



Teenage pregnancy in Zimbabwe: A call for expedited interventions

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Dear Editor.

Zimbabwe has a perennial challenge of teenage pregnancies. Despite several years of discussions around ending the problem, reports have continued to emerge of a rise in teenage pregnancies (Nunu et al., 2020). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the pre-existing risk factors for this problem due to a multitude of factors (Murewanhema et al., 2022). In this correspondence, we highlight the ‘wicked nature’ of teenage pregnancies and call upon all the relevant stakeholders and policymakers to prioritise the design and implementation of effective strategies to reduce the burden and eliminate teenage pregnancy as a significant public health problem.

Notable drivers of teenage pregnancy include socioeconomic, religious, and cultural factors, and in recent years, heightened exposure to the internet and various social media platforms. Zimbabwe is a poor country, currently going through a wave of hyperinflation, plunging many families into absolute or extreme poverty as defined by the World Bank. A significant proportion of the population lives in extreme poverty and struggles to access the basic necessities of life such as food, shelter, and clothing (Nunu et al., 2020). Girls are still significantly treated as inferior in some communities, and during hard times are made to drop out of school, to help in working and fending for families, or are married off early for bride price, which is a norm across some Zimbabwean societies. More often, they may be married to older men and in polygamous relationships, and this is more common in some religious sects, which also do not believe in modern contraception or healthcare (Yah et al., 2020).

Traditionally, parents could marry their daughters to ‘wealthier men’, and this is still happening in some societies. Some families also marry their daughters to older men as a replacement for dead or incapacitated female relatives. Heightened exposure to the internet and various social media platforms has increased the vulnerability of young children, both girls, and boys, and has resulted in early indulgence in sexual activities (Nunu et al., 2020). Contributory factors to an increase in teenage pregnancy during the COVID-19 pandemic included

prolonged closure of schools, idleness, increased free time in the community, and escalating poverty levels due to reduced sources of income/livelihoods for significant others (Murewanhema et al., 2022).

Teenage pregnancies are a wicked problem both in causes and in effects. The negative repercussions of teenage pregnancies at individual, family, and societal levels are far-reaching. Generally in Zimbabwe, a woman who becomes pregnant as a teenager will not return to school, will have no technical skills, and therefore will continue in poverty. They turn to informal jobs such as cross-border trading, vending, and commercial sex work, which are all significant risk factors for the acquisition of sexually transmitted infections like human immunodeficiency virus (UNFPA, 2018). These reproductive health infections in turn lead to a myriad of short and long-term health challenges, including acute and chronic pelvic inflammatory disease, subfertility, ectopic pregnancies, and chronic pelvic pain. Additionally, young girls/women are at an increased risk of repeated unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortions. During the pregnancy itself, teenage pregnancy is a high-risk pregnancy and needs special attention from specialised personnel, which is often difficult (UNFPA, 2018).

Families led by teenagers are socioeconomically unstable, have lower levels of income, and have a high risk of sexual and gender-based violence. Teenage mothers may fail to bond with their babies, and in the long run, their children are also at risk of teenage pregnancies, social instability, not going to school, substance use, and a myriad of other challenges. Teenage pregnancies result in a significant loss of human capital, and this is undesirable for economic growth. The challenges posed by an increased incidence of teenage pregnancies in any society are not exhaustive but suffice to say that it goes beyond just being a public health concern (Aluga and Okolie, 2021).

Like other wicked problems, there are no easy solutions or ‘one-size-fits-all’ for teenage pregnancies. Proactive approaches, requiring continuous surveillance of the problem extent and implementation of risk-reduction strategies are required. The challenge of teenage pregnancies requires solutions at individual, family, societal and national

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levels, and by players/stakeholders from different sectors including education, sexual and reproductive health, public health, law and order, and religious sectors (Aluga and Okolie, 2021). The public health lens provides an important view but is by far not sufficient to address this problem. Education of the girl child and the deprioritisation of boys to create a balance is a critical step. In schools, comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education is indispensable. Returning teenage mothers to school or providing them with vocational skills is important. However, effective legislation to deal with individuals who have sex with young children is required, including in religious sectors where children are still married to older men, oftentimes without their consent (UNFPA, 2018).

Reducing the incidence of teenage pregnancies in Zimbabwe is a matter that deserves urgent attention. We, therefore, call upon the government and all stakeholders involved to expeditiously put in place interventions to deal with this problem.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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