

Socio-cultural Determinants of Teenage Pregnancies in Transmara West, Narok County, Kenya

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Abstract: There has been an upsurge of teenage girls getting pregnant in Narok County and specifically Transmara West with little or no efforts to combat the menace. The study was conducted in Transmara West to ascertain the socio-cultural determinants responsible for teenage pregnancy. A qualitative methodology was adopted with interview as the major method of data collection. Head teachers, village elders, religious leaders, teenage mothers and social workers were interviewed for the study. Purposive sampling was used. The study found that ignorance, marginalization, poor parenting and cultural practices were the major socio-cultural determinants of teenage pregnancies in the County.

Key words: socio-cultural; teenage-pregnancy, determinants

I. INTRODUCTION

Teenage pregnancies are becoming a national disaster in Kenya with some areas in the West and Coast having 1 in every 4 girls affected as per recent Kenya Demographic and Health Survey [1]. Studies on teenage sexual and reproductive health rights posit that teenage pregnancies pose serious health, psychosocial and economic dangers to the girls including thwarting their reproductive health including child birth, schooling and career growth, keeping them in vicious cycles of poverty (many come from already poor families), and overall limiting their capabilities, opportunities and choices..

In Kenya, nearly 18 percent of adolescent girls between aged of 15 and 19 are mothers [2]. The rates of teenage childbearing vary across Kenya. While progress has been made to decrease the numbers in some regions, in others it has remained alarmingly high. According to the World Health Organization [3] quotes a number of studies that look at the impact of early childbearing on pregnancy outcomes and child survival, with regards to health of teenage mothers and their infants, as well social and economic effects at the individual level, and societal level. Among others, the studies conclude that children born to adolescent mothers are at greater health and mortality risks than those born to older women. Early pregnancies are associated with significantly worse pre-natal health care and vaccination behaviour, leading to lower birth-weights and higher mortality. Adolescent mothers also have higher health risks and lower health outcomes. Pregnancy-related deaths are the leading cause of mortality for 15-19 year-old girls worldwide.

Teenage pregnancy is a health and socioeconomic challenge encountered by countries across the globe [4], [5]. Teenagers

have progressively increased commonly in the developing countries. This steady increase is credited to declines in mortality and relatively high fertility levels as well as increasing live births and improved chances of survival [6].

In spite of all initiatives to address teenage pregnancy, there has been minimal reduction particularly in developing countries. According to UNFPA [7] there are 20,000 births to teenage mothers (below 20 years) daily in developing countries transforming to over 7.3 million births yearly. In Kenya, approximately 18 % of girls whose ages range from 15 to 19 are already mothers. KDHS report also found out that the fraction of teen girls who had begun childbearing had not changed between 2008 and 2014.

A study by Kiarie [8] found that about a half of the girls who join form one drop out before completing secondary school education. Among other factors such as poverty and culture; pregnancies accounted for the highest number of dropouts. Consequently, a study by Barmao-Kiptanui, Kindiki, and Lelan [9] on impact of teenage motherhood on the academic performance in public primary schools found that teenage pregnancy accounted for low academic performance. On completion rates the study found out that incidences of teenage pregnancy reduced the completion rate by about 10%. These statistics, coupled with public outcry over teenage pregnancies across the country forms the basis for this study. Despite teenage pregnancy being a social menace and a risk to educational development little has been done to curb it. This is attested by the fact that from 2015 there is has been an upsurge in teenage pregnancies not only in Transmara West but in the entire country. The current study will therefore examine the socio-cultural determinants of teenage pregnancies and come up with appropriate measures that will assist education stakeholders to curb teenage pregnancies in the county.

II. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative methodology was used in understanding the sociocultural determinants of teenage pregnancy in Transmara. Desk review was very vital in understanding the status of teenage pregnancies, recommendations on prior findings as well as the county and national policies regarding teenage pregnancy.

Key informant interviews were conducted in the areas which were purposively selected as hotspots for teenage pregnancies. Key people whose opinion was sought included; village

elders, social workers, head teachers, religious leaders, teenage mothers as well as cultural leaders.

Data analysis was undertaken using qualitative techniques such as trend analysis, themes and sub-theme identification as well as analysis of assumptions regarding sociocultural determinants of teenage pregnancies. The data analysis was undertaken alongside data collection to ensure saturation (adequacy) and avoid data gaps after exit from the field. Analyzed data was used for the production of this report.

III. FINDINGS

Regarding the escalating rate of teenage pregnancies in Transmara, several interviews and focused group discussions were conducted with an aim of coming up with effective and appropriate recommendations for the government and other education stakeholders to be able to curb the social menace. The findings obtained from the field have been discussed into six sections based on the themes that emerged from the study. They include: *high ignorance level; poverty; poor parenting and cultural practices.*

A. High Ignorance Level

From the interviews contacted it was clear that ignorance level among teenagers was very high. Oblivious of the dangers associated with engaging in unprotected sex, most teenagers from Transmara West were found to have been impregnated by ‘*boda boda*’ riders (these are people who provide public transport using motorcycles, though initially it was bicycles). In an interview with a head teacher on the same issue said the following:

‘Transmara subcounty has recorded the highest number of reported teenage pregnancies. However, I do not only blame the girls but the entire community for failing to provide the required standards for our girls to follow. Secondly, there is high level of ignorance among teenagers whereby most lack crucial information regarding sex education and reproductive health in general’

Similar sentiments were also echoed by a PAG church pastor who said that teenagers from the region require intensive education on sex in order to understand and comprehend their bodily changes in order to reduce curiosity where most of them get wrong information from their peers. ‘Some of these teenagers think that once you commence menstruation, then you start having sex. It is wrong’ he said.

B. Poverty

Kenya has a poverty index of 45.2% while Narok has a poverty index of 48.9% which is slightly higher than the national index. This implies that almost half of the households in the county live below poverty line. As such, most girls from these families would find it convenient to engage in sexual activities with those who can provide or promise to provide some of their basic necessities. This was for instance revealed during an interview with a village elder from one of

the villages in Transmara. According to him most affected girls engage in sexual activities with married and older men with an intention of getting money to meet their expenses that parents have been unable to provide for them. According to the village elder, poverty is the major huddle that most families are facing and thus, almost making it inevitable for school going girls to be impregnated by men who take advantage of the situation.

In an interview with a 14 year old girl who delivered her baby on the second day of her National Examination said that she had been involved in love affairs with the man because he provided everything including paying for whatever that was required in school. The lady also revealed that her parents were aware of her illicit relationship with the married man and that the man several occasions came to the family’s rescue

‘I have been in a relationship with this man for two years now. I never expected that I will deliver during my examinations but it has happened.’

When asked whether she knew the man was married and if she knew the man’s status why did she opt to continue with the relationship, she said the following:

‘Yes I was aware that he is married and I even know his wife and the kids but the situation we are in forced me to accept his favours. He even on several occasions saved my families from financial strain’

The above interview revealed the high levels of desperation that some families go through because of being unable to provide the basic needs for their members.

Findings also revealed that some parents because of poverty force their children especially girls to drop out of school and get employment to sustain their family members as it was the case with a 17 year old who had this to say:

‘I dropped out when I was in form two because my parents could no longer sustain me in school as they were unable to provide basic needs such as sanitary towels, food, exercise books among other important stuff. Feeling embarrassed, my mother advised me to drop out and travel to Nairobi where I was to work as a house help. I worked for six months after which I was chased away due to pregnancy which belonged to my boss. He raped me when his wife had travelled to Mombasa for a funeral. Unfortunately I got pregnant and when I told him, he bribed me with fifty thousand shillings to abort and return to my parents’ home. He told me that the pregnancy will ruin his harmonious family that he had built for years. I had no choice but to leave’

C. Poor Parenting

Poor parenting was also isolated as one of the major factors contributing to teenage pregnancies in the county. An interview with a Maasai elder in charge of cultural practices within the community said that the social fabric in the

community was torn and children cannot find good role models anymore. He compared the modernity with traditional way of bringing children. According to him, traditional form of parenting was the best because children were owned by the community not parents. Any elder who found a child misbehaving could correct the mistake through punishment which made children to be much disciplined. However, the current generation according to him has lacked morals due to poor parenting. This according to him has contributed to the escalating social menace of teenage pregnancy in the county.

In another interview, a head teacher from an urban primary school in Transmara town criticized parents for lacking time to spend with their children and therefore children are consuming a lot of immoral stuff from media which have played a role in high rates of teenage pregnancies in the county.

‘Parents nowadays care less about their children claiming that they are working to better the lives of their members. Most parents working from morning to evening and from Monday to Sunday, how will you know your child’s character? Children are now on facebook, youtube and other social sites where they are consuming a lot of unwanted stuff which have contributed to decaying morals in the society culminating to increased teenage pregnancies. Consequently, when children perform poorly in school, parents are among the first to throw blames on teachers and specifically school heads for failing in their duties. They should know that they have failed completely in raising their children.’

D. Cultural practices

Culture as a people’s way of life is good and often functional for a population. Relevant cultures are crucial in promoting togetherness, harmony and morality in practicing communities. However, culture can at times lag behind with certain practices becoming repugnant to wellbeing, which in this case is about the education development of young girls. The study found that certain cultural practices among the Maasai community contributed to high numbers of teenage pregnancies. Practices such as age of marriage, gender preferences and religion were found to contribute significantly to teenage pregnancies.

In an interview with a social worker over the influence of cultural factors on teenage pregnancy said the following:

‘When it comes to teenage pregnancies in this region, it is normally the highest due to the position of a woman in the society. Since boys are valued more due to inheritance of properties, girls are viewed in terms of wealth. They are therefore prepared and nurtured towards married and not education. Most parents therefore do not put emphasis on girl-child education. The end result is, some girls dropping out of school due to unwanted pregnancies’

IV. CONCLUSION

In Narok County, teenage pregnancy is increasing at an alarming rate with no effort to combat the social vice. If left unattended, most girls in future will end up as teenage mothers with poor educational development background. The issue of social and cultural factors such as gender preferences, certain aspect of cultural practices, poor parenting as well as poverty need not be ignored by the county and national government as it will ruin girls’ educational aspirations.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

There is need for all the stakeholders including the county government, schools, parents and the community to work hand in hand in ensuring that the social and cultural aspects discussed above are addressed. This will reduce exposure of girls to early and unwanted pregnancies which later disrupt their educational aspirations.

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