

Teenage Pregnancy and Educational Disruption: A Study of School Dropout Rates among Girls in Rural Malawi

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.1026EDU0058>

Received: 09 October 2025; Accepted: 14 October 2025; Published: 04 February 2026

ABSTRACT

Teenage pregnancy is a major obstacle to education for girls in rural Malawi. Cultural norms, financial struggles, and little access to reproductive health education come together, creating a cycle of early motherhood and dropping out of school. This study looks at how teenage pregnancy affects educational disruption among adolescent girls in selected rural areas of Malawi. It uses a mixed-methods approach, combining data on school dropout rates with insights from interviews with students, teachers, parents, and community leaders.

The findings show that teenage pregnancy is both a cause and a result of limited educational opportunities. It often leads to early withdrawal from school, lower academic performance, and fewer future chances. The study also points out gaps in policy implementation and community support. Recommendations include focused interventions like sexuality education, re-entry policies for young mothers, and community advocacy to change cultural views. By exposing the educational impact of teenage pregnancy, this research aims to guide policy and encourage strategies that help girls finish their education and escape the cycle of poverty.

Keywords: Teenage pregnancy, School dropout, Girls' education, Re-admission policy, Gender inequality, Poverty and education, Reproductive health and Cultural norms

INTRODUCTION

Teenage pregnancy is a significant public health and educational issue in Malawi, especially in rural areas where access to reproductive health services and formal education is limited. Even though national efforts aim to promote girls' education and reduce early childbearing, the country still sees high rates of teenage pregnancies. This situation has serious effects on school retention and academic success.

In rural regions, adolescent girls encounter a mix of socio-economic and cultural pressures that heighten their risk of early pregnancy. Poverty, gender inequality, limited access to contraception, and strong traditional beliefs often push girls out of school and into early motherhood. The Malawi Demographic and Health Survey (2022) states that nearly 29% of girls aged 15 to 19 have begun childbearing, with most of these girls living in rural districts.

The impact of teenage pregnancy on education is significant. Girls who get pregnant while in school are more likely to drop out for good. This limits their future opportunities and continues cycles of poverty and reliance on others. Although Malawi has put re-admission policies in place to help young mothers return to school, these often do not work well because of stigma, lack of support, and weak enforcement.

This study looks at the connection between teenage pregnancy and school dropout rates for girls in rural Malawi. By using both numerical data and personal insights from students, parents, and teachers, the research seeks to uncover the key reasons behind educational disruption. It also aims to explore possible solutions that could help adolescent mothers continue their education.

Background

Teenage pregnancy is a significant public health and social issue in Malawi, especially in rural areas where

access to education, reproductive health services, and job opportunities is limited. The Malawi Demographic and Health Survey (MDHS) shows that nearly 29% of girls aged 15 to 19 have started having children. This statistic highlights the urgent need to tackle adolescent reproductive health and its broader effects. One of the most serious consequences of teenage pregnancy is its effect on girls' education. It often leads to school dropout, lower academic performance, and fewer future opportunities.

In rural Malawi, poverty, cultural norms, gender inequality, and limited access to sexuality education combine to create high rates of teenage pregnancy. Many girls feel pressure to marry early, while others do not have the ability or resources to make informed choices about their reproductive health. After becoming pregnant, girls often face stigma or are forced to leave school due to school policies or community attitudes, effectively ending their educational journey.

Despite government attempts to enforce re-admission policies and encourage girls' education, challenges remain in applying these policies, particularly in remote areas. The disruption in education caused by teenage pregnancy harms not just the individual girl, but also affects families, communities, and national progress. To create effective solutions that help girls stay in school and reach their full potential, it's important to understand the specific causes and impacts of teenage pregnancy in rural Malawi.

This study aims to investigate the link between teenage pregnancy and school dropout rates among girls in rural Malawi. It will look at the social, cultural, economic, and institutional factors that contribute to this issue. By highlighting the real experiences of these girls and the systemic obstacles they encounter, the research intends to guide policies and community efforts that support educational continuity and gender equality.

Problem Statement

Even though local and national initiatives are geared toward building secondary and tertiary education facilities and lowering adolescent fertility rates, in Malawi, the dropout cases among girls of school-age and in rural areas are especially alarming and far too common as a result of teenage pregnancy, which is a very difficult situation. The intersection of poverty, poor reproductive health care and culturally oppressive views toward girls in most adolescent age groups, means for a premature end to the education journeys of numerous girls. The girls themselves are in an unfortunate situation, but it doesn't end there, society as a whole suffers when there is a high level of teenage pregnancy. There is loss of productivity when the human capital is underutilized and poverty level is high, all as a result of high teenage pregnancy rates and under-educated women in the population.

Policies instituting the re-admission policy for young mothers and school dropout teenage pregnancy mothers, have had very little success, especially in rural areas of Malawi, where stigma and lack of support, as well as poor enforcement, stand in their way. There are very few controlled local studies measuring how much of an impact teenage pregnancy has on the rural dropout population. There is little to no research done and in cases of a lack of targeted and contextualized information, the strategies included in the programs are standard and do not course correct for the very specific issues affecting young school age girls in the rural areas of Malawi.

This study aims to bridge the gap by exploring the causes and effects of teenage pregnancy on girls' education in rural Malawi, particularly focusing on dropout rates. By pinpointing the key factors and evaluating how well current support systems are working, the research hopes to guide the development of more effective and culturally aware strategies that can help keep girls in school and enhance their future opportunities.

General Objective

To examine the impact of teenage pregnancy on school dropout rates among girls in rural Malawi, with the aim of identifying key contributing factors and informing strategies that support educational retention and re-entry for adolescent mothers.

Specific Objectives

1. To identify the socio-cultural and economic factors contributing to teenage pregnancy among school-aged girls in rural Malawi.

2. To assess the extent to which teenage pregnancy influences school dropout rates among girls in selected rural districts.
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of existing policies and support systems aimed at preventing teenage pregnancy and promoting educational re-entry for adolescent mothers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teenage pregnancy is still a significant issue in Malawi, especially in rural areas where economic hardships and cultural expectations come together to influence young people's reproductive choices. As noted by Kalulu et al. (2024), Malawi has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in sub-Saharan Africa, despite various policies aimed at reducing early childbearing. Their community-based research pointed out that factors like low education levels, early marriages, poverty, and limited access to contraception play a major role in the high rates of teenage pregnancy in these rural districts.

UNFPA Malawi (2023) supports these findings, revealing that nearly a quarter of all pregnancies in the country involve teenage girls. The organization emphasizes that some girls as young as 14 are becoming mothers, which often leads to them dropping out of school and facing long-term educational setbacks. This situation is made worse by a lack of proper sexual and reproductive health education and limited access to youth-friendly services, particularly in rural communities.

Immaculate and Kalyani (2023) conducted a focused study in Blantyre's Traditional Authority Makata, revealing that peer pressure, cultural beliefs, and economic hardship are major drivers of early pregnancy. Their findings emphasize the need for strengthened contraceptive service promotion and economic empowerment programs to keep girls in school longer.

Adolescent pregnancy around the world often leads to negative educational outcomes. According to UNESCO (2021), teenage mothers are much less likely to finish secondary school, and even when they want to return to school after giving birth, they face significant challenges due to systemic and social obstacles. In Malawi, while the government has put policies in place to allow young mothers to re-enter school, these efforts often fall short in rural areas where enforcement is weak and community support is lacking (Kalulu et al., 2024; UNFPA, 2023).

The socio-cultural landscape in Malawi is crucial in shaping how people view teenage pregnancy and education. In many rural communities, traditional beliefs tend to value early marriage and motherhood over formal education for girls (Immaculate & Kalyani, 2023). This cultural mindset not only makes teenage pregnancy seem normal but also discourages girls from aiming for long-term academic success. UNFPA (2023) emphasizes that any legislative changes need to be accompanied by grassroots advocacy to challenge these deeply ingrained beliefs.

In summary, the research highlights a complicated mix of factors—like education, economics, culture, and institutions—that play a role in teenage pregnancy and how it affects girls' education in rural Malawi. While the studies we have so far offer some important insights, there's still a pressing need for more localized, data-driven research that digs into the real experiences of the girls impacted and assesses how well current interventions are working (Kalulu et al., 2024; Immaculate & Kalyani, 2023; UNFPA, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of early and unintended pregnancy (EUP) and its implications for the education sector. The design allowed for triangulation of data, enhancing the validity and depth of findings.

Quantitative Component

a. Data Sources

- Secondary data from national Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), Education Management Information Systems (EMIS), and global databases (e.g., UNESCO Institute for Statistics, WHO).
- Indicators included adolescent fertility rates, school dropout rates, re-entry statistics, and access to sexual and reproductive health services.

b. Analysis Techniques

- Descriptive statistics to identify prevalence and patterns of EUP among school-aged adolescents.
- Cross-tabulations and correlation analysis to explore relationships between EUP and educational outcomes (e.g., attendance, completion rates).
- Regional comparisons to highlight disparities across geographic and socioeconomic contexts.

Qualitative Component

a. Data Collection

- Document review of policy frameworks, program evaluations, and academic literature related to EUP and education.
- Key informant interviews with educators, health workers, community leaders, and adolescent mothers (where feasible).
- Focus group discussions with students and parents to explore perceptions, stigma, and support mechanisms.

b. Analysis Techniques

- Thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, challenges, and best practices.
- Narrative synthesis to integrate findings from diverse sources and contextualize them within local realities.

Sampling Strategy

- Purposive sampling was used to select documents, case studies, and interview participants with direct relevance to EUP and education.
- Geographic focus included high-prevalence regions such as Malawi's Central Region, with attention to rural-urban differences

Ethical Considerations

- Ethical approval was sought from Malawi Assemblies of God University Research Ethics Committee (MAGUREC) for primary data collection.
- Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with confidentiality and anonymity strictly maintained.
- Cultural sensitivity guided all interactions, especially with adolescent participants and vulnerable groups.

RESULTS

Quantitative Findings

a. Prevalence of Teenage Pregnancy

- Data from selected rural districts revealed that approximately 28% of girls aged 13–19 had experienced pregnancy before completing secondary school.
- Among these, 72% dropped out permanently, while only 18% attempted re-entry, and 10% transitioned to informal education or vocational training.

b. Dropout Rates

- Schools with higher teenage pregnancy rates showed a 30–40% reduction in female enrollment over a three-year period.
- Girls who became pregnant were three times more likely to drop out compared to their non-pregnant peers.

c. Correlations

- Strong correlations were found between teenage pregnancy and:
- Household poverty levels ($r = 0.68$)
- Parental education ($r = -0.55$)
- Access to reproductive health services ($r = -0.61$)

Qualitative Findings

a. Perceptions of Teenage Pregnancy

- Interviews with teachers and community leaders revealed that pregnancy is often viewed as a “natural transition” into adulthood, especially in rural areas.
- Many parents expressed resignation rather than concern, citing cultural norms and economic pressures.

b. Barriers to Re-entry

- Girls reported facing stigma, bullying, and lack of childcare support, which discouraged them from returning to school.
- School administrators cited limited resources and unclear policy guidelines as obstacles to implementing re-admission policies.

c. Voices of Adolescent Mothers

- Focus group discussions highlighted feelings of shame, isolation, and lost potential among teenage mothers.
- Some girls expressed a desire to return to school but lacked financial support, encouragement, or flexible learning options

Emerging Themes

- Cultural normalization of early motherhood

- Weak enforcement of re-admission policies
- Disconnect between national policy and rural implementation
- Need for community-based support systems

DISCUSSION

The results of this study shed light on a deeply rooted connection between teenage pregnancy and educational disruption for girls in rural Malawi. The data reveals that almost one in three adolescent girls have faced pregnancy before finishing secondary school, with most of them dropping out for good. This finding is consistent with national statistics from UNFPA Malawi (2023), which indicate that teenage pregnancy is a major factor contributing to school dropouts among girls.

Moreover, the strong link between household poverty and teenage pregnancy ($r = 0.68$) underscores the idea that economic hardship plays a significant role in early childbearing. Girls from low-income families often struggle to access reproductive health services and are at a higher risk of early marriage, which only increases their chances of being excluded from education. Kalulu et al. (2024) also pointed out that poverty and limited parental education are key factors predicting teenage pregnancy in rural areas.

Qualitative insights really added a layer of understanding to these patterns, showing that cultural norms and community attitudes often make early motherhood seem normal. Conversations with parents and community leaders revealed that pregnancy is seen more as a natural milestone than a crisis, which discourages efforts to keep girls in school. This cultural perspective aligns with the findings of Immaculate and Kalyani (2023), who highlighted how traditional beliefs contribute to early pregnancy and disengagement from education.

The study also pointed out significant gaps in how re-admission policies are put into practice. While Malawi has official rules that allow adolescent mothers to go back to school, the situation in rural areas is much more complicated. Girls encounter stigma from both peers and teachers, struggle to find childcare support, and often feel out of place in the classroom. These challenges reflect UNESCO's (2021) global findings, which emphasize that having policies in place isn't enough without active community involvement and support from institutions.

It's clear that there's a gap between national policies and what actually happens on the ground, especially when you look at how school administrators responded. They pointed out that vague guidelines and a lack of resources are significant hurdles. This highlights the urgent need for interventions that are tailored to local contexts, addressing both the structural and cultural challenges at play.

In conclusion, the study shows that teenage pregnancy is not just a result of educational inequality in rural Malawi; it also perpetuates it. Tackling this issue calls for a comprehensive strategy—one that includes efforts to reduce poverty, provide thorough sexuality education, raise community awareness, and establish strong support systems for young mothers. If we don't take these steps, the cycle of early pregnancy and educational setbacks will keep holding back the potential of Malawian girls and stalling national progress.

CONCLUSION

This study sheds light on the significant effects of teenage pregnancy on the educational opportunities for girls in rural Malawi. The findings clearly indicate that early childbearing is not just a result of systemic inequality but also a driving force behind it—fueled by poverty, limited access to reproductive health services, and entrenched cultural beliefs. The data shows a troubling dropout rate among pregnant teens, while personal stories reveal the emotional, social, and institutional hurdles that keep young mothers from going back to school.

Even though there are national policies designed to help adolescent mothers re-enter education, the reality on the ground is that these efforts often fall short and lack consistency. Girls encounter stigma, logistical

obstacles, and a shortage of support systems, making it incredibly difficult to continue their education after becoming pregnant. These insights highlight the pressing need for comprehensive, community-focused solutions that not only address policy gaps but also resonate with the real-life experiences of girls in rural areas.

To effectively address teenage pregnancy and its impact on education, we need a collaborative approach that empowers girls with essential knowledge, provides economic support to families, and shifts societal views on adolescent motherhood and girls' education. If we don't take these steps, the cycle of early pregnancy and educational setbacks will continue, hindering Malawi's broader aspirations for gender equality and sustainable development.

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