Predictors of teenagers' pregnancies in Rwanda: Evidence from selected Districts

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ABSTRACT

This quantitative study aims to assess factors which contribute to teen pregnancies and identify mechanisms which can be used to address it. Findings demonstrate that poverty was found to be the major factor of teens' pregnancies, parents should educate them about working hard and be the source of their economic transformation instead of relying on individuals who manipulate them. Concerning mechanisms which can be used to address teenagers' pregnancies, the study suggested that there is a need of raising parents' awareness of the importance of having quality time with their children especially at teenager age, being closer to them in order to make regular follow up on challenges they face related to their physiological changes especially at teenage age. This would help them understand what is happening in their bodies and guide them towards appropriate behavior.

Introduction

Teenagers' pregnancy is a global issue which affects the lives of future generations whereby social and economic power of teen mothers is undermined. It has been revealed that an average of 16 million of girls aged between 15 and 19 give birth every year (WHO, 2018; Kalaylioglu, 2020). Covid -19 worsened the situation of early pregnancies in developing countries due to sudden closure of schools. It has socially and economically affected the Rwandan population which increased the number of teen mothers (Umumararungu & Bazubagira, 2021).

Statistics reveal that number of victims of sexual abuse was amplified. In Gasabo District, 1,064 teenagers were sexually abused from which 444 (41.7%) were impregnated (Cousins, 2019; Bizoza & Sibomana, 2020, Uwizeye et al., 2020). The phenomenon of teen mothers cannot be addressed by single efforts. It requires a combination of efforts from different stakeholders involved in children rights and development. Despite different researches conducted to address causes and consequences, there is still a need of exploring predictors of teenagers' pregnancies in the context of Rwanda so as to deal with push factors and propose related solutions. Thus, the need of conducting a research which intends to examine predictors of teenagers' pregnancies as well as mechanisms to address it arises.

Teenagers' pregnancies constitute a major challenge which has raised the attention of writers and educational stakeholders. The phenomenon is being amplified by different push factors which make teens impregnated.

The purpose of the study was to assess factors which contribute to teen pregnancies and identify mechanisms which can be used to address it. The study is justified by the need of assessing causes and suggesting solutions which intend to reduce the phenomenon of teen mothers which hinders social and economic development. The study is guided by two objectives:

  i.   Examine factors which contribute to teen pregnancies; and

ii.   Find out mechanisms which can be used to address the phenomenon of teen mothers.

Respondents were sampled from five Districts by considering 40 in each and 200 respondents were randomly selected. Poverty, carelessness, rape, lack of information about reproductive health, attempt to love, peer influence and lack of parental attachment in all its angles were highlighted to be the main causes of early pregnancies. Considering the age group of people who impregnate teens, findings confirmed adults to be at the top. A big number of teen mums get impregnated between the interval age of fifteen and eighteen.

Literature review

Various studies related to the topic under discussion as well as related theories were reviewed. Literature review section presents theoretical background, conceptual framework and empirical review.

Theoretical background

Social Learning Theory has been explored and guided the discussion. This part explains the construction of the theory on which the research is grounded. The necessity of exploring Social Learning Theory (SLT) is of paramount importance to discuss the context of teenagers' pregnancies. SLT is relevant to the present research as it elucidates the complexity of factors contributing to teenagers' pregnancies.

Social Learning Theory

The section discusses Social Learning Theory (SLT) which the research is based on. SLT highlights the necessity of observation, modeling and imitating attitudes and reaction of others as influencing one's behavior. It states that human behavior results from the interaction between cognitive and environmental factors (Kilinç et al., 2018; Deming & Johnson, 2019; Rumjaun & Narod, 2020). Thus, for the case of teenagers' pregnancies, it results from what they see and observe in their environment which makes teenagers adopt sexual behavior. Children learn by imitating their surrounding; they need to be supported by positive behavior for their future developmental opportunities. Children are great imitators, give them something great to imitate (Bazubagira & Umumararungu, 2023). It is mostly what children observe, touch, sense, see and hear around which shape their values and beliefs. It is social integration that ensures continuity and consensus of shared values in the community (Argyriadis, 2021). However, a child may benefit from an adequate education from his/her family but still s/he is influenced by schools, friends and social media. Thus, an effective way is to dispose with appropriate education at different levels which make a child's environment safe and inspiring positive behavior. 'Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it' (Proverbs 22:6).

Conceptual framework

The figure clarifies Social Learning Theory path which leads to the adoption of a certain behavior. SLT passes through different stages whereby a child observes with much attention the surrounding environment. It affects the way of thinking (cognitive) and choice of values, norms and beliefs. Children absorb, retain and find out motives of adopting surrounding conduct or misconduct which leads to behavioral imitation or reproduction. Teenagers adopt sexual behavior as a result of what they see others doing. They do not invent any behavior; they only watch, internalize, imitate and reproduce (Bandura, 2021).
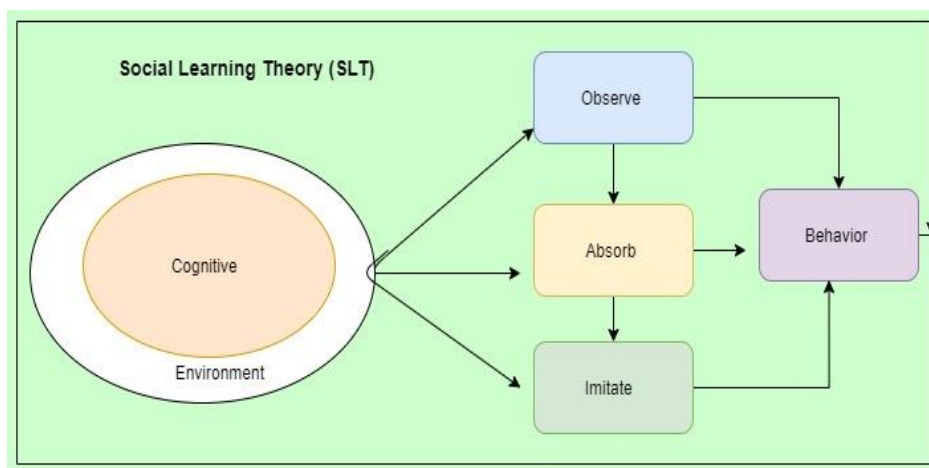

Figure 1: Social Learning Theory (SLT) path

Empirical review

For a good understanding of the topic under study, related studies were examined. This part reviews studies which assessed teenagers' pregnancies phenomenon and factors associated with it.

Uwizeye et al. (2020) examined the prevalence of teenage pregnancy and the associated contextual correlates in Rwanda. The study used secondary data to analyze household factors which are associated with teenage pregnancies in Rwanda. Descriptive analysis and regression models were used to assess the level of association between teenage pregnancy and household socio-economic characteristics. Results indicated that marital status, age of household head and size, number of bedrooms and educational level of household-head were significantly impacting the rate of teenagers' pregnancies. Furthermore, the study revealed that lack of social and economic support to teen girls which include parental supervision, guidance and financial care were contributing to the increment of teenage pregnancy rates.

Discussing factors associated with adolescent pregnancy in the Sunyani Municipality of Ghana, (Asare et al., 2019) highlighted the necessity of addressing the issue as it affects socially and economically the life of teen mothers and their children. Data were collected from 245 respondents using structured questionnaire survey and analyzed using STATA. It was found that disadvantaged adolescent girls from rural areas are the most affected. Various factors including societal and traditional norms, sexual abuse and living in a violent community, low level of education and peer pressure have been identified to be the major causes of adolescent pregnancies.

Ochen et al. (2019) conducted a study on predictors of teenage pregnancy among girls aged 13-19 in Uganda. Data were collected through structured questionnaire from 480 respondents selected through simple random sampling. The results indicated that multiple sexual partners, frequent sex and irregular contraceptive use contributed to the increment of teenagers' pregnancies. Moreover, familial factors such as being forced to get married at teenager age, peer pressure, sexual abuse and lack of control over sex were push factors to teenagers' pregnancies.

Donkor & Lariba (2017) carried out a research on the impact of sex education on teenage pregnancy in basic schools of Bawku municipal district in Ghana. The study aimed at assessing how sex education could lessen teenage pregnancies in the Bawku-East Municipality. The sample size of the study was 139 respondents. Questionnaires, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and observation were used to collect data. Findings revealed that lack of sufficient information about biological changes that take place at teenager age contributed to unplanned pregnancies. The phenomenon brings serious developmental and socio-economic implications. The study revealed that poor parenting, poverty and peer influence were the major causes of teenagers' pregnancies in the study area.

Basing on literature and empirical review related to the topic under study, the research findings aimed at verifying the following hypotheses:

H1: Inadequate parental education and support, poverty, sexual violence, lack of information about sexual and reproductive health, dysfunctional families and social media contribute to teenage pregnancies.

H2: Parents' attachment to children, provision of psychological, emotional and financial support, education to reproductive health can reduce the phenomenon of teen mums.

Research and methodology

The research was conducted in Rwanda and five Districts from five Provinces were randomly selected. In each District, two Sectors (one in rural and another in urban areas) were considered. The five Districts from which respondents were sampled include Rwamagana, Kicukiro, Muhanga, Rusizi and Musanze. In each District, 40 respondents (teen mothers) were randomly selected that is, the sample was constituted by 200 respondents. Parents of teen mothers were also part of respondents whereby 10 parents participated in the study. In addition to teen mothers and their parents, 10 local leaders in each District were considered which gives a total of 50 parents and 50 local leaders. Data were collected both qualitatively and quantitatively that is, mixed approach was used (Gupta & Gupta, 2022). Questionnaire and interview with teen mothers, their parents/guardians, local leaders were used for data collection. Quantitative data were presented in graphs generated from excel. Content analysis was also used to systematically categorize, classify and summarize qualitative data (Saunders et al., 2019).

Findings and Discussion

The section presents data related to factors contributing to teen pregnancies and mechanisms which can be used to address the phenomenon of teen mothers. Among 200 distributed questionnaires, 176 were returned which gives a response rate of 88%.
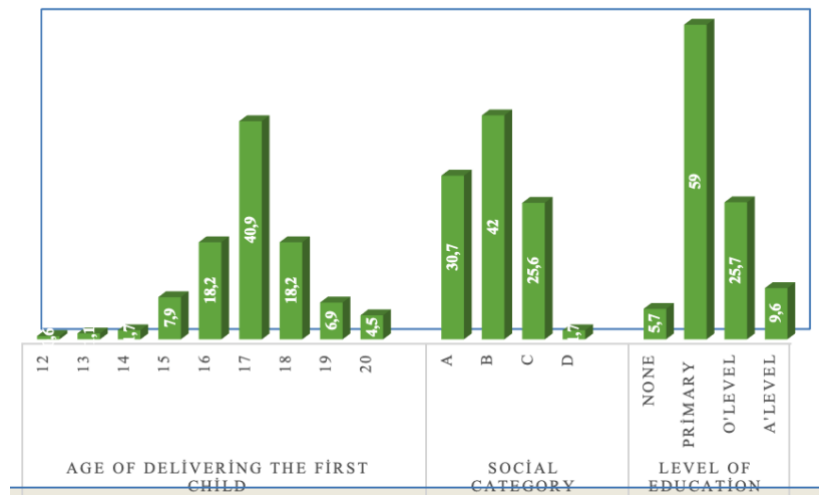
Figure 2: Characteristics of teen mothers

Findings from figure 2 indicate that a big number of teens get impregnated before the age of 18 which represents 70.4 % and one of them got pregnancy at the age of 12. This implies that at teenage age, they become responsible of their children while they are still young to take this heavy responsibility. This constitutes a burden to teen mothers which hinders their wellbeing and enjoyment of their young age. Data confirm the hugeness of the phenomenon of teen mothers which is a big challenge to their development, their children and their families as well.

As far as respondents' social category is concerned, respondents from very poor families are 30.7%, poor 42%, middle class 25.6% and higher class 1.7%. It was revealed that the majority of respondents (72.7%) belong to poor families which confirm poverty to be a significant push factor to early pregnancies.

Considering the education level of respondents, 59% completed primary schools, 25.7% completed O' level, 9.6% completed A level. Besides, there is a considerable number of girls who are illiterate (5.7%). This implies that inadequate parental support to education constitutes a major factor of teenage pregnancies whereby a big number of teens got pregnancies after school dropout.
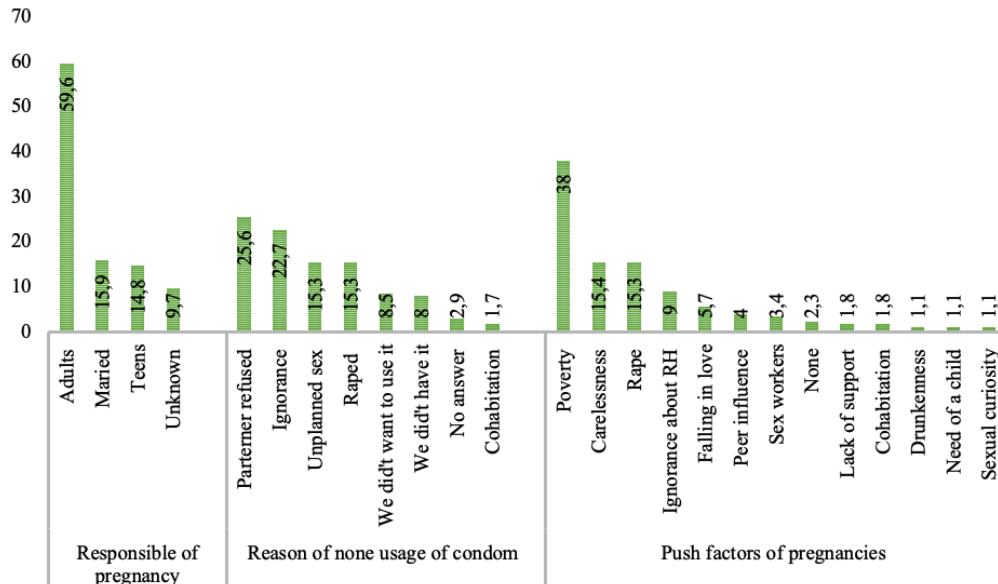

Figure 3: Push factors of early pregnancies

Taking into consideration the age of people who impregnated teens, figure 3 indicates that the majority are adults who represent 75.5 % among which 15.9 % are married. Those who were impregnated by people of the same age are 14.8 % and 9.7% of respondents were impregnated by people they do not know which implies the problem of identity crisis of their children.

As far as reason of none usage of condoms is concerned, 25.6% replied that the partner refused because it was a paid sex, 22.7% did not have information about condoms, 15.3% got unplanned sex, 15.3% were raped, 8.5% did not want to use condoms, 8% were not in the possession of condoms, 1.7% cohabitated and 2.9 % did not answer to the question. On the top of causes of teenage pregnancies comes the manipulation of adults who were supposed to provide guidance to teens and instead, disorient and lead them to becoming mothers at young age.

Regarding push factors to early pregnancies, 38% who constitute the majority of respondents asserted that they got pregnancies because of poverty, 15.4% mentioned that it was due to carelessness, 15.3% were raped, 9% confirmed that their pregnancies was due to lack of information on reproductive health, 5.7 % were in love, 4% confirmed that they were influenced by peers, 3.4% of respondents were sex workers, 1.8% did not have someone to care about them, 1.8 % cohabitated, 1.1% were pushed by sexual curiosity, 1.1% were in need of children and 1.1% were drunk.

Local leaders supported what was mentioned by parents and stressed that early pregnancies are grounded on poverty, family conflicts, lack of parental moral, emotional, psychological and financial support. The results of the study are in line with the findings of previous researchers who emphasized that poverty is at the top of teen pregnancies (Lambani, 2015; Asare et al., 2019; Singh & Naicker, 2019; Lee et al., 2021). Family conflict has also been mentioned by all respondents to be a major push factor of teen pregnancies. The family environment is key in shaping children's behavior and decision-making (Umumararungu & Bazubagira, 2020) and this has been highlighted by the Ministry of Family and Gender Promotion during the 18th National Retreat held from 27th to 28th February, 2023. Local leaders and parents accentuated that parents have abdicated their educational responsibilities which brought huge consequences among family members. They stressed that poverty, domestic violence, lack of information about girls' physiological changes, uncontrolled usage of social media, attraction to on fashion materials which are beyond their financial capacity, peer pressure and indiscipline were highlighted among major factors which contribute to teenage pregnancies. The results revealed that lack of appropriate education to reproductive health enlarged the phenomenon of teenagers' pregnancies as pointed out by previous findings (Donkor & Lariba, 2017; Yakubu & Salisu, 2018).

Most of families that are supposed to assist teen mothers in establishing new ways of thinking, solving problems, developing good relationship and decision making are not offering that platform (Bazubagira & Umumararungu, 2023). Not only families but also the society at large marginalizes teen mothers which make them feel abandoned. One of the mechanisms which can be used to address teenagers' pregnancies is family empowerment that can improve the family capacity to support their children financially, socially and emotionally. Awareness on girls' education among poor families is of paramount necessity to educate and give them power over the control of their sexuality. It has been observed through answers from teen mothers, their parents/guardians and local leaders that there is a gap in primary and secondary education on reproductive health. Thus, an emphasis on reproductive health in basic education could considerably reduce the phenomenon of early pregnancies. Appropriate education including family education promotes a healthier environment where girls are educated to balance their decisions and avoid manipulation of any kind like gifts, financial support, sweet words from those who have hidden agenda of abusing their innocence and ignorance. Successful education on consequences of drunkenness and belonging to bad groups is of paramount importance. Developing an attachment between parents-children would help teens listen and follow their parents'/guardians' advice and use condoms in case of necessity and thus reduce the risk of early pregnancies.

Using existing Rwandan community platforms on creating awareness among parents to be responsible of their children's education with a particular focus on girls can be a great mechanism to deal with early pregnancies. It has also been noticed that developing a friendly relationship parent-child, control the usage of children's after-class time as highlighted by local leaders and parents during interview can be a good approach to lessen the phenomenon. Having a family time where parents have a regular talk about reproductive health with their children could provide trustable information on teens' biological changes.

Conclusion

The study examined factors contributing to teenagers' pregnancies and mechanisms which can be used to address it. The study revealed that poverty, lack of information on reproductive health are major factors to teenagers' pregnancies. Moreover, lack of parental attachment and guidance to children's moral, psychological, emotional, financial support and envying on fashion things which are beyond teen's financial income are push factors which facilitate adults to manipulate teens and impregnate them. The phenomenon of teenagers' pregnancies is amplified by different factors and its implications are huge. It worsens economic situation of families whereby teen mothers are not economically able to support their children which push them to become sex workers and being engaged in illegal activities as survival way. Furthermore, children from teen mothers suffer from the problem of identity crisis as it was revealed that a big number of teen mothers are impregnated by adults who prevent them to reveal it. Parents should be role models of their children and support them by creating a healthier family environment and provide positive behavior for their children's stability and good imitation. They also need to be close to their children, educate them on living according to their level of financial income. In addition, programs aiming at educating teenagers to reproductive health would help them understand their biological changes and adopt appropriate behavior.

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