
TEENAGE PREGNANCY: IMPLICATION AND GUARDING THE HOPE OF THE HOPELESS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

In Nigeria and most of the developing nations alike, the down trodden is the centre of societal misnomer. The rich have always capitalized on the disadvantaged paraphernalia of the poor to perpetrate all kinds of social evil. The 'sugar-daddy's' victims are most often the poor. The girl child nannies are the poor; the foster child is the poor etc, and all these are the grooming ground for teenage pregnancies. Teenage pregnancy poses great threat, economically, socially and psychologically to both the developed and the developing nations. The worries are that even when the developed nations see this as a threat and are committed to its check, the developing nations seem not to be bothered. If some do, is Nigeria passionate about these classes of people? This paper aims at advancing ideas that can enhance the life styles of the teen mothers in a country whose primary aim is wealth maximization and whose citizens care is left to fate.

In Nigeria and most developing nations, the teens, more so the late teens are the people seen and paraded as ripe for marriage. Even in the developed nations, evidence abound that marriages are contracted to girls of teens. The medieval queen of England, Eleanor of province was 14, 16 and 17 years old when she gave birth to her first three children by her husband, King Henry De III of England; Fantasia Barino, Winner of American Idol 2004, was 17 when she gave birth to her daughter, Zion Quari in 2001; even Dunham, the mother of the 44th president of the United States, Barack Obama, was 18 when in 1961 she gave birth to the president (Zimmerman, 2008). The issue here is not whether marriages are contracted to girls of teens but what is made out of such marriages and the teen mothers. Also, those who gave birth outside marriage in their teens, what is their fate especially in developing nations where the hope of the hopeless is left to fate.

Teenage pregnancy according to Turner, Grind, Staff and Philip (1990) is defined as a teenaged or under aged girl (usually within the ages of 13-19) becoming pregnant. It refers to girls who have not yet reached legal adulthood, (legal adulthood though in Nigeria starts at 18) becoming pregnant and eventually mothers; whether married or unmarried. A non governmental organization; Save the Children, found that annually, 13 million children are born to women under the age of 20 years worldwide, and that 90% of this population come from the developing nations. Treffers (2003) observed that, the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in the world is obtained in the sub-Saharan Africa where women tend to marry at early ages. Supporting this assertion, Macleod (1997) observed that in Niger alone, that out of the total number of 57 women surveyed who are married, 53% had given birth to a child before the age of 18 years.

Facing unplanned teen pregnancy can be difficult and possess some psychological trauma. Emotionally, there are initial excitements, followed closely by confusion, fear, resentment and frustration. Socially, the physical changes may cause gradual withdrawal from peers and play groups and the expansion of the uterus may make her dresses unfit for her. This can generate a variety of negative

activities like drinking, smoking, lack of sleep, unhealthy eating habit etc. which may be harmful to the developing baby. Psychologically, she is emotionally unstable and often thinking of her unknown fate. The social stigma that accompanies out-of-wedlock pregnancy is the peak of the teen pregnant trauma. Economically, childbearing curtails the child's education thereby reducing her employment prospect in the job market.

The pregnant teens have been discovered to be at a greater risk of health problems of anemia, hypertension, renal diseases, eclampsia and depressive disorders (Comba-some, 1993; and Turner, Grindstaff and Philips,1990). The pregnant teens faced with all these problems is not just the issue, rather what the society does to accommodate, accept, and provide for them, their special needs, and in this their peculiar difficulties. In developed countries, some schools provide "abstinence-only" education, and make virginity pledges increasingly popular. According to Valk (2000) most public schools offer "abstinence-plus" programs that support abstinence with advice on contraception. The Dutch curricula focus on values, attitudes, communication and negotiation skills, as well as biological aspects of reproduction. Educational opportunities are equally provided for teen mothers and their media has encouraged open dialogue; and their health-care system guarantees confidentiality and a non-judgmental approach, Valk maintained. In serious developing countries like Indonesia, Sri-Lanka, South Africa and others, laws are enacted against child marriages and relationships. They have also provided a systematic policy framework for teaching about sex within schools, as well as opportunities for teen mothers to continue with their education after birth (Mahta and Roque, 1998). There also exist non governmental agencies such as International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) which provide contraceptive advice for young women worldwide, even in Nigeria. But what has Nigerian government done or what are they doing to provide for this class of the down trodden? Does the society give hope to this hopeless class? Even among the teen mothers, do they have the moral courage to fit in? Finally, is there any hope for this hopeless class of citizens? Hopelessness meaning a state of despair, having no reason or cause to expect a good outcome or success (Robinson and Davidson, 2004).

Teenage Pregnancy: Implication and Guarding...

Causes of Teenage Pregnancy

Apart from the early marriage and traditional gender roles of majority of the sub-Saharan African Countries, most teen pregnancies are unplanned, even in the developed world (UNICEF, 2001; Policy Studies Institute, 1998). However, in the developed nation's evidence abound that teenage mothers become pregnant to get benefits, welfare and council housing (Policy Studies Institute, 1998). In the developing nations, poverty is associated with increased rate of teenage pregnancies. Economically poor countries such as Niger and Bangladesh have far more teenage mothers compared with economically rich countries as Switzerland and Japan (United Nations Fund for Population Activities, 2007). Apart from early marriage and poverty, other factors which have skyrocketed teenage pregnancies in Nigeria and other poor sub-Saharan African countries include:

- Lack of education on safe sex whether from parents, schools, or otherwise peers. That is, not having any cognition of the central facts of sexuality.
- Adolescent sexual behaviour resulting from the class of websites visited films and home videos being watched and at times, engagement in drugs and alcohol.
- Peer pressure encouraged mostly by mixed secondary school system.
- Lack of knowledge of, or access to contraceptives and conventional methods of preventing pregnancy.
- Age discrepancy between the teenage girls and the men they engage in relationships with, and who often impregnate them.
- Sexual abuse of rape and forcing or luring the unsuspecting teen girl to sex.
- Dating violence which often results after the first pregnancy.
- The environment in which the girl child is often raised; (as nannies, foster child and so forth).

- Parent's careless and freelance sexual relationship and behaviour before the teen children.
- Lack of religiosity and monastic way of life in homes.

The Socio-Economic, Biological and Psychological Implications of Teenage Pregnancy on the Victim

Available records show that the one and major socio-economic factor that is closely associated with increased rate of teenage pregnancy is poverty. By implication, poor nations and families encounter more the issue of teen's pregnancy (even in developed countries) than the economically buoyant nations and individuals. Besharow and Gardiner (1987) in their study on trends in teens sexual behaviour, found out that, economically poor countries have far more teenage mothers, compared with economically rich nations. In the United Kingdom, around half of all pregnancies of under 18's were found to be concentrated among 30% most deprived population, with only 14% occurring among the least deprived (Academic Excellence Health Statistics, 2001). Males (2001) noted that teenage birth rates closely mapped poverty rates in California. In Nigeria, how many average parents allow their children of teens to contract marriage and even if mistakenly and outside wedlock a wealthy parent discovers that her child of teen is pregnant, Christianity abound, how many allow such pregnancy?

The socio-economic implications of teenage pregnancy are varied and discerning. Socially, the child is often stigmatized and treated as a recalcitrant child, more so, when it is out of wedlock. Associating with her playmates, religious groups and peers is restricted as the teen pregnant child or mother develops repugnant behaviour which may be detrimental to the child unborn or cause complications before or during delivery. The teen mother would likely also be exposed to domestic violence and family strife. The husbands to teen mothers often are seen treating their wives like maids.

Economically, childbearing may curtail education and thereby reduce the young mother's employment prospect. Low level of education reduces the teen mother's economic viability through life. Thus, if a country's total standard of living is a consequence of per-capita income, then each country with a high teen pregnancy ratio will recreate poor standard of living.

Biologically, the world-wide incidence of premature birth and low birth weight is higher among adolescent mothers; hence the pregnant teens are less likely to receive pre-natal care (Makinson, 1985). However, studies have indicated that young mothers (though in late teens) who receive high quality maternity care have significantly healthier babies than those who do not (Guttermacher Institute, 1999). In Nigeria and other developing countries alike, inadequate nutrition of the pregnant teen is another key factor to complications of pregnancy in teen mothers. Many pregnant teens, especially those made out of wedlock, are subjected to nutritional deficiencies due to lack and poverty. The consequence of this lack and poverty may lead to young mothers and their children vulnerability to HIV and AIDS. The risks of medical complications equally are found to be greater on young mothers below the age of 15 years. This is due to underdeveloped pelvis which can lead to obstructed labour and consequently, caesarean section. Only God knows the rate of availability of this service to the poverty ridden teen mother to be. Non availability of such medical attention may lead to eclampsia, obstetric fistula, infant mortality or even maternal death.

Psychologically, the teen mothers-to-be are usually likely to be psychologically unstable. Even matured pregnant women will attest to psychological instability of the mind, more so, during the last trimesters to talk less of a mentally and emotionally immature adolescent.

Equally, the social stigma of out-of-wedlock pregnancy can result to psychological risks of serious health consequences like hypertension, renal disease, eclampsia, anemia and depressive disorders (Combes-Orme, 1993; Turner, Grindstaff and Philip 1990). These psychological implications can equally affect the psychological development of the child in the fetus. The developmental disabilities and

behavioural issues are increased in children born to teen mothers (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2001). They further observed that adolescent mothers are less likely to stimulate their infant through affectionate behaviours such as touch, smiling, and verbal communication; or to be sensitive and accepting towards their needs. Mothers who had less social support were likely to show anger towards their children or to rely upon punishment (Crockenberg, 1987). Daughters born to adolescent parents are more likely to become teen mothers themselves. Also sons born to young women in their teens are three times more likely to serve terms in prison (Furstenberg and Brooks, 1990, Maynard, 1996).

Guarding the Hope of the Hopeless Teens in Nigeria

In Nigeria, though it seems a twilight is being noticed at the darkest end of the tunnel, fuel price remaining predominantly stable and in all filling stations; a poverty alleviated salary for tertiary institution workers and a promise of a living wage for Civil Servants; consolidation and reconsolidation of finance institutions, victory over constitution amendment; relative stability in the power sector etc, may be likened to giving hope to the hopeless. A better hope for the teens is affirmed through absolute care as an adage says, “there can be no precise prediction, ab-initio, of the ‘fate’ of a pregnant woman; or he who is held on the ground.” This work suggests the following as best practices to curb or in the least, curtail teenage pregnancies, thus sustain hope, than loosing out to seek it:

1. **Joint Parenthood and Nurture:** Recent studies have indicated that teenage pregnancy risks are higher in families whose fathers left the family early in their lives. In a study carried out by Ellis (2003); Furstenberg and Brooks (1990); and Maynard (1996), it was observed that girls whose fathers left the family early in their lives had the highest rates of early sexual activity and adolescence pregnancy, closely followed by those whose fathers left at a later age. While the lowest rates are found in girls whose fathers were present throughout their childhood. Marriage is for better and for worse, as such parents should persevere, stay together and train their children though the economic situation, to reap the benefits of child bearing.
2. **Life-line Communication Linkages:** There should be a free circular flow of communication between parents and their children. The parents especially the mother should establish such rapport that will allow their daughters free access, even to disclose those deals and ideals as is regarded secret. Though parents should scold their children to the point of not sparing the rod, it must be tactfully done to obviate such fears as may tantamount to keeping secrets, secret deals, feelings or even thought. When the child is free with the parents, they will be able to advise her appropriately and in time.

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3. **Childhood Environmental Peace:** Tomkins (2004) observed that one-third of teenage pregnancies could be prevented by eliminating exposure to abuse, violence and family strife. He noted that family dysfunction has an enduring and unfavourable health consequences for women during their adolescent years, the child bearing years and beyond. The family should maintain maximal peace which will regenerate proper care and attention thus, giving the child the sense of belonging and the psychological alertness to shun immoral behaviours.
4. **Adequate Parental Care, Supervision and Upbringing:** Very close to firm communication channel is good care, supervision and moral upbringing. A good parent should be able to read the child's desire, intentions and, or worries from her face. Parents must not wait to be told of the problem before responding to it. Parents should pry into their children's difficulties and make them understand that they are ever willing to help out. Also, the home videos, films and web-sites being watched/visited, should be regulated and monitored.

5. ***Good Educational Foundation and Prospect:*** There is a great connection between education and the child's growth and development. A child who acquires good educational foundation may be more interested in her future prospect than in marriage. More often, pregnancies in teens results more in dropouts. Some teens are said to have been pressured into sex when trapped in their bid to sale their wares during hawking; also in an attempt to raise money to go back to school. Though the extent of fact in this assertion, children who are adequately provided for by their parents are less prone to forced or pressured sex. Improved female literacy and educational prospect will definitely check teenage pregnancy.
6. ***Eradication of Foster Care:*** Foster care has been adjudged one of the major factors that promote teenage pregnancy. The National Casey Alumni Study which surveyed 23 countries in sub-Saharan Africa found that, child birth rate in girls under foster care was more than double the rate of their peers outside the foster care system. Parents should in all circumstances, be ready and willing to live with their children of teens than putting them in the care of foster parents.
7. ***Enacting Laws Against Teens Relationship and Marriage:*** Nigeria should emulate such countries as Indonesia, Sri-Lanka, South Africa etc, where dating a girl under 18 years of age attracts jail sentence. Here in Nigeria, even the law makers are seen marrying the under aged; hence laws are often for the classless. Even at that, let there be a standing law entrenched in the constitution, against dating, marriage or any erotic relation established to have existed between one and any under aged girl (girls below the age of 18 years).
8. ***Teenage Pregnancy, Street Hawking and Guardians:*** ~~Teenage pregnancy, street hawking and guardians~~ ~~Street hawking especially with girls of teens is hazardous.~~ Though it is seen often as a means of livelihood in poverty ridden nations like Nigeria, it should be banned. Biologically, puberty is characterized with many physical changes and development (enlargement of ovaries, buttocks, uterus and breasts). The breast becomes roundish with pointed nipples, the skin becomes plump and succulent, pubic and axilla hair develops, etc. All these features make the girl child attractive and at the same time, develops in men likeness for her and in the girl child, the tendencies to try sex. When such a person is allowed all the freedom with wares on her head walking up and down the street, only God knows what it will earn her. In all, street hawking promotes the incidence of teenage pregnancy and should be avoided especially for girls of teens.
9. ***Creating Employment for the Youths, the Less Privileged and the School Drop-outs:*** Idle mind people say, is the devils workshop. Teenage pregnancy will be drastically reduced if jobs are provided for the teeming youth especially the less privileged that drop out of school for lack of finance.
10. ***Resuscitating the Unisex Boarding School Practice:*** Proximity we can attest, is the father of most relationships. Though a study on the extent to which mixed secondary schools (age of adolescence) practice impact on the sexual relationship of adolescents was not reached, common sense supports that proximity promotes relationships, erotic or otherwise. The beneficiaries of the unisex secondary education are aware that such distance as created during this 'testing' stage, instills moral fear. In fact, it was not usually easy and rampant as it is today, seeing the opposite sex together, standing in the full gaze of the entire public, face to face, giving and accepting dates. This is a no issue today due to familiar-ness. They are always together hence can say, do and practice whatever they so wish.
11. ***Entrenching Values, Attitudes, Communication and Negotiation Skills, as Well as Biological Aspects of Reproduction (The Dutch Approach) in Nigerian Curriculum:*** The Dutch approach to preventing teenage pregnancy which has often made a model to other countries is, focusing curriculum on values, attitudes, communication and negotiation skills, as well as biological aspects of reproduction. Also, their media encouraged open dialogue and their health care system guarantees a

confidentiality and non-judgmental approach (Valk, 2000). Virginity should be seen and taught as a virtue, even celebrated for girls that retained theirs till marriage. Communication and negotiation skills on sexual relationships and behaviour should be taught, as well as the biological reproductive circle. As whether one likes it or not, the child must get to know about it, and probably, in the wrong place and the wrong idea, if not educated.

- 12. *Conscious and Unconscious Inculcation of Moral Values Through Firm Religious Life:*** The child should be made to know God, respect, fear, and keep the commandments and read her bible with due diligence and obedience to the laws.

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Conclusion

Teenage pregnancy is a social as well as an economic issue as it portends low education and employment, high rate of poverty and the psycho-social stigma it carries more so when it is out of wedlock. The correlation between earlier childbearing and failure to complete high elementary school reduces career opportunities for many young mothers. In the study carried out by the National Campaign to Prevent Teens Pregnancy (2002), it was observed that in 1988, 60% of teenage mothers were impoverished at the time of giving birth. Similarly, Levine and Lindsay (1997) in their own research found out that nearly 50% of all adolescent mothers sought social assistance within the first five years of their child's life. A study of 100 teenage mothers in the United Kingdom (a developed nation) found that only 11% received salary, while 89% were unemployed (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999). Most of these researches were carried out in developing nations where assistance are given to the impoverished, yet this high rate of poverty and poor standard of living on the teen mothers were noticed. In developed and developing nations where things work, better support programmes are developed for teenage mothers including the provision of assistance to aid their return to school; provision of counseling and advisory support services; providing employment opportunities for young fathers and teen mothers; providing better childcare facilities and increased availability of support housing services. In Nigeria, the employment prospect of the educated free from social disadvantaged child is lean, to talk less of teen mothers. Though the Nigerian government should make effort to emulate such assistance as is elaborated above, a better means of guarding the hope of the teen children is not to experience teen pregnancy. A better practice is abstinence from sex before adulthood/marriage.

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Teenage Pregnancy: Implication and Guarding...

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Academic Excellence

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