

The anatomy of teen motherhood and schooling

Implementation of school re-entry policy, guidance and counselling, special arrangements for breastfeeding and moral support from teachers play a key role in giving teen mothers a second chance to pursue education



A group of teen mothers in Samburu who have joined catch-up classes - a preparatory and accelerated learning phase - before joining formal schools. The WWW project has opened 25 such centres in 8 counties.

Why is it that some primary school girls get pregnant, deliver, go back to school and achieve excellent learning outcomes while others drop-out and never go back to school?

These were the central questions of a research project undertaken by the WWW project, aimed at unravelling intricacies around teen motherhood and schooling in arid and semi-arid lands (ASAL) in Kenya.

Specifically, the study set out to examine factors that determine re-enrolment and retention of teen mothers in school in ASAL regions in Kenya.

So, what makes the difference?

And so according to the study, for teen mothers to re-enrol and stay in school, child-care, emotional, financial and material support are fundamental.

“All the teen mothers came from poor social-economic backgrounds. Getting a baby, therefore, resulted in a strain in family or household financial resources” the study revealed.

School environment

At the school level, implementation of re-entry policy, guidance and counselling special arrangements to allow time for breastfeeding and moral support from teachers plays a great role in giving teen mothers a second chance to pursue education.

According to the study “teen mothers are faced with a host of challenges that include food insecurity and lack of basic needs, lack of emotional support from the father of the child, balancing parenting roles and schooling, who takes care of the child while she is at school and social stigma”.

Factors that predispose girls to teen pregnancy are female genital mutilation (FGM), poverty, peer pressure, funeral discos (*disco Matanga*), weddings, poor housing and over-age school children.

Guidance and counselling

The study recommends strengthening of guidance and counseling units in school. “Guidance and counselling (G&C) is a critical element in re-enrolment and retention of teen mothers.

How schools and teachers support teen mothers

There exist special arrangements that allow teen mothers to either have their babies brought in at break time and lunch time (for breastfeeding) or being allowed to go home during such breaks to breastfeed



Members of the research team talking to a headteacher in Tana River County. Schools have devised ways of supporting teen mothers to remain in school.

Schools have devised special ways of keeping pregnant teens and mothers in school. For example, there exists special arrangements that allow teen mothers to either have their babies brought in at break time and lunch time (for breastfeeding) or being allowed to go home during such breaks to breastfeed.

Remarkably, in each of the school visited, particular teachers were said to have been personally supportive to teen mothers.

Guidance and Counselling

The research study revealed that guidance and counselling was commonly used to support pregnant adolescents and teen mothers to remain in school. It helped sensitise other pupils in the schools to promote a supportive environment for the pregnant girls and teen mothers.

But when asked how regularly guidance and counselling for the pupils was conducted, one teacher said it was done in an *ad hoc* manner.

“We do it when there are reported cases of indiscipline or when we are informed that some pupils are having romantic relations”.

Additionally, all the guidance and counselling teachers were not trained, and therefore done purely on their own initiative; they lacked technical knowledge required in guidance and counselling.

However, respondents were unanimous that guidance and counselling played a key role in preventing pregnancies, retaining pregnant girls in schools and re-enrolment of teen mothers.

Support from teachers

One girl from a school in Kilifi County said: “When I became pregnant, I told Madam Jane. She counselled me and encouraged me to stay in school. She has been supportive all through. I am due to deliver any time next month but still in school”.

Another girl from Tana River County said: “My teachers kept talking to me and advising me to think about continuing with school after delivery”.

She continued: “My class teacher who is the deputy head teacher also visited me at home to encourage and advise me on the need to return to school”.

A case in point is where a headteacher in Turkana went out of his way to persuade an out of school teen mother to return to school; the school waived all the levies.

“I had been told about the plight of that teen mother and so one day when she came to school to fetch water I convinced her to return to school” said the teacher.

He added: “The girl does not pay anything. She even enjoys the low cost boarding facilities free of charge”.

Discrimination

But despite the gains made, teen mothers and pregnant girls were often subjected to discrimination, ridicule and criticism from peers and staff members.

There were also concerns by some teachers of a possible increase in school pregnancies as a result of supporting adolescent mothers back to school. The project is addressing these concerns through counselling.

School boys culpable for teen pregnancies

A significant number of teens mothers interviewed confessed that their peers - either in secondary or primary school - were responsible for their pregnancy, while the rest had been made pregnant by adults in the community



A teen mother with her baby outside their manyatta (hut) in Samburu County. Primary and secondary school boys were found to be responsible for a significant number of teen pregnancies.

P rimary school boys and those in secondary schools are responsible for a significant number of teen pregnancies. A cross-section of of teen mothers interviewed confessed that their peers - in secondary or primary school - were responsible for the pregnancy, while the rest were made pregnant by adults in the community.

Peers in primary and secondary schools

Notably, in Tana River and Kilifi counties data from different sources revealed that male peers in the same school or neighbouring primary schools were mainly responsible for teen pregnancies.

A teen mother in Kilifi revealed that “we were friends for one year before I became pregnant. I used to visit him at their home. We were in the same school but I was a class behind him. I became pregnant in 2016 and gave birth in April 2017. When I told him about the pregnancy he wanted me to abort but I refused.

She added “We continued being friends and I became pregnant for the second time and delivered in June 2018 and that is when I moved to their home. He is now in class 8 in another school.

In Samburu the main perpetrators were boys in secondary schools while in Turkana it was mainly the adults in community as reported by teen mothers.

A teen mother with 2 children was living with her boyfriend who was a class 8 student in another school. She was being taken care of by her boyfriend’s father.

Using gifts and money

Adults took advantage of the girls by luring them with gifts and money to gain sexual favours.

A teen mother in Samburu said: “We were friends for 3 years and everything was okay until I became pregnant in December 2017. When I told him he began avoiding me, he stopped getting in touch with me. He does not provide for me and the baby even though he works at the local national reserve”.

Culprits shirking responsibility

The overriding theme from the quotes above indicates that the boyfriends of the three teen mothers had refused to take responsibility leaving the teen mothers to single-handedly bring up the babies.

Discussions with out-of-school teen mothers revealed that 5 of the 6 teen mothers dropped out of school as soon as they found out they were pregnant.

Only one of the girls dropped out at 5 months because she felt her uniforms had become smaller and did not want to create attention.

It requires fortitude and emotional strength for a pregnant girl to remain in school or even go back after delivery.

The girls need support at home and in school to continue their education.

The WWW project is working closely with schools and Community Health Workers (CHVs) to support these girls re-enrol in school.

Making STEM subjects more attractive to girls

Evidence from research shows that entrenched stereotypes and 'social belongingness' - where girls prefer careers with more women - are the main reasons why girls are under-represented in science careers



Michael Waiyaki from the Young Science Achievers Programme (YSAP) talking to girls at Kariobangi Secondary Schools about careers in Science and technical fields.

Why is it that women in Kenya are starkly under-represented in science and technical fields? And what can we do to address this imbalance?

These questions have occupied the minds of educationalists and policymakers in Kenya for some time now.

For example, in 2017, there were only 21,400 professional women employed in the science and technical fields in Kenya compared to 52,000 men, more than double the number of women.

Hence, the WWW project have put in place a multi-pronged plan to address this imbalance.

A key pillar of this plan is to break stereotypes - that boys are better than girls in sciences; and also to develop effective teaching methods to make Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) subjects more attractive and easily understood.

Evidence from research shows that entrenched stereotypes and 'social belongingness' - where girls prefer careers with more women - are the main reasons why girls are under-represented in science careers.

A research study by Lin Bian, Sarah-Jane Leslie and Andrei Cimpian shows that girls aged five years are more likely to say that girls can be "really, really smart" but at six years they start thinking brilliance is much more associated with boys than girls.

The WWW project, with support from Young Science Achievers Programme (YSAP) in Kenya, has initiated a mentorship programme to break these stereotypes. The girls are mentored and encouraged to take up STEM subjects.

Also, the Centre for Mathematics, Science and Technology Education in Africa (CEMASTEA) is supporting the project to equip teachers with the right skills and attitudes to teach these subjects.

The WWW project, through our partner, Concern Worldwide, has procured 38 science kits made of locally available materials, to be distributed to schools in Nairobi and Marsabit.

These kits will help teachers demonstrate abstract science concepts and help pupils learn better. The science kits were bought from the School Equipment Production Unit (SEPU).