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Perceptions of secondary school teachers towards school expulsion of pregnant adolescents at Igunga District, Tanzania—a qualitative study

Hamida Nkata, BScN, MPH[a,b], Sandra C.S. Marques, PhD[a,c], Tumaini Nyamhanga, PhD[d], Henrique Barros, MD, PhD[a,e]

Abstract

Background: In Tanzania, adolescent pregnancy results in a denial of the girl's fundamental right to education. School expulsion of pregnant adolescents is a common practice exercised by teachers in this country for decades. This study aimed to explore the perceptions and feelings of secondary school teachers towards this practice.

Methods: The study used a qualitative approach comprising focus groups and individual semistructured interviews with a purposive sample of sixteen teachers and nine headmasters (n=25) from nine secondary schools of the rural Igunga district, in Tabora region, Tanzania. Data was collected in March to June 2017 and submitted to thematic analysis.

Results: Though most participants were not satisfied with the practice, their role on the expulsion of pregnant students was perceived as mandatory by law and regulations. Main argument in favor was its deterrent effect, yet the review of schools' registries did not sustain that perception. Stigma and fear of contamination added a relevant contribution to its implementation. Conflicting feelings among teachers were also disclosed.

Conclusion: This study was of most value to understand current perceptions and feelings of those who exercise the practice of banning pregnant adolescents from school in Tanzania, while having identified some of the cultural and social believes acting as influential factors in its pervasiveness. International and national human rights organizations should increase their efforts and campaigns in order to strength social awareness of the benefit of females' education to society as a whole and of adopting policies and practices in support of their equal right to education.

Keywords: adolescents, African Eastern, pregnancy, Women's human rights

Introduction

The vast majority of adolescents reside in low- and middle-income countries where achieving appropriate standard of sexual and reproductive health is a challenge for all. It is estimated that 95% of all adolescent births occur in low- and middle-income countries.[1] In Tanzania, about one in four [23%] girls between the age of 15 and 19 years is either pregnant or has given birth,[2] which places Tanzania amid the top ten countries rated with the highest number of adolescent pregnancies.[3]

Long-lasting practices of kinship and cultural norms associated with gendered power relations and high value attributed to children (offspring quantity) as a major capital for maintaining the clan lineage, labor, and economic security for the families are not alien to this state of affairs.[4,5] The Law of Marriage Act in place since 1971 in Tanzania reinstated the legality of common practices of early marriage and polygamy. Monogamous as well as polygamous marriage, understood as the permission for a man to be married to one or several women, is allowed at the apparent age of 18 years for males and 15 years for females and at 14 years of age for both with permission of the court.[6] In 2015 to 2016, at least 14.3% of females aged 15 to 19 years were married[7] and therefore with a high exposure to adolescent pregnancy (owing to increased exposure to sex intercourse and pressure to conceive quickly after marriage).[8,9] The other well-known contributing factor to this reality is the high rate of sexual assault, rape, and coercive sex.[10] According to a 2009 national survey commissioned by the United Nations Children's Fund, nearly three in ten women between the ages of 13 and 24 in mainland Tanzania reported having experienced sexual violence at least once before turning 18 years old.

Schoolgirls in Tanzania are the most sufferers of the effect related to adolescent pregnancies. Due to pregnancy, young females are banned from schools and are denied their constitutional right to education.[11] Official provisions to inhibit pregnant girls of attending state primary and secondary schools in Tanzania date back to the 1960s, when the country secured its

[a] EPIUnit – Instituto de Saúde Pública da Universidade do Porto, Porto, Portugal, [b] Nkinga Institute of Health Sciences, P.O. Box 60, Nkinga, Tabora, Tanzania, [c] Centro em Rede de Investigação em Antropologia, Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, Lisbon, Portugal, [d] Department of Development Studies, School of Public Health and Social Sciences, Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences, Dar-Es-Salaam, Tanzania, [e] Departamento de Ciências da Saúde Pública e Forenses e Educação Médica, Faculdade de Medicina, Universidade do Porto, Porto, Portugal.

[*] Corresponding author. EPIUnit, Instituto de Saúde Pública da Universidade do Porto, Rua das Taipas, n° 135, 4050-600 Porto, Portugal.
E-mail address: hamidankata@gmail.com (Hamida Nkata).

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independence from British rule. In the last decade, the country has assisted to some initiatives for change following several African countries with similar realities and histories of policies. In 2009, Tanzania Ministry of Education and Vocational Training developed guidelines on how to enable pregnant adolescents to continue with studies[12] and, in 2012, it was started a process of debate on how to review the Education Act and enact a law that will enable girls to return to school after delivery.[13]

However, Tanzania's National Assembly did not endorse the aforementioned guidelines, and the process of debate to review the Education Act has not been completed to date and schools did not adopt any comprehensive policies towards these goals. As per the 2013 report by the Center for Reproductive Rights, more than 55,000 Tanzanian students have been expelled from school over the previous decade for being pregnant.[14] In 2015 only, at least 3439 [5.6%] dropouts from both public and private secondary schools were due to the same motive.[15]

According to present Mainland Tanzanian schools regulations: "expulsion" is defined as the permanent removal of a pupil from school; "exclusion" is defined as the refusal of admission or readmission of pupils to school; and, "forced or preemptive dropout" is defined as the act whereby a pregnant student drops out of school because she or her family recognizes, or a school official makes clear, that expulsion from school on the basis of pregnancy is inevitable.[14]

Regulation 4 of the 2002 Education Regulations (Expulsion and Exclusion of Pupils from Schools) states that expulsion of a student may be ordered where: (a) the persistent and deliberate misbehavior of the pupil is such as to endanger the general discipline or the good name of the school; (b) the pupil has committed a criminal offence such as theft, malicious injury to property, prostitution, drug abuse, or an offence against morality whether or not the pupil is being or has been prosecuted for that offence; (c) a pupil has entered into wedlock.[16] We note that though matrimony and some behaviors are unambiguously referred as motives to order the expulsion of a student, pregnancy is not specifically addressed in the regulations. To be qualified as motive for expulsion, pregnancy must therefore be understood as the result of persistent deliberate misbehavior of the female student and/or as an offence committed by the female student against morality. Teachers are the agents exercising the power of banning female students from school due to pregnancy under this legal framework set by the state and schools regulations. This study aimed to explore the perceptions and feelings of secondary school teachers towards the practice.

Methods

The study was carried out in rural Igunga district, one of the seven districts of the Tabora region of Tanzania. This area was selected due to the fact that Tabora has one of the highest teenage childbearing rates in the country [43%].[7] The population of Igunga district is approximately 400,000[17] and, in 2017, the district counted 33 secondary schools, 29 of which were public. For this study, we conducted a qualitative inquiry with a purposive sample of 25 participants from 9 secondary schools (7 public and 2 private), along with a review of their schools' registries on school dropout due to pregnancy in the last 5 years. Between March and June 2017, all 9 headmasters from selected schools were individually interviewed as well as 16 teachers from all schools who accepted the invitation to participate in focus group discussions [FGDs], with previous knowledge of their headmasters. Two FGDs were held with 7 and 9 teachers respectively, without the presence of headmasters. Among the total participants, 13 [52%] were male and 12 [48%] were female; participants' age ranged from 26 to 51 years (Table 1).

FGDs and individual interviewing guides were semi structured with open-ended questions. The interview guide developed for the headmasters covered the following topics: participant's perceptions and feelings towards school expulsion of pregnant girls; in-school available strategies to reduce school pregnancies; current state regarding pregnancies at school; and recommendations on the subject. Regarding the FGD interview guide, three topics were explored, covering: participants' perceptions and feelings towards school expulsion of pregnant students, and recommendations on the subject.

Data collection was conducted face-to-face in Kiswahili language by two Tanzanian researchers (one being involved in all phases of the study). Participation was voluntary and signed informed consent was obtained from all participants before initiating interviews. FGD lasted one hour and individual interviews lasted half an hour, on average. All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed by the interviewers, and then translated into English. Data was then submitted to a thematic analysis by a team of two researchers. Thematic recurrences and significant divergences were extracted. Narrative analysis for the entire transcripts of individual participants was also conducted. Themes emerged from participants' narratives were then refined, revised, grouped, and hierarchized in order to form a comprehensive picture of main perceptions, experiences, and feelings towards the subject in study.

Approval to conduct this study was granted by Tanzania National Institute for Medical Research. Permission to conduct the study in Igunga district's secondary schools was granted by District Executive Director and District Education Officer. All generated data within this study is secured in protected dedicated storage and kept for a precise period after the completion of the PhD project which frames it, as required by ISPUP, its host institution. Identifier marks or personal information that could breech participants' privacy will not be used in the reporting of study results.

Results

The results are organized in three sections, reflecting main relevant themes emerged from the coding of participants'

Table 1

Participants characteristics

	Individual interviews	FG 1	FG 2
Head Master	9		
Gender			
F	3		
M	6		
Age			
26–40	3		
41–51	6		
Teacher		7	9
Gender			
F		4	5
M		3	4
Age			
26–40		7	7
41–51		0	2

FG 1 = Focus group 1, FG 2 = Focus group 2.

narratives: (1) Participants' perceptions towards school expulsion of pregnant adolescents; (2) Participants' feelings towards school expulsion of pregnant adolescent; (3) Available in-school strategies to reduce school pregnancies. Selected quotes from participants are used to illustrate findings. Quoted individuals in these results are identified by 'Tn' (teacher) and 'HMn' (headmaster), followed by gender. Example: 'T7, F'.

Perceptions towards school expulsion of pregnant adolescents

School expulsion is required by law and regulations. Almost all participants spontaneously stated that school expulsion of pregnant students is mandatory by law and Education Regulations and no one had referred to the possibility of a different interpretation. "Regulations are very straight, a student should not be allowed to return to school once pregnant nor to practice sexual intercourse" (T7, F).

Nonetheless, the majority of inquired teachers were not in full agreement with the practice (see Table 2). Eleven participants, including three headmasters, expressed disagreement with the practice and 4 teachers refrained from expressing their opinion. Those overtly in favor of the practice, the majority of whom were headmasters and males, considered that expulsion has a positive deterrent effect: "(. . .) expelling them will act as a lesson to our girls; they will fear and therefore concentrate more on studies" (HM9, F).

Perceived current state of school pregnancies. The main argument presented in favor of the practice of school expulsion of pregnant students was its deterrent effect. All headmasters, but one, affirmed that the number of pregnancies at school was continuously decreasing when compared with previous years. In order to access the accuracy of these perceptions, researchers reviewed all 9 schools' registries of the number of students who were expelled due to pregnancy for the preceding 5 years.

To illustrate our findings, we selected one example of one school reported by the headmaster as experiencing continuously decreasing and the one of the school reported as experiencing increasing of the number of detected students' pregnancies. In the first case, the headmaster declared: "It has been reduced greatly. For the two years I have been here, only one girl was caught pregnant and was expelled immediately" (HM4, F). The school's registry revealed the following decreasing proportions for consequent years from 2012 to 2016: 4.5%, 2.7%, 0.4%, 1.3%, and 0.8%. In the second case, according to the headmaster: "No, the number is increasing. Many are expelled here due to pregnancy. Imagine, I only have two months here and already two students have been expelled" (HM8, M). The school's registry revealed the following proportions staring from 2012, 0.4%, 0.2%, 0.6%, 0.7%, and 0.2% in 2016.

As displayed above, schools' registries did not sustain either one or the other perception towards the evolution of the proportion of detected students' pregnancies nor did they sustain the perception that school expulsion of pregnant students is having a deterrent effect.

Stigma and fear of contamination. Several participants expressed fearing contamination if pregnant students were given a chance to remain in school. According to them, that will encourage more girls to become pregnant. As the following selected statements illustrate: "There is no way they can be combined with other students who are not pregnant. They are no longer girls; they have become adults" (HM9, F); "if they remain in school, other girls will be spoiled" (T15, F). "However, we need to reconsider those who were expelled due to pregnancy. Find a way to give them education. If we can develop a special program like evening classes I think they will manage" (HM8, M).

Stigma is a construction of deviation from some ideal or expectation causing isolation and rejection and subsequent prejudice and discrimination to those who are stigmatized.[18] The above selected out of many statements reveal that the practice of school expulsion of the pregnant student is entangled in a stigma only inflicted to the young female. Participants labeled the pregnant students as "playing with boys," "adults," "mothers," physically and psychologically unsuitable to stay in school, "spoiled," contagious and an embarrassment to themselves and others.

Feelings towards school expulsion of pregnant adolescents

Findings on participants' feelings towards the school expulsion of pregnant adolescents were unanticipated. The main outcome is that no one was satisfied with it. The overwhelming majority of teachers expressed feeling bad or having mixed feelings about the practice, even though some stated their agreement with it for its deterrent effect. Participants lamented the prospective future of lack of education and often poverty for the girl and tried to position themselves as parents, expressing that the situation was

Table 2

Position expressed by participants towards expulsion of pregnant students

Participants		Agree with the policy of expulsion	Disagree with the policy of expulsion	N/A	Feel positive about it	Feel negative about it	Mixed feelings
Headmasters	9	6	3	0	2	7	0
F		2	1	0	2	1	0
M		4	2	0	0	6	0
Teachers FG 1	7	2	3	2	0	5	0
F		1	2	1	0	3	0
M		1	1	1	0	2	0
Teachers FG 2	9	2	5	2	0	6	3
F		1	2	2	0	3	2
M		1	3	0	0	3	1
Total	25	10	11	4	2	18	3

FG 1 = Focus group 1, FG 2 = Focus group 2, N/A = Did not clearly state his/her position.

hard, painful to accommodate. "Imagine if the girl was my own daughter, I won't feel good, I feel bad, because education is very important in life today" (T13, M, 41 yrs).

Available in-school strategies to reduce school pregnancies

Female focused strategies. Participants mentioned several available in-school strategies to reduce school pregnancy. Overall, those strategies were female focused and based on vigilance and control. Regular pregnancy check-ups towards the enforcement of the regulations and dormitory facilities only for girls being the most mentioned strategies. "We take all girls to hospital for pregnancy check-up (. . .) regularly. Also, we have dormitories only for girls especially those coming from long distances" (HM2, M). "We offer regular pregnancy check-ups. We are doing it manually, although it is very challenging because early pregnancy cannot be detected" (T3, F).

Educative strategies. Educative strategies were poor or nonexistent. Only two schools were reported as having educative in-school strategies to reduce pregnancies, in both cases described by the headmasters as "counseling." "We give counseling to our students on how to live here at school, we tell them about dangerous days and the importance of using condoms in order to avoid pregnancy" (HM8, M). Once again focusing on the girls, participants insisted on the role of close supervision by parents in preventing, for example, known practices of unsafe abortion. "It really needs close supervision; some students are clever to the extent that they can remove pregnancy on their own without parents' knowledge; girls are using cassava leaves, jik (washing detergent), . . . " (T1, F).

Perceived current state of available in-school strategies. Overall, participants recognized the limited provision of sexual and reproductive health education offered at school. Participants suggested requiring assistance from parents, government health workers, Non-Governmental Organizations, religious leaders as well as all media. "Sexual and reproductive health education is very important. The government and NGO's should cooperate to improve this. Moreover, health workers in nearby health centers and dispensaries should be invited to school to teach our students about sexual and reproduction health" (HM3, F).

Discussion

Our findings did not show relevant divergences in the narratives between participants of different ages, schools, or private and public sectors. However, some divergences related to gender and role of the teacher in the school were found. Overall, participants perceived school expulsion of pregnant students as mandatory by law and Education Regulations and no one referred to the possibility of a different interpretation, though the law is not forthright about it, as we've described in the Introduction. Researchers found that it was a sensitive subject to address and that teachers felt some reluctance to speak about it. Nonetheless, overall inquired participants revealed not being satisfied with the practice. All, but two, revealed negative or mixed feelings about exercising it, mainly drawn on compassion for the parents and the poor prospective for the girl. It is well known the potential for curtailed livelihood options, limited economic independence, lower level of empowerment in adulthood and even less decision-making parity within conjugal relationships.[20,21]

Adolescents' pregnancies are invariably treated as an evidence of the female adolescent engaging voluntarily in sexual practice or prostitution, offences punishable with school expulsion. Though participants are also aware of many cases of sexual assault and even the involvement of male adults and teachers, only two female participants dared to advocate the punishment of the male involved, and even so, no one mentioned the possibility of exempting the girl. Tanzanian Sexual Offences Special Provision Act states that having sex with a girl below age 18 is a rape and even a boy of same age (if he is above 10 years of age). If one is found guilty could face up to 30 years imprisonment.[22] Consequently, as it was argued by one participant, victim and surrounding people keep silence, fearing to uncover the male responsible in consideration of the perspective of the severity of the punishment and future care for the baby. A previous study reported that occasionally pregnant girls have also been detained, interrogated, or arrested by police in an effort to identify the male who caused the pregnancy.[14]

The punishment and the stigma are only inflicted to the pregnant girl revealing the strong social discrimination of the young female that becomes a mother outside marriage. Motherhood belongs to the realm of adults, achieved by age or by marriage, as reflected in the labels used to refer the pregnant student. Similar findings on this stigma of disgrace are reported for other countries in this African region.[23] Fear of contamination was the other major argument presented in favor of the school expulsion of pregnant adolescents. Participants' point of view was that giving them a chance to continue schooling will encourage more girls to become pregnant. This fear led some participants to advocated programs such as "evening classes" for pregnant adolescents promoting their segregated re-entry in school. This idea, not only implies the implementation of another discrimination practice against pregnant adolescents, it also creates unnecessary extra burden to the education system. A neighboring country Kenya is making use of very different strategies to address the issue, embracing the active encouragement of pregnant girls to stay in school as long as possible and the re-entry of adolescent mothers.[24]

Overall in-school strategies implemented to reduce school pregnancies were female focused and based on vigilance and control towards regulations' enforcement. Girls are often exposed to regular pregnancy check-ups which are always mandatory either by a school's matron or in nearby health facilities (antenatal clinics). This is yet another practice that violates their human rights, subjecting them to distressful procedures without their consent. It has been reported that the procedure is not explicitly supported by any national level law, regulations, or policy.[14]

Most participants reported that school pregnancy is decreasing with these practices, therefore proving its positive deterrent effect in the occurrence of students' pregnancies. However schools' registries do not sustain this perception. Moreover, other possible explanations for the reduction of detected pregnancies may be the increasing use of contraceptives, self-withdrawal, as negative as expulsion, or the practice of unsafe clandestine abortion, as it was mentioned by one participant, with even more serious consequences for the girl. In Tanzania, pregnancy termination is only legally available if the pregnancy is a threat to the woman's life. Hence, many women and girls with an unwanted pregnancy, particularly in rural areas, try to secretly induce the abortion themselves.[19] A previous study identified a significant number of students with unsafe abortion and the most cited reason was fear of school expulsion.[25] Fortunately it is also reported that male students are slowly resourcing to condoms and the fear of school

expulsion due to pregnancy also made some parents to tolerate or even actively support the early use of contraception by their daughters.[26]

Participants also insisted in the importance of parents' supervision in preventing adolescent pregnancy. A study in Nigeria found that adolescents manifested similar opinion.[23] Our findings illustrate, however, the gender inequality in the prevalent approach to reproductive health issues.[5] Full responsibility in preventing pregnancy is left to females and adolescent pregnancy is perceived as girl's fault. Formal and family education and support are determinant in empowering individuals to make informed decisions and progress socially and financially. It is important to strengthen social awareness on the benefit of implementing educative strategies addressing both boys and girls since they are equally experiencing risky sexual behaviors predisposing them to sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancies.

Conclusion and recommendations

The participation of teachers exercising different roles in both Tanzanian public and private secondary schools offered useful insights into current perceptions and feelings on school expulsion of pregnant students within the teachers' community. It also allowed to identify some of the cultural and social believes acting as influential factors in the pervasiveness of the practice. Equal access to quality education is one of the most effective interventions to empower adolescents with the most basic skills to thrive and make positive contributions to society. Regarding adolescent pregnancy, it is even of greater relevance for girls so that they are able to recognize their options, negotiate sexual and reproductive desires, and to demand access to protection and good quality services for reproductive health. In addition to suggestions presented along the discussion of results, it is recommended that more efforts should be made in order to strengthen social awareness of the benefit of females' education to society as a whole and of adopting policies and practices in support of their equal right to education. The process towards strengthening Tanzanian policies which favor all students to remain in school should be resumed.

Limitations

Teachers recruited to this study have been selected and contacted with the previous knowledge of their headmasters and their response may have been influenced both by the school status regarding adolescents' pregnancies and the headmaster's official position on the matter. The reluctance to speak about it among those who participated added to the small number of teachers that have accepted the invitation further indicate the sensitive nature of the approached subject. Focus group discussions were conducted with teachers from various schools and without the presence of headmasters to mitigate this limitation. It is the authors' opinion that the subject is so pertinent and in such need of updated findings on the current situation that the outcome exceeded it.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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