinics; and non-friendly adolescent reproductive services.

Instead of using the weapon of stigmatization to shame pregnant adolescents into penury, so they could serve as

deterrents for other girls, we should rather focus on how to design appropriate intervention programs to prevent/minimize identified factors influencing teenage pregnancy in Africa.

Conclusively, an isolated event of accidental pregnancy is not supposed to attract such a capital punishment such as a shattered dream and vision. It is time to challenge the toxic attitudes that blindly reject, stigmatize and discriminate against pregnant teenagers and teenage mothers in the African society. With appropriate support and care, pregnant teenagers/teenage mothers can achieve their dreams in life.

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