

Poverty the Cause of Teenage Pregnancy in Thulamela Municipality

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KEYWORDS Adolescent. Financial Security. Sex. Parents. Knowledge

ABSTRACT The majority of South Africans who live in the rural areas are poverty stricken as they are unemployed and mostly depend on grants. Poverty among children is said to be extremely high and therefore government policies promote poverty alleviation by offering Child Support Grants (CSG). The present paper seeks to investigate whether or not CSGs influences young teenage girls to fall pregnant in order to gain access to the grant money. The investigation was prompted by the fact that every beginning of the month at Thohoyandou (South Africa) shopping complex the researcher would come across long queues of teenage mothers at the banks with babies on their backs. Therefore, the purpose of the paper was to explore and get from 'the horses' mouths' whether or not poverty is the major cause of the teenage pregnancy. A qualitative research methodology has been employed using a questionnaire with a list of ten questions that are related to the causes of teenage pregnancy. Ten (10) participants responded orally to the questions. Although, the participants agreed that other factors also played a role, they agreed that poverty was the major (80%) reason teenagers fall pregnant. It is therefore, recommended that young children receive support straight from the government through education. The issues of sexuality, and teenage pregnancy and poverty alleviation should be included in the curriculum as early as the Foundation Grades.

INTRODUCTION

Teenage pregnancy can occur in females between the ages of 13 and 19 years. This can happen to girls who have not completed their core education, that is, secondary school, and do not have marketable working skills. These are the girls who are financially dependent upon their parents and/or continue to live at home and are mentally immature (Segen 2012; Smith 2014). Falling pregnant during this period makes it harder for the girls who come from poor backgrounds to break the cycle of poverty (Ipantenco 2014). About 7.3 million girls under 18 years of age give birth every year in developing countries. Issues of poverty, poor education, a lack of contraceptive advice and the practice of child marriage play a part (France-Press 2013).

UNPF (2013) reports that 95 percent of teenagers giving birth have access to birth control. In the United States, girls aged 14 and under have children each year and underage pregnancy is becoming a global crisis. IRIN (2007), and Taylor et al. (2014) report that South Africa has a huge teen pregnancy problem. One in three girls has had a baby by the age of 20. Skosana (2013) and Francis and DePalma (2014) also add that South African girls between 15 and 19 years of age have been pregnant at least once.

Poverty refers to the lack of resources necessary for survival (SPII 2007). The fight against poverty in South Africa is supported by the country's constitution through social security. Everyone has the right to have access to social security. For those who are unable to support themselves and their dependents, appropriate social assistance is offered. Half the population, 22 million South Africans, live in poverty (Poverties 2011; Younge 2014). A child support grant is a kind of grant that is paid by the South African government to mothers who are unemployed and cannot afford to feed their children. It is usually given to girls who fall pregnant at an early age and also to children whose parents are unemployed (Child Support Grant 2013). The cash grant is meant to directly support the children in order to reduce the poverty vulnerability of children living in poor households. Some young girls intentionally fall pregnant or do not abstain from sex or do not have protected sex, because they know that the government will assist them (Child Support Grant Evaluation 2010).

Causes of Teenage Pregnancy

There are several factors which contribute to the causes of teenage pregnancy, but seems

to be one of the major causes among girls from poor communities. The causes of pregnancy in this paper include culture, financial security, lack of education and relationships. All these causes have, in one way or another, something to do with poverty.

Cultural Influence

Cultures have influence on how early girls should fall pregnant or get married. If girls are in a community where girls get married young they are all obliged to follow suit. Erosion of African traditional norms and values on sexual behaviour, inadequate involvement of women in decision making on issues concerning reproductive health and the prevalence of female circumcision cause women to have unplanned babies. Forced marriages practised in certain cultures culminate in girls having babies at tender ages. Some families put pressure on their children to get married when they are still too young. Cultural nuances such as children born of teenage parents choosing the same path as their parents or having a family member in prison (Brown 1999; Whalen and Loper 2014) can add to the concerns. The more the children in a family, the poorer they become as they scramble for resources such as food, clothes, proper sanitation and enough room. Therefore, government is blamed for not providing housing for unplanned children born to young mothers who are supposed to be at school.

Family breakdown caused by divorce or the migrant labour system results in children taking care of themselves due to lack of a father figure. When love is not present at home, girls may be forced to look for places where they will feel loved. Sometimes girls themselves want to prove their womanhood due to lack of proper parental guidance. Young girls sometimes want to experiment with sex. The religious leaders or churches sometimes do assist by teaching people to have good morals and condemn teenage pregnancy as well (Preston-Whyte et al. 1988; Wanjohi 2010).

Financial Insecurity

Ipanteco (2014) argues that poverty is one major contributor to teen pregnancy among poverty stricken girls. Bruenig (2012) asserts that high rates of teenage pregnancy are a feature of

inequality and not a cause of it. He emphasises that pregnancy is a symptom of poverty. Kamper (2013) adds that poverty causes teen parenting and not the other way round. GPCC (2006) states that the youth living in poverty have a teen pregnancy rate of five times the average rate. The poor socio-economic circumstances seem to play a major role in increasing rates of teenage pregnancy. Teenage girls from low income families are falling pregnant at a higher rate than those from middle and upper income families.

Posel (2013) stresses that adolescent pregnancy most often is caused by lack of access to schools, employment, quality information and health care. Early pregnancy reflects powerlessness, poverty and pressures from partners, peers, families and communities. In South Africa all children have access to free education and health services. It can be argued that private schools offer a better education as compared to public schools (Muligwe 2012). Also, the private health sector offers better health care service as compared to the public health care sector because most of the public health care sectors' resources are overstretched (Motswaledi 2013). Even if South Africa experiences high levels of poverty and unemployment, and poverty among children is extremely high, government policies promote poverty alleviation (Chitiga et al. 2014). The CSG is a cash grant targeted to eradicate poverty from children.

Solomon (2013) states that there is substantial evidence that child support grants reduce risky behaviour among teens such as sexual activity and pregnancy. They serve to reduce teen pregnancy over time rather than increase them. Burdette (2012) argues that child pregnancy is an effect of poverty. Yalesias (2012) confirms that women choose to become mothers because their economic outlook is objectively bleak. There is a desire for financial security, and by falling in love with affluent people who will support them financially, women attain this desire. As a result, they are exploited by older men (Decker 2006). Sometimes, even if they were given money for transport to and from school, children tend to hitchhike and fall sexual victims of older men (eNCA 2013).

Lack of Education and Relationships

Education is one of the most effective ways to reduce teenage pregnancy, but in most of the

cases governments do not have funding to provide proper health programmes. Burdette (2012) asserts that childbearing is more likely among women from low income level and education than among their better off peers. Teenage mothers are less likely to finish school and more likely to live in poverty, depend on public assistance and be in poor health (NCSL 2014). However, alarming figures released by the South African Provincial Education Department indicate that schoolgirl pregnancies have doubled since 2006, despite a doubled effort of spending on sex education and AIDS awareness (IRIN 2007). Ipan-tenco (2014) confirms that access to quality sex education and health classes are essential during teen years, -because the classes teach children how babies are made and what action they can take to prevent pregnancy. It seems that the type of education offered at the South African schools is not good enough to stop the learners from engaging in dangerous sexual behaviours. The explanation maybe that the financial needs of the learners are not being addressed practically, hence they opt for CSG.

Parents do not guide and supervise their children on issues relating to sexuality. Parents' lack of education about schools and government and sex and relationships is a contributing factor of teenage pregnancy (Mbeki 2010). Most parents lack both the knowledge and skill to talk openly about sex with their children. They feel disempowered to talk about sex to their children in an environment which emphasises a right-based culture for children. The general knowledge gap filled by the educational gap between parents and children contributes towards the sense of disempowerment (HRSC 2009). Parents' lack of knowledge about safe sex and use of contraceptives such as condoms, pills, and loops (Deckert 2010; Posel 2013) is problematic.

Most of the parents feel disempowered to talk about such things as HIV and AIDS. They leave everything into the hands of government via schools and teachers. As a result, they fail to equip their children with the realities of adult life. Therefore, peer pressure, alcohol abuse, loneliness and lack of belonging take control of teenagers. In most cases, these situations result in unwanted teenage pregnancies (Cause of Teenage Pregnancy 2009). The teenage mothers end up becoming poorer as the envisaged salvation of the CSG proves worthless. Therefore, poverty in terms of knowledge and material

possessions causes teenage pregnancy, which further exacerbates the cycle of poverty in the country.

Purpose

The purpose of the paper was to explore by getting from the horses' mouths teenage mothers, whether or not teenage pregnancy is influenced by poverty.

Objective

The objective of the paper was to find out if the CSG was the main factor negatively influencing the teenage girls to fall pregnant.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research design used is a qualitative survey and random sampling. All the participants had an equal opportunity to participate, but the researcher sampled those who were queuing up for CSG at the CAPITEC bank at Thohoyandou.

Population and Setting

The study was conducted at the Thohoyandou shopping complex where the participants collect their child support grant money. They were all identifiable because they were carrying babies. All the participants considered Thohoyandou (Limpopo Province, South Africa) a convenient place where, after collecting their money, they could easily buy groceries and clothes. There are many teenage mothers, but the researcher decided to interview ten willing participants at CAPITEC bank which is a public place. All the participants were teenage mothers born after 1994.

The average age of the participants was 18. It must be pointed out that all the participants were school dropouts residing in the rural areas of the Thulamela Municipality within the Limpopo Province.

Sampling

A random sample was used because each and every member of the population had an equal and independent opportunity of being

selected. However, the researcher interviewed only ten of those who were willing to participate since the issue of teenage pregnancy is personal and sensitive.

Research Instrument

In order to meet the research objective, the researcher selected a set of ten questions relating to major causes of teenage pregnancy. The data collection instrument for this paper was a questionnaire with structured questions. The questions read out to each individual participant were translated into Tshivenda, and the responses were recorded on the questionnaire by the researcher.

Data Collection

As soon as the participants who were in the bank (CAPITEC) queue verbally agreed to the interview, the researcher personally interviewed each participant by reading each question and recording the responses. This method ensured a one hundred percent return rate.

Data Analysis

The researcher recorded the responses on the questionnaire when the participants orally responded in their mother tongue, Tshivenda, why they fell pregnant. Data analysis was performed by placing the information gathered in the numerical form and manipulating it according to the arithmetic properties to derive meaning from it (Monnette 2005). Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data.

Ethical Considerations

The permission to conduct the study was obtained from the participants themselves as Thohoyandou complex is a public place. Informed consent was sought from the participants. Participation was voluntary. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout. The participants were not subjected to any harm. The participants were informed that they would not receive any remuneration in money or kind for taking part.

DISCUSSION

The aim of the paper was to ascertain if poverty among teenagers influences them to fall preg-

nant or not. The discussion shows how the teenage girls between 17 and 18 years of age responded to the ten questions relating to the major causes of teenage pregnancy. Possible explanations for these phenomena are provided.

Role of Parents in Sex Education

The majority (80%) of the respondents indicated that they stayed with their parents who mostly were unemployed. Two of the participants' parents were employed: one set of parents had a teaching profession and one had a decent government job. Fifty percent of the participants stated that they discussed sexual issues with their parents while another 50% did not discuss. The finding is incongruent with the claim that parents do not discuss issues of sex with their children (Mbeki 2010; HRSC 2009; Cause of Teenage Pregnancy 2009; Deckert 2010; Posel 2013). It is of great concern that even if the parents spoke to the girls about sex, the girls still went ahead and fell pregnant. The reason might be that the education or talk given by parents was not enough.

All the participants pointed out that they discussed matters relating to sex with their peers. 90 percent agreed that their friends influence them to engage in sexual activities. The findings confirm the report by HRSC (2009) that the knowledge gap as well as the education gap between parents and children contributes toward parents' sense of helplessness in confidently talking about sex. Peer pressure seems to have contributed towards the participants' decision to engage in sexual behaviour. They understand and believe their peers more than their parents. The prime reason proved to be that there is no knowledge and education gap among the teenagers and peer control. Their age group was between 17 and 18 years.

Cultural Influence

A hundred percent of the participants showed that culture had nothing to do with them falling pregnant. The finding is in contrast with the findings by Brown (1999) and Whale and Loper (2014) in which young girls are forced to get married and have babies at a tender age. All the participants are Venda speaking and their culture does not influence them to have babies at a young age. However, there is no hard and fast rule about

what will be done to the girls who fall pregnant. Only churches preach about sexual abstinence until marriage, but they do not have the authority to enforce it. It is a matter of whether an individual girl would like to remain a virgin until marriage or not (Preston-Whyte et al. 1988; Wanjohi 2010).

Financial Security

Fifty percent of the participants confirmed that the fathers of their babies were elderly people. The finding shows that the participants could have had a relationship with elderly people who are not necessarily their parents. They could relate to older people only when it came to having sex with them. The finding is in contrast with (HSRC 2009) finding that the knowledge and education gap could be a barrier between old people and young girls. The reason might be that they need financial security from the elderly men as stated by Deckert (2006) and eNCA (2013).

The majority (80%) of the participants indicated that they fell pregnant, because they needed to receive the social grant money. As revealed earlier that they fell in love with elderly men, it stands to reason that money was the root cause for the girls to fall pregnant. The finding contradicts Solomon's (2013) assertion that the child support grant money reduces teenage pregnancies rather than increasing them. However the finding confirms the declaration by Burdette (2012), Yalesias (2012) and NCSL (2014), that young girls fall pregnant because they want to improve their economic status. As a result, they become dependent on public assistance for the rest of their lives and perpetuate poverty.

Seventy percent of the participants revealed that they fell pregnant because of lack. Most of the participants were also at the age of being recipients of the CSG, which was paid to their mothers. The finding is in support of the claim that children from low income households are five times more likely to fall pregnant than those from stable income households (GPCC 2006; Brueng 2012; Kamper 2013; Ipanteco 2014). Therefore, the finding confirms that poverty is one of the major causes of teenage pregnancy.

Eighty percent of the participants agreed that they were taught about sex education at school. The finding revealed that lack of education was not the major cause of teenage pregnancy, but

ignorance was. The results confirm IRIN's (2007) statement that South African teenage girls fall pregnant in high numbers despite the sex and AIDS awareness campaigns. However, Ipanteco (2014) made the assertion that quality sex education on how babies are made is essential. The type of education given to the teenagers might not be sufficient to help them refrain from sexual activities. The finding contradicts the finding that lack of education by government and parents contributes towards teenage pregnancy (Mbeki 2010). Government is doing its part, but the learners are not.

Reasons for Becoming Pregnant

On the question of why the participants fell pregnant, their responses indicated that they were under pressure from friends who enticed them with the prospect of receiving CSG. Their friends also told them that they (their friends) had financial freedom of buying clothes and groceries of their own choice. The majority six stated that they knew it was a mistake and that it was ignorant. They knew the consequences, but in any case, they went ahead and fell pregnant. They did not worry that much because they knew that they would receive the CSG. One participant felt that it was the right time for her to have the baby.

CONCLUSION

The paper concludes that there are several causes of teenage pregnancy, but poverty is the prime cause for teenagers from the Thulamela Municipality. Although, the participants were taught about the far-reaching consequences of teenage pregnancies, they were not educated about the relationship between pregnancies and poverty. The teenagers were not aware that poverty influenced them to have babies. They felt that they had made a mistake. The conclusion is that they were ignorant of their plight of being poor.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is therefore recommended that sex education should be offered from primary school till secondary school levels. The parents too should be made aware of the importance of talking about sex with their children. Learners should

be educated about poverty eradication through proper conduct of not rushing to give birth in order to receive CSG. Community structures such as churches and civic organisations should be encouraged to educate young people about abstinence. Religious leaders or pastors should be given the opportunity to visit schools and talk about sex education.

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