

Exploring Experiences of Pregnant and Mothering Secondary School Students in Tanzania

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Abstract

The Constitution of Tanzania grants every child the right to education, yet a girl's access to education is denied when she becomes pregnant or gives birth. This study explored the experiences of pregnant and mothering students in secondary schools and the community awareness, attitudes and perceptions toward pregnancy policy in Tanzania. It sought insights into parenting students' challenges, coping strategies, and their suggestions on how to help teen mothers who are returning to school. One hundred respondents were selected using snowball sampling technique due the sensitivity of the matter. Data were collected and analyzed mainly through qualitative techniques. Seventy five percent of the participants were aware of the pregnancy policy and lamented on its staggering implementation. Ninety five participants (95%) acknowledged the presence of quietly struggling pregnant and mothering secondary school students due to the lack of clear policy to protect them. Coping abilities of teen mothers and pregnant learners were revealed. The education stakeholders were urged to authorize the policy soon. Further research to illustrate negative consequences of conflicting views and inconsistencies in implementing the policy were recommended

Keywords: early pregnancy, mothering students, re-admission policy, gender inequality in education.

1. Introduction

The study focused on the government plan to reform its education and training policy (ETP) 1995 on pregnant students to continue with studies during and after delivery. The idea came after the realization that girls' pregnancy-related school dropout remained high on the world agenda. Thirteen million children are born to women under the age of 20 years worldwide and more than 90% in developing countries (Wikimedia Foundation, 2010). The Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) region is characterized by high school dropout rates in the world. Teenage pregnancy prevalence is 143 per 1000 girls and resultantly, women are losing battle of equal access to secondary education (James *et al*, 2000). Teen pregnancy is the major constraint in the elimination of gender disparity in education and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals of universal primary education and gender equity in education by 2015 (UNESCO, 2003).

As one of the SSA countries, Tanzania has witnessed an alarming increase in early pregnancy-related school dropouts. According to Ministry of Education statistics, 28,600 girls left school between 2004 and 2008 due to pregnancy. In other words, four out of ten girls became pregnant before the age of 20 during this time (Maluli 2011). Teenage mothers account for more than 30 births per minute (*The Express Tanzania* 06-17-2010), which denies them of access to formal education (see Maluli 2011 for details).

The causes of early pregnancy vary worldwide so are measures against it. According to Berkowel (1999), adolescent pregnancy is a multifaceted problem involving social, political, cultural, educational and economic factors. For instance, two thirds of SSA women give birth before the age of 20 due to cultural norms encouraging early marriage (WHO 1998). Other factors include poverty, unemployment and the lack of information about sexual matters, exposure, too much leisure, illiteracy and low level of education among girls (John 1995). Most influential are low level of education and cultural norms (WHO, 1998). Social cultural norms and poverty are among the leading causes of adolescent pregnancy in Dodoma region, Tanzania (Papers in Education Development Plan 2003).

The debate on school teenage pregnancy policies in SSA has been an on-going. Countries evaluated, revised and reformed their policies and practices for pregnant school girls to return to school after delivery. The trend in most countries is to move towards policies which make it easier for young mothers to continue with their education. For example, Botswana instituted an innovative pilot project to support teen mothers to continue with education. In Madagascar, new mothers could return to school immediately after delivery if they wished. In Cameroon, girls have the right to negotiate the duration of their maternity leave with their school management, and can arrange for extra classes so that they do not lag behind in their school work during the agreed period of absence from school. The government in Kenya came up with a policy allowing the re-entry of girls to schools after giving birth (Nyambura 2000). In Malawi, the government reviewed the policy that allows readmission of pregnant school girls after delivery and guaranteed childcare (UNESCO 2003). In South Africa, the 1996 policy allows logistical and financial support to pregnant and mothering teens to continue with schooling. In Namibia, a

pregnant student is allowed to be in school until she is about to deliver, after which the baby is cared for by a responsible adult; and the girl has the right of readmission in the same school within twelve months from the date she left school (Namibia MBESC, 2001c). Contrarily, a pregnant student must drop out of school and re-apply after two years in Zimbabwe, but re-enrolment is made subject to the availability of space.

Each country including Tanzania has different ways of solving the problem of early pregnancy and protecting affected students. Since independence the common practice in Tanzania was expulsion of girls even as such measures violate girl children's rights to education as stipulated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania, and the Universal Human Rights and its approved optional protocol; and they go against UNESCO, EFA and CEDAW goals on the rights of the pregnant learners.

Tanzania adopted a new policy under the pressure from UNICEF and other civil organizations to change her 1995 educational policy on pregnant students to allow them to continue with studies during pregnancy and after giving birth (Media Global 2010). In October 2009, the government initiated the policy changes and pregnant students were allowed to sit for the national examinations in primary and secondary schools and developed new guidelines that would assist teenage mothers in returning to school after delivery (Media Global 2010). Accordingly, there were three main issues that the ministry was dealing with to enable teenage mothers to cope with curriculum after returning to school- timeframe, which school to be readmitted to, and the care for the baby (*the Citizen News Paper* April 2010). Previously, such students were readmitted into TRCs, Adult Education centers and VETA if they wanted to continue with studies.

All the same, readmission of pregnant students and teenage mothers is still a major problem in many schools (Nyambura, 2000). Despite the government authorization, it is not always a straight forward issue as some school heads do not want to give teenage mothers space in their schools (Tjombonde 2003). They continue to believe that, giving a chance of education to teenage mothers will encourage more girls to become pregnant. As a result, pregnant and mothering students are still expelled from schools and some are struggling to continue with studies under difficult situations. Worse still, there is limited information on students' experiences of mothering in this situation of the lack of explicit policy. Thus this study sought to gain insights into the pregnant and mothering secondary students' experiences in Tanzania to fill the apparent gap.

1.1 Methods and Goals

Predominantly, qualitative and some aspect of quantitative methods were employed- documentary review, interview, focus group discussion and questionnaire. Case study design was used to gain in-depth understanding of the situation and meanings of those involved (Merriam 1998). The study was conducted in five seriously affected Community Secondary Schools out of 52 in Dodoma Municipality. Given the sensitivity of pregnancy or mothering among students, 100 informants were selected purposefully. Snowball sampling technique was used to obtain pregnant and mothering student respondents where an initial mothering student was obtained through a connection (Bali 2011). She then introduced the next informant, till the required number was reached. Parents, teachers, education officers, school heads and religious leaders were also selected purposefully. Data were collected from parents and parenting and pregnant students through semi-structured interviews, while questionnaire was administered to teachers, school heads, education officers and religion leaders. Data were analyzed using qualitative techniques where raw data were organized, broken into themes, synthesized to search for patterns and decide what to tell others (Cohen and Manion, 1994). Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 16 and results were presented in frequency tables.

1.1.1 Results and Discussion

Overall, 75% of the respondents was aware and strongly support the government plan on pregnant and mothering students. They learned it through the media- television (TV), radio, internet, brochures, news papers and Parliament sessions.

“It was one evening at 08.00 p.m., on 9 October 2009. I was watching television and I heard an announcement by the then Deputy Minister, Mwantumu Mahiza. I was encouraged to send my daughter to sit for standard seven national examinations. Prior to that announcement, I had been very discouraged and thought that early pregnancy was a hindrance to my daughter's success in education. I thought she could never attend school again. After the national examinations, she was selected to continue with secondary education in one of the government schools in Dodoma region”. (Field notes on August 16, 2010)

Documentary review corroborated that mass media played a great role in creating awareness about the government plan. Policy Forum, UNICEF Working Paper, and IPS presented a number of current reports through internet. Topics questioning the government, which created more awareness, were debated on Policy Forum, UNICEF, and IPS websites between August 2007 and August 2010:

“Should pregnant girls be expelled from school?” and “Why are pregnant or parenting students still forced out of

school despite the government announcement allowing young mothers to continue with studies?"

The Presence of Pregnant and Mothering Students in Secondary Schools

Table 1 exhibits that, 99% of the respondents were aware of the presence of struggling pregnant and mothering students studying under difficult situation as the vignette shows:

"During the National Examination Invigilation, one girl was identified to be eight months pregnant, while other two had given birth two weeks before the national examinations. All girls were allowed to sit for the exams in October 2009." (Field notes on August 21, 2010).

The interpretation of these findings is that, some girls are able to cope with schooling and mothering even though there is no policy to support them. However, only those with family support and are psychologically prepared continue with studies. These findings are consistent with Grant and Hallman (2000) and UNESCO (1995) that, the available economic and social support resources play a role in determining whether or not a teen mother can resume schooling after childbirth. Lack of explicit policy compounds the situation as one respondent put it:

"The implementation of this government plan is situational, depending on how sympathetic the school head is. No consistent arrangement is in place. Those students who are found to continue with studies are an outcome of mere announcements declared by authorities, such as the then Deputy Minister for Education in October 2009. We all know that no government operates through verbal announcements, except for a presidential decree. There should be a circular to all school heads" (Field notes on August 22, 2010).

Focus group discussions revealed that policy was debatable and that some leaders were dramatizing it for political ends as some respondents lamented over bureaucratic procedures and reiterated allegations of corruption in readmitting mothering students:

"It is more political than practical".

"It opened doors to favoritism, corruption, and 'who knows who' among heads of schools".

"We parents and our daughters have failed to understand if the policy was aimed at helping or creating barriers to readmission. There are no clear rules to follow as some pregnant students are still expelled, while others are registered to continue with studies".

"While some school heads re-admitted young mothers due to kindness or family relationship, others had to pay something".

"It was not difficult to get back to school because my parents had friendly relationship with headmaster. But it was not done officially; it was based on 'know who'".

"It was not easy to be accepted to continue with studies after delivery. My parents begged and were given conditions. We were requested to pay some amount of money to be allowed because the head of the school argued that the current policy did not allow us to do it and what we heard from the government leaders was just politics." (Field notes from August 2 – 11, 2010).

An expelled mothering student was interviewed during field research. Apparently, she was barred from taking the 2010 national form two examinations even though her examination number was already pinned on the desk. Ironically, some other respondents in the same school who were also mothering at the time of the 2010 national form two examinations were allowed to continue with studies during pregnancy and after delivery. These findings support principals' inconsistencies in readmitting mothering students documented in Namibia and Kenya (Tjmbonde 2003; Nyambura 2000).

Table 1: Community Awareness on the Presence of Mothering and Pregnant Students in Secondary Schools

Respondent Category	Aware		Not Aware		Total	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Parents	20	20	1	1	21	21
Students	24	24	-	-	24	24
Teachers	24	24	-	-	24	24
Mothering students	10	10	-	-	10	10
Pregnant students	8	8	-	-	8	8
Education officers	2	2	-	-	2	2
Religion leaders	5	5	-	-	5	5
School heads	6	6	-	-	6	6
Total	99	99	1	1	100	100

Source: Field data 2011

The Community Perceptions and Attitudes towards the Government Plan

Mixed feelings were expressed towards young mothers' readmission policy as shown in Table 2. Some, particularly parents appreciated greatly, while others were against it.

Many respondents argued that education is the basic rights for all children including pregnant and mothering students; and that expelling girls from school violated their rights especially when perpetrators are not punished as severely as the girls:

"We are very happy with the government's efforts to help us, but it should implement it effectively".

"Finally, the government leaders and policy makers have realized our rights to education. We also have the future like other learners who do not have children. My dream now is to move from 'nobody' to become 'somebody' in my life. After I complete my education and start working, I will support myself and my child" (Field notes from August 7- 9, 2010).

However, school heads and religion leaders were apprehensive of the rationale underpinning the government plan, claiming that the policy is still controversial in Tanzanian society. They emphasized that girls should maintain discipline, arguing that the policy will encourage more girls to fall pregnant since they would be assured of readmission after delivery; and that "it contradicted the Sexual Offense Provision Act of 1998, which provides for 30 years imprisonment of a man who impregnates a student". A faith leader particularly argued that, the intended pregnancy policy is against the children's rights and would make mothers to abandon their children; thus denying them of breast-feeding privilege and mother's love:

"Leaving a child with baby-sitter is rendering it an orphan. Since the father already disappeared during the pregnancy, allowing the mother back to school will leave the child at the mercy of babysitters.

"Government officers and policy makers should know that, a baby deserves its biological mother's love and care" (Field notes on August 16, 2010).

The findings concurred with the existing literature (Mitchel and Halpern 2003; Boulden 2001; Canadian Ministry of Education 1998) that, some school administrators or staff members fear that the presence of teenage mothers in the school will set a bad example to other learners and give a school bad image. The findings also indicate that sexuality in Tanzanian social context is loaded with traditional norms and values dominated by patriarchal values. Those against the policy based their arguments on perceived cultural norms and beliefs about sexual appropriateness. For them, any girl who violates traditional mores regarding sexuality deserves the burden and torture accompanying rearing her baby alone, including the difficulties faced in readmission into school after delivery. As such, they use these readmission obstacles to deter other school girls from becoming pregnant.

Indeed, such punitive attitudes ignore realities under which girls fall pregnant as most school girls are victims of sexual exploitation. Bali (2011) found that, both rural and urban girls are vulnerable to sexual exploitation as the traditional norms subordinating women have remained intact. As changes sweep across cultural norms protecting children and socio-economic hardships prevail, unfortunately some school girls are forced to engage in sex for survival to make ends meet (Van Niekerk, 2004; Guma & Henda, 2004). Hence, sex for survival is intimately connected to more general notions about morality, sociality and humanity in Tanzania (Bali, 2011).

Table 2: The Community Perceptions and Attitudes toward the Government Plan Mothering Students

Respondent Category	Positive		Negative		Total	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Parents	4	4	17	17	21	21
Students	5	5	19	19	24	24
Teachers	12	12	12	12	24	24
Mothering students	6	6	4	4	10	10
Pregnant students	6	6	2	2	8	8
Education officers	-	-	2	2	2	2
Religion leaders	3	3	2	2	5	5
School heads	2	2	4	4	6	6
Total	38	38	62	62	100	100

Source: Field data 2011

Students' Experiences of Mothering and Schooling

The results showed that some young mothers were able to cope with schooling (Table 3). Their quality of work and performance in tests and examinations were always complete and according to instructions. Many respondents pointed out that, pregnant and mothering students showed great improvement in learning both individually and in interaction with other students in group work when supported financially and psychologically. The abilities of young mothers to complete their assignments despite double responsibilities were appreciated by

respondents as shown by testimonies from mothering students and their parents:

“My daughter was pregnant. I was not sure if she can go to school due to pregnancy mood swings. I did not force her but only encouraged her to proceed with school until she felt tired. But she was very strong until the day of delivery”.

“I fell pregnant when I was in form two. Thankfully, I passed the national form two exams while pregnant. After delivery, my parents took care of the newly born baby. This encouraged me to continue with studies”. (Field notes on August 20, 2010).

Documentary review corroborated satisfactory mothering and pregnant students' work. Eleven mothering and pregnant students were requested to provide their exercise books. Six out of eight mothering students and two out of three pregnant students did homework completely, up to date and correctly. The 2010 national examinations results for form two and four were evaluated to examine the performance of mothering students in comparison to other examinees. Three out of ten mothering students scored the average of 38, 35 and 33 in their form two national examinations. Similarly, form four national examination results of five mothering students also showed satisfactory performance: two girls got division three and the other two girls got division four (28 and 30 points), which were comparable to other learners their class.

Interviews with teenage mothers revealed that, they were able to budget their time between schooling and attending babies; and that they appreciated mothering experience as an important motivating factors in continuing with studies:

“I used to wake up early in the morning for general cleaning of the house and preparing for school. I do it to assist my mother to have enough time for the baby. After school, I always wash clothes, breast feed and then in the evening I have group discussion. Sometimes I failed to attend the class in the evening but I requested notes from my classmates and do home work”. (Field notes on August 3-7, 2011).

However, focus group discussion with teachers and other students revealed a different picture that, mothering and pregnant students always looked tired, restless and sleepy during class sessions. This finding concurred with the Canadian Ministry of Education (1998) that, teenage mothers missed many lessons and often fell behind with school work due to double responsibilities of schoolwork and motherhood. Actually, some mothering students lamented over negative reactions they encounter from insensitive teachers, especially if they enquired further explanation:

“You see the problem of teaching mothers. They don't pay attention to the presentation. You are supposed to stay at home and look after your child or even better get married” (Field notes on August 5, 2010).

These findings were the same as those of the Namibia Ministry of Education (MBESC) (2001a) that, young mothers do not participate in lesson activities freely, are restless and worrisome if the topic is about life skills in biology, feeling that everybody was talking about their situation (Chigona and Chetty, 2007). This is because some students stigmatize pregnant learners through words, avoiding them in group work, playing etc., which make them uncomfortable and perform poorly (Elimu Yetu Coalition 2003; Boulden 2001; Harrison 1990).

School heads acknowledged stigma and trauma accompanying being a mother at school. A young mother is offensively called '*mzazi*', which means a parent or guardian. Pregnant and mothering students admit that, fellow learners tease and regard them as adults; and that, some openly express:

“We do not want to see an old woman in our class”.

When they are given reports or invitation letters for their parents, their fellows would remark insensitively:

“Are you also going to inform your parents about the meeting while you are a parent?”

Pregnant students face depression in and out of schools. Once a student becomes pregnant, she is normally affected psychologically due to thoughts about the consequences, particularly when their partners run away or are unwilling to take family responsibilities. They are also depressed due to hurtful comments or remarks by both teachers and students in school environment, or when a girl's parents/guardians become abusive. Worst still, mothering students are not permitted breastfeeding break privileges:

“In most cases I used to lie to school authority to be permitted so as to take my child to the hospital.

For this reason I would not concentrate well on my school work.” (Field notes on August 3, 2010).

Ironically, teachers and school heads feel that some young mothers and pregnant students take for granted that the school management knows their mothering roles so can ask for permission to attend to their babies due to either sickness or loneliness and the situation is worse for girls who leave their children with baby-sitters or relatives. Certainly, mothering students do not inform the school if the child is sick. Maluli (2011) encountered un-excused absence of a mothering student she was supposed to meet at school. Apparently, the girl was absent without the knowledge of class teacher or the teacher on duty. She told the researcher that her mother went to a funeral so she did not have a baby sitter. Such finding was consistent with Chetty and Chigona (2007) that,

teenage mothers missed classes, especially when the child fell sick and hospitalized.

Table 3: Students' Experiences with Mothering and Schooling

	Results	
	Frequency	%
Obvious Experiences		
Improved individual learning abilities and interaction with others	42	24.3
Improved seeking of guidance and counseling services	16	9.2
Improved quality of work for completeness according to instructions	29	16.8
Intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to do well	15	8.7
Improved confidence depending on one's background before and after delivery	28	16.2
Clear appreciation of the second chance	21	12.1
Safe and supportive family environment enabled them to perform well	22	12.7
Total	173*	100

Source: Field data 2011

*Frequency counts were from multiple responses.

Suggested Solutions for Pregnant and Mothering Students

All school heads, education officers, parents and mothering students stressed that, it is better for a pregnant student to be readmitted in a different school (Table 4).

Parents complained bitterly about teachers' inadequacy in dealing with student mothers. Parenting students urged that before making the policy official, the government should introduce in-service and pre-service training on basic counseling skills to the current teachers so that they get the necessary helping skills and sensitivity to work with mothering students:

“We need encouragement from female teachers who went through similar experiences and managed to complete their education” (Field notes on August 8, 2010).

The findings supported the existing literature that, appropriate guidance and counseling services to teenage mothers would significantly reduce school dropout (Chetty and Chigona 2007; McCauley Brown 2005; Enyegue and Mayone 2004; Boulden 2001; Nyambura 2000; CMC 1998; Policy Studies Institute 1998; Roye & Balk 1996; FAWE 1995). Boulden (2001) and Policy Studies Institute (1998) argue that, teenage mothers should have antenatal care to prepare them for parenthood, while Nyambura (2000) recommends setting up of special bridging centers for young mothers where they could continue with formal education and/or specialized training while breastfeeding their babies, creating opportunities for out of school girls, exploiting informal sector apprenticeships, and introducing flexible models of attendance so that institutions operate at full attendance and completion of courses. Enyegue and Mayone (2004) call for concerted efforts to reduce pregnancy-related school dropout. Without a high school diploma, young parents have difficulties finding jobs to support their babies (McCauley Brown 2005).

Respondents expressed the urgency to implement the policy and urged that, the policy should explain the best place for readmitting pregnant and teenage mothers:

“Being in school will reduce the possibility of repeating to bear another child during their adolescence. It is important to support young mothers in order to enable them reach their education goals. Every child possesses different talents. If early pregnancy is allowed to take them out of school, it will deprive the country an opportunity to utilize talents and skills of these teenage mothers” (Field note on August 13, 2010).

These findings concurred with the existing literature that, keeping them in school minimizes the risk of repeating early pregnancy, creates opportunities for their future and reduces stress (University of Illinois Urbana Champaign 2004; Boulden 2001; CMC 1998; US Department of Health and Human services 1998; Russell et al. 2004).

Table 4: Suggested Solutions on How to Implement the Government Policy on Pregnant and Mothering Students

Suggestion	Results	
	Frequency	%
Endorse transferring them to other schools to avoid stigma	40	32.5
Introduce sex education to secondary school students	28	22.8
Introduce proper guidance and counseling in secondary schools	28	22.8
Implement policy on pregnant and mothering students immediately so as to give them a chance to continue with studies	27	22
Total	123*	100

Source: Field data 2011

*Frequency counts were from multiple responses

1.1.2 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and discussion above, a number of conclusions were made:

- Despite the research done on issues of mothering students and campaigns on readmission policy, they still face problems in secondary schools. Community awareness of the policy on pregnant and mothering students and the ordeals they go through when seeking readmission notwithstanding, no explicit policy exists on transparent readmission process. Education administrators, government leaders, policy makers and political leaders were urged to refrain from passing judgment; instead they must address the pregnant and mothering students' concerns.
- Aside from mothering role hampering the girls' progress in secondary education, other factors such as home environment and stigma must be considered when finalizing the policy. There is a need for those in authority to spend time with teachers and young mothers before they return to school so as to re-orientate the girls and to work through teacher prejudices. Many of these young girls went back to the school system as mothers without any emotional preparation for their new roles and expectation for behavior. This resulted in poor performance, and in many cases dropping out of school. Also it would be necessary to broaden the sexual and life skills, relationships and attitude education for the benefit of pregnant and mothering teenagers.
- Young mothers performed generally well and the quality of their work was satisfactory according to their teachers' instructions. Particularly, mothering students who were in boarding schools did well and were able to cope due to less daily contact with their children compared to day students. The lesson to be learned before the policy is amended and implemented is that, parents and the community at large should support these girls. Limited information the government and parents have about learning abilities of these students have often worked against their interests. Education stakeholders should not give up on them.
- The solutions proposed by community members provided insights into the perceptions and attitudes on issues of teenage pregnancy in Tanzania. Thus, these findings should sensitize those in authority about the challenges and experiences of pregnant and mothering girls in secondary schools in order to help them to continue with their education. The policy if implemented would come at the right time to strive to foster partnership among school administrators, teachers, parents and the targeted learners. Through cooperation, the concerns of the pregnant and mothering students would be handled effectively.

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