

## Becoming a Single Teenage Mother: A Vicious Cycle

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**ABSTRACT** The aim of the study was to investigate the psycho-social impact of single parenthood on teenage mothers. A phenomenological study was conducted. Nine participants were purposefully selected for the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data. Thematic content analysis was used to analyze data. The study found that single teenage motherhood is psychologically distressful, affects relationships with significant others, their education and leads to economic dependence on parents and government grant. The single teenage mothers should get support from their parents, peers, teachers and the community to help them cope with the challenges that they encounter.

### INTRODUCTION

Teenage pregnancy refers to the pregnancy of a teenager or under aged girl, usually within the ages of 13–19 years (Chibuzo 2010). The term in everyday speech usually refers to pregnancies of women who have not reached legal adulthood. Teenage pregnancy is a problem in society. It puts a burden on the economy as the babies need to be taken care of, and because the mothers are still young and unemployed. Because of that they rely mostly on financial support from the government. Thus, teenage pregnancy impacts negatively on the single mother, the family and community at large (Driessna 2006).

In the United States, teenage parenting continues to be a significant social problem despite dramatic declines in the rates of adolescent pregnancy and childbearing since the early 1990s (Witman et al. 2001). More than 750,000 teens fall pregnant each year, with more than 50% resulting in live births. Of those births, approximately 90% of the mothers choose to assume responsibility of parenting themselves, rather than putting their children up for adoption (Witman et al. 2001). Worldwide, rates of teenage pregnancy range from 143 per 1000 in some

sub-Saharan African countries to 2.9 per 1000 in South Korea (Treffers 2003). Studies conducted around the globe indicate that the high increase of teenage pregnancy is the main cause of single parenthood, especially single motherhood. Single parenthood (also lone parent, solo parent and sole parent) is a parent who cares for one or more children without the physical, psychological and sometimes financial assistance of the other parent (Witman et al. 2001).

In South Africa, teenage single motherhood is so widespread that it has become a norm in society (Spicker 2011). The percentage of teenage girls falling pregnant and ending up being single mothers is steadily increasing in South Africa, especially in poor communities (World Population Awareness 2011). Despite the fact that some people perceive teenage motherhood as normal, it haunts the South African society. Single teenage motherhood has devastating consequences on the young South African mothers (Spicker 2011), their family, community and nation at large (Chilman 1980). This shows that the teenagers engage in unprotected sex. This is worrying at a time South Africa is regarded as having the highest prevalence of HIV infection in the world (Human Sciences Research Council 2010). As in most communities in South Africa, Khujwana village in Limpopo Province also faces the problem of teenage single motherhood.

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### Conceptualisation

Being a single mother at a very young age can be difficult. Not only will you need to worry

about the welfare of your child, but you also have to worry about continuing your education. A single-parent is a parent who cares for one or more children without the physical assistance of the other parent in the home (Miller and Ridge 2001). Single parenthood may vary according to the local laws of different nations or regions. Single parenthood may occur for a variety of reasons. A few possible scenarios are by choice, as in divorce, adoption, artificial insemination, surrogate motherhood, while others are the result of an unforeseeable occurrence, such as a death, child abuse, child neglect, or abandonment by biological parents (Miller et al. 2010).

The living and parenting arrangements for single parents are diverse. Quite a number of them live in households with family, other adults or alone in the house, apartments, condos or government assisted housing (Millar and Tess 2001). When parents separate, one party, usually the primary parent, has the children the majority of the time but secondary or 'non-resident' parents continue to share some type of parenting time and responsibility, to some extent, with their child (Miller and Ridge 2001).

Single parenthood is a term that is mostly used to suggest that one parent has most of the day to day responsibility in the raising of the child or children. In western society in general, following separation, a child will end up with a 'primary carer'. The main carer, for example, in UK over 90% of the time is the mother and a 'secondary carer', is normally the father. In the UK, and U.S.A for example, it is widely accepted, that it is in the 'children's best interests' to have both parents' involvement. Because of that the practice is to encourage each parent to respect the other parent in the children's presence and to offer financial help through child support for the parent that carries the most responsibility (Callister 2006). Any benefits, tax credits and related government-sponsored assistance are given 100% to the primary carer, if the secondary parent does not have the ability to financially care for their child.

In 2006, 12.9 million families in the U.S. were headed by a single-parent, 80% of them by a female. Since 1994, the percentage of US households headed by a single parent has remained steady at around 9%, which has nearly doubled since 1970 (Chloe 2009). In 2003, 14% of all Australian households were single-parent families. Since 2001, 31% of babies born in Australia were

born to unmarried mothers, although calculated single mothers may not be single, as they may be living with the other biological parent without being formally married. In the United Kingdom, there were 1.9 million single parents as of 2009, with 3 million children. About 1 out of 4 families with dependent children are single-parent families, 8 to 11 % of which have a male single-parent. UK poverty figures show that 52% of the single parent families are below the Government-defined poverty line (after housing costs). In South Korea, where societal disapproval of unmarried mothers is strong, 1.6% of births in 2007 were to unmarried women, and, of those women, 70% are estimated to have opted for adoption (Chloe 2009).

Abhishek (2008) states that the rise in the number of single parents is not limited to the Western world. In South Africa, in 1998, over a fifth of all households were run by single parents (Agarwal 2011). Sadly, many South African children grow up without fathers. According to Agarwal, in some cases, fathers have had to leave the family home to find work across the country's borders. In others, the fathers have fallen victim to AIDS, leaving widows and orphans in their wake. Some women have single-parenthood forced on them by war.

According to Bergman (2007), single parent families are at a higher risk of poverty than couple families, and on average single mothers have poorer health than couple mothers. Single parenting is strongly associated with an increased risk of a number of negative social, behavioral and emotional outcomes for children. However, while the association is strong, on balance, the effect, size and the actual numbers affected are modest. Most children from single parent families do well. Many factors influence how children develop in single-parent families: the parent's age, education level, and occupation; the family's income; and the family's support network of friends and extended family members (including the non-resident parent, if available). Disadvantages that often accompany single parenting appear to cause most of this association rather than single parenting itself (Bergman 2007).

Bergman (2007) also indicates that shocking headlines do get published. For example, a 2003 Swedish study, stated that those living with a single parent were about three times more likely to kill themselves or end up in the hospital after

an attempted suicide by the age of 26 than children living with two parents. However, this only happened to 2.2 % of girls and 1 % of boys.

Single parent families are often thought of as broken families (Whitehead 1993). It is commonly argued that both parents are necessary to take care of the children. One should, therefore, understand its causes and how serious its consequences are to children and society at large. Berner (1992) indicates that single parenthood occurs due to the choice of a mother. However, the majority of single parents do not attain their status by choice. Humphrey (1988) found out that about 80% of single parents were married at a later stage.

Whitehead (1993) indicates that the causes of single-parenthood vary enormously. Single parenthood can be caused by the following: divorce, the death of a spouse, having a child out of wed-lock, adoption, and early pregnancy. Divorce is the legal separation of a married couple. When a couple divorce, they or the court can decide who gets custody of their child or children.

Single parenting can also be caused by the death of the partner resulting in the other partner who is in most cases the woman, taking sole care of their child. Single parenting caused by death of a partner undergoes some stages such as anger, denial, depression, bargaining, and finally goes to acceptance. This is the most difficult cause of single parenthood as it is not by choice from either of the partners, unlike the other causes of single parenthood where one or both partners can be attributed to the single parenthood (Whitehead 1993). According to Barker (1999), the increase in single parent families is an outgrowth of the decline in forced or 'short gun weddings.

According to Macleod (1999), a woman may voluntarily become a single parent to an adoptive child from the beginning rather than later separating from a partner. This form of single parenting is widely accepted these days, mostly because women choose to pursue a career and disregard the idea of being married and having their own children.

Single parenting can also be caused by early pregnancy. These kinds of single parents are very common to teenagers, who become rebellious from their parents. They feel neglected by their parents not only of their needs, but their love and attention that they expected from them.

Because of these feelings of being neglected, teenagers learn to find and look for someone who can fulfill their love and affection that commonly results in early pregnancies (Knight 2009).

Single parenting caused by early pregnancy is very difficult to manage because teenagers are still immature, inconsiderate and unprepared to face the future. Because of immaturity, the relationship of teenagers with their partners usually ends early (Knight 2009).

### Teenage Pregnancy

Teenage pregnancy is currently increasing rapidly at a pace of about 90% than was the case ten years ago. This means the population is multiplying as days goes by. In some societies, early marriage and traditional gender roles are important factors in the rate of teenage pregnancy (Chibuzo 2010). For example, in some sub-Saharan African countries, early pregnancy is often seen as a blessing because it is proof of the young woman's fertility. In the Indian sub-continent, early marriage and pregnancy is more common in traditional rural communities compared to the cities (UNICEF 2001).

The lack of education on safe sex, whether it's from parents, schools, or otherwise, is a cause of teenage pregnancy. Many teenagers are not taught about methods of birth control and how to deal with peers who pressure them into having sex before they are ready. Many pregnant teenagers do not have any cognition of the central facts of sexuality. Some teens have said that they are pressured into having sex with their boyfriends when they were young and yet no one had taught these teens how to deal with this pressure or to say "no" (MacLeod 1999). In societies where adolescent marriage is uncommon, young age at first intercourse and lack of contraceptive can be the causes for teen pregnancy. Most teenage pregnancies in the developed world appear to be unplanned.

According to Chibuzo (2010), in the developed world, the causes of teenage pregnancy is different from that in the developing countries in the sense that it is mostly outside marriage and carries a lot of social stigma. Thus, adolescent sexual behaviour is one of the causes of teenage pregnancy. Having sex before one is twenty is the norm all over the world today and this has brought about high levels of adolescent pregnancy which are a result of sexual rela-

tionships among teenagers. Comprehensive information about sex is lacking (Guttmacher Institute 2011).

The intake of drugs, alcohol to mention a few contributes a lot to teenage pregnancy. A teenager who is intoxicated may have sex when he/she is not ready to have sexual intercourse. This is because sex at that time is less emotionally painful and embarrassing (Chibuzo 2010).

Furthermore, sexual abuse is also one of the causes of teenage pregnancy. Rape is a form of a sexual abuse which leads to teenage pregnancy (Chibuzo 2010). Studies have found that between 11% and 20% of pregnancies in teenagers are direct results of rape, while about 60% of teenage mothers have had unwanted sexual experiences preceding their pregnancy.

According to Saewyc et al. (2004), before age 15, a majority of first intercourse experiences among females are reported to be non-voluntary. Sixty percent of girls who had sex before age 15 were coerced by males who on average were six years their senior. One in five teenage fathers admitted to forcing girls to have sex with them. Multiple studies have indicated a strong link between early childhood sexual abuse and subsequent teenage pregnancy in industrialised countries. Saewyc et al. (2004) indicate that up to 70% of women who gave birth in their teens were molested as young girls; by contrast to, 25% of women who did not give birth as teens but were also molested.

In some countries, sexual intercourse between a minor and an adult is not considered consensual under the law because a minor is believed to lack the maturity and competence to make an informed decision to engage in fully consensual sex with an adult. In those countries, sex with a minor is, therefore, considered statutory rape (Saewyc et al. 2004). In most European countries, by contrast, once an adolescent has reached the age of consent, he or she can legally have sexual relations with adults because it is held that in general (although certain limitations may still apply), reaching the age of consent enables a juvenile to consent to sex with any partner who has also reached that age. Therefore, the definition of statutory rape is limited to sex with a person under the minimum age of consent. What constitutes statutory rape ultimately differs by jurisdiction.

Age discrepancies also cause teenage pregnancy in the sense that a teenage girl with a

partner much older than herself is more likely to get pregnant more often than a girl that has a partner closer to her in age, (Chibuzo 2010). Clement (1998) reports that a commonly held belief is that a large number of young women living in disadvantaged circumstances deliberately plan their pregnancies, in order to make financial or material gain in the form of welfare payments and access to subsidized or council housing.

### **Impact of Single Parenthood on Teenage Mothers**

A lot of pregnant teens do not know where to turn when they find out they are pregnant. They do not want to tell their parents and end up trying to hide the pregnancy as long as they can. The effect of this is bad prenatal care. The teen does not realise the importance of good nutrition to promote good health for her and the child (Teen Pregnancy Help 2010). They also do not realise the major effects of drug and alcohol use and getting an accurate amount of sleep at night. Many activities that a teen may perform could be too strenuous for her when she is pregnant also. According to Miller and Ridge (2001), single parent families are at a higher risk of poverty than couple families, and on average single mothers have poorer health than couple mothers.

Finishing school and participating in activities after the child is born becomes a big chore. The mother may be able to get help and do some of the activities that she likes to do but feelings of guilt and of not fitting in with the other young people of her age, makes school unattractive. All of this is natural for a teen pregnancy (Teen Pregnancy Help 2010). Prior to having their children teenage mothers are more likely to be low achievers at school and have a history of school non-attendance or delinquency (Clement 1998). According to Chilman (1980), adolescent parenthood was one of the factors which contributed to dropping out of high school. He argues further that half or more of early school drop-outs because of parenthood returned to school in later life, often in middle age. A 17-year longitudinal study demonstrated 50% less graduation rates for adolescent mothers when compared to delayed child bearers matched for SES and ethnicity (Corcoran 1998).

Teenage single mothers are more likely to depend on state benefits and to live in poor hous-

ing. It is more likely that they will drop out of school and not go to college or university. They are less likely to find stable and well-paid employment. This will cause the teenage mother and the child to live in poverty (Clement 1998). According to Chilman (1980), adolescent single mothers were slightly more likely to be dependent on welfare than married adolescent or non-mothers of similar backgrounds.

Many emotional problems occur during this time also (Whitman et al. 2001). Depression could make the mother feel like she is no good and a worthless person. She may also feel resentment to her partner for doing this to her. A lot of young women who are pregnant have a lot of fear that they cannot be the mothers they want to be (Whitman et al. 2001). Frustration that they will not be able to do the things that the rest of their peers are doing will also affect them (Kaplan 1996).

Studies, both in the UK and elsewhere, have shown that teenage mothers are more likely than non-parenting peers to have lower self-esteem, and to lack purpose in life (Clement 1998). Furthermore, the parenting skills of young mothers were found to be of poorer quality than those of older mothers. Due to this lack of experience, parenting tends to be stressful for them, especially for single mothers.

Teen mothers are often not emotionally ready to cope with stressors associated with parenthood. In part, this lack of readiness is due to the fact that they often have reduced cognitive resources and are forced to cope with tasks associated with adolescent development, including a search for self-identity, self-esteem, and peer acceptance, while simultaneously attempting to resolve the challenging tasks associated with parenthood. Thus, it is not surprising that depression, frustration, and aggression occur with higher frequency among pregnant adolescents than pregnant adults (Whitman et al. 2001).

Whitman et al. (2001) also indicate that adolescent mothers may carry over hostility transferred from fathers who have abandoned their responsibilities to their sons. Even without added emotional baggage, an adolescent forced to parent a young child faces a demanding task, requiring patience, tolerance, and emotional control- challenges that many adolescent mothers find difficult as they search for their own self-identity. Not surprisingly, a variety of studies

suggest that pregnant adolescents have poorly integrated personalities and a low self-esteem.

In a study conducted by Kaplan (1996), teenage mothers reported that being teenage mothers placed great stress on their relationships with their mothers. Kaplan (1996) also indicates that these teen mothers were also adolescents, a period during which girls are often experiencing anxiety and confusion as they strive for maturity, to develop trust and make connections with others. Kaplan (1996) further indicates that compounding these challenges were problems caused by the break-up of important relationships with important people in the teenage mother's life: the babies' fathers disappearing from their lives and friends gossiping about them. These abandonments caused teen mothers to turn to their mothers for increased emotional and financial support, only to find both unavailable. At the same time, they have to learn how to be mothers.

In South Africa, single parenthood is a serious issue. In addition to the high divorce rate and a high teenage pregnancy since 1990, there are many single teenage mothers who need support (Frenkel 1998). This tends to promote single parenthood. Single parent families, in which women are the sole heads of the households, are as a result, predominant (Kanyane 1995). However, compared to single mothers, single fathers are not negatively impacted by single parenthood as much as their female counterparts. It is highly unlikely for a single father to raise a child on his own without the assistance of a female partner. Ways of coping with single parenthood vary by class. Lower class men rarely assume responsibility for heading a family without a spouse because they have very few resources for housekeeping or inadequate facilities. Upper class men may head a partial family in which they usually compensate for their spouses.

However, fatherhood has become a distinctive and prestigious substantive issue and "mother focused" research programmes have become increasingly outmoded and criticised (O'Brien 1982). The problem of teenage single motherhood is great because it does not affect the teenage mothers only, but also the child born of that teenager, the teenage mother's family, the community and the country as a whole (O'Brien 1982). This problem affects the teen-

age single mother physically, in that her body is not yet ready to be a mother; educationally because her schooling has to be disturbed, in order to deal with the child, and socially and psychologically she has to grow up prematurely and stay at home to look after the baby. She does not get time to socialize with peers (O'Brien 1982). There are big social and psychological prices to pay for single teenage motherhood. The teenage mother's family is affected in that the parents and older siblings must support the baby financially and also physically by helping to babysit the child if the teen mother decides to go back to school. Further, teenage single motherhood affects the country's development, especially economically as most teenage single mothers end up seeking financial help from government through social support grants (Chilman 1980). Also teenage mothers mostly drop out of school before completing grade 12 and end up working at non-skilled less paying jobs. This impacts on the country's development because the more of this situation, the more less skilled individuals in the country.

### **Aim of the Study**

The study sought to analyze the psychosocial impact of single parenthood on teenage mothers. Specifically, it sought:

To establish how single parenthood affects teenage mothers; and

To suggest strategies for reducing the impact of single parenthood on teenage mothers.

### **Research Questions**

The following questions guided the study:

What is the psycho-social impact of single parenthood on teenage mothers?

What strategies could be used to reduce the impact of single parenthood on teenage mothers?

## **METHODS**

### **Research Design**

The study used a phenomenological research design. A phenomenological research design is concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of people involved (Welman et al. 2005).

The study, therefore, focused on teenage mothers who were single to get a deeper understanding of what they went through.

### **Participants**

The study population comprised nine teenage single mothers of between 13 to 19 years of age from Khujwana village, in the Mopani District. Mopani District is situated in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. Most of the inhabitants of Khujwana village were poor and unemployed, and a fairly large number of families in the village depended on social grants or work on the nearby farms.

Seven of the participants were 19 years of age, and only one was 18 years old. The other participant was 17 years old. All participants had one child each. Four of the participants gave birth to their children at the age of 17, three at the age of 16, one at the age of 18 and the other one at the age of 19 years. At the time of the interviews, four of the participants were attending school. Of these, one was in grade 11 and three were in grade 12. Five of the participants dropped out of school due to motherhood responsibilities. When asked to rate their socioeconomic status on a scale of good, better or bad, four teenage mothers rated their socioeconomic status better; two rated it good and three rated it bad.

Purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method, was used to select the participants. The researchers deliberately obtained units of analysis in such a manner that the sample they obtained could be regarded as being representative of the relevant population (Welman et al. 2005). The sampling method was appropriate for the study because it considered certain characteristics of interest to the study.

### **Measuring Instrument**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the nine teenage mothers. An interview guide was used. Semi-structured interviews were suitable for this study because they allowed the interviewers to probe, in order to get clear, in-depth information (Welman et al. 2005). Because of the flexibility of semi-structured interviews, there was no specific order of asking questions, but the sequence of the questions varied depending on the way in which the interview de-

veloped. It put the interviewees at ease and kept them in control of the interview, thus creating a free flow of answers or information.

Interview conversations were recorded using an audio-tape and some field notes were taken. Use of the audio-tape to record the conversations allowed for the keeping of a full record of the interviews without having to be distracted by detailed note-keeping (Terre-Blance and Durrheim 2006). Field notes were taken to capture non-verbal behaviours important for the study (Welman et al. 2005). In addition, field notes helped the researchers to remember the things that were said in the interviews that were not included in the original notes.

Before the actual study was conducted, a pilot study was conducted on four (4) teenage single mothers to test the validity and reliability of the research instrument. The pilot study helped the researchers to ensure that no offensive language was contained in the questions, check the clarity of instructions and questions, administration time, layout and data input, and conduct preliminary data analysis.

### Procedure

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the head of the village (Induna). The Induna arranged for the participants to come to his home where arrangements for the interviews were made. The dates and venue for the interviews were agreed upon. Thirty to forty minute individual interviews were conducted with each participant.

### Data Analysis

Content analysis was used. Response frequencies were counted coupled with the sequencing of particular words, phrases or concepts, in order to identify key words or themes (Welman et al. 2005). Thus, content analysis allowed for the identification of themes that were important to the study. The analysis was done inductively as the themes emerged from the data and were not imposed by the researchers.

### Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was gained from the participants by means of written agreement. Initially, the participants were informed about the pur-

pose of the study, the procedure that was to be followed and their rights of the participants before indicating whether or not they were willing to participate. Participation was voluntary and the participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage. Reporting was anonymous as the participants were not required to use their real names. The interview environment was non-threatening. Participants were assured that all the information that was obtained from them was to be kept in strict confidence.

## RESULTS

This section presents the impact of single motherhood on teenage mothers and the strategies that can be used to reduce the impact. These are presented next.

### Impact of Single Parenthood on Teenage Mothers

#### *Economic Dependence*

All the teenage mothers interviewed indicated that they were not employed, hence almost all of them depended on their parents and other family members to financially and physically (by babysitting) take care of their children. Also, a majority of the participants reported that they largely depend on the government child support grant for the financial rearing of their children. The following responses illustrate this point clearly:

*The money I receive for the child grant is the one that I use to take care of myself and my child of which it is very little. My mother who is also unemployed also helps out, especially on babysitting. (Participant 5)*

*I take care of my child on my own with the grant money as it is the only source of income for me. My parents and the child's father do not help me at all. (Participant 4)*

*My parents and the child's paternal grandparents are helping financially... having to beg for money for all the needs of the child is difficult for me, hence I depend largely on the child support grant. (Participant 1)*

*My mother is the one who takes full responsibility for me and my child. I also receive a child support grant. Economically things are very difficult for me especially when the child is*

*sick I can't afford to take her to private doctors when the public clinics are out of medications. (Participant 6)*

*Financially I depend on my parents to take care of my child and I. Sometimes when I need money for the baby's needs my parents can't provide immediately. It gets difficult for me, especially if it's the baby's special food that has run out. I think it gets worse because I don't receive a child grant because my mom doesn't want me to. She says I didn't make this baby for the government grant. (Participant 7)*

### **Education**

Finishing school and managing with school work both at school and at home was a mission for most of the teenage mothers, since the majority of them were still at school. Concentration in class was reported to be very low among most participants; absenteeism from school was very common and also failure and having to repeat a grade as well as dropping out of school were real threats. The participants indicated that all this was due to parenting responsibilities. The following extracts support this statement:

*...it gets difficult for me when I am at home because in order for me to do my homework or study I have to wait for the child to sleep. It is then that I can focus on my books. Sometimes the baby doesn't sleep until late by the time she sleeps, I am also tired and sleepy and cannot do my school work. At school its better, its only challenging when the child is sick and cries the whole night I end up having to skip school on the next day. If I don't skip school I fall asleep in class and am always tired and not productive at school. (Participant 6)*

*When I got the baby I didn't get time to study because the baby disturbed me so on that year I failed a grade and had to repeat it. (Participant 4)*

*Sometimes I have to skip school and look after my child, I skip one day if my mother who looks after her when I go to school has to go somewhere and a lot of days when the child is sick I stay at home until she is better. (Participant 9)*

*A year after my child was born I had to drop out of school because the child was very sick and I was still breastfeeding her. I had to stay at home and take care of her so I stayed away the whole year (Participant 3)*

*I had to drop-out so that I can take care of my child as my mother is working and was very frustrated. She was reluctant to help with the baby sitting or hiring a person to look after the child. So I dropped out at grade 10 and never returned to school. (Participant 1)*

### **Effects on Relationships with Significant Others in their Lives**

Falling pregnant and having children at an early age had so many social effects on the teenage mothers. Single parenthood amongst teenagers affected their relationships with their significant others, parents, teachers and friends. For some the relationships turned sour in the initial stages and recovered later. For some they never did.

With regards to relationships with parents, this is illustrated by the following extracts:

*My parents and I don't get along at all since the arrival of my child to this day. This is because my parents wanted me to go and stay with the father of my child who didn't want me. So my parents are still angry and blame me for everything and also for not making it work with the father of my child. Because of my having this child there is a lot of tension between my parents and me until today. (Participant 4)*

*Initially my mother and brother threatened to chase me away from home and treated me very badly. They wouldn't even speak to me. But as the child grew that changed but it was too late because by then because of the way they had treated me I had moved from home to go stay with my boyfriend, who took advantage of me and abused me because he knew that I depended on him because my family had given up on me. (Participant 6)*

*My parents were initially angry but only my mother came around but my father still does not even talk to me and acts as if my child and I don't exist. (Participant 1)*

However, one participant reported that her mother was supportive and the relationship remained the same. However this was for the wrong reasons. This is supported by the following response:

*My mother was supportive from the beginning and our relationship stayed the same. My mother says I have replaced her son who recently passed away as a toddler so our relationship is even greater. (Participant 8)*



With regard to relationships with friends, these changed for the worse as most of them said they were operating in a different sphere of life from that of their friends. Some became isolated to such an extent that they remained friendless. The following statements support this point:

*They talked about me behind my back and made it obvious. They even stopped inviting me to places where we used to go together and when I am with them they talk about things that I know nothing about, things that happened when I was not around, so this made me feel left out. (Participant 7)*

*My friends laughed at me; friends that I trusted they laughed at me and judged me and asked me how could I be so stupid to make a baby with someone who beats me. So our friendship broke just like that and it made me very angry and isolated because whenever I would join them they would make excuses and move away from me one by one and didn't want to be associated with me. So I ended up not talking to them at all. (Participant 9)*

*I lost my best friend because when I failed a grade due to being distracted when I went off school to take care of my sick baby, she moved to the next grade which made us to be not close anymore. (Participant 3)*

Regarding their relationships with their teachers, since most of the single mothers were still at high school, most participants claimed that these stayed the same. The following extracts support this:

*My teachers treated me in the same way as before I had a child. (Participant 9)*

*The relationship remained the same, to them it is as if the pregnancy never happened. (Participant 7)*

However, some participants reported that although their teachers are not treating them differently, they say things that make the teenage mothers feel uncomfortable and embarrassed in front of other students. The following response illustrates this point clearly:

*My teachers are treating me in the same way although sometimes they make nasty comments about girls who fall pregnant at a young age, comments such as "knowing that one is poor but she goes and makes a baby" etc. (Participant 6).*

### **Psychological Effects**

The three most common psychological effects that were reported by a majority of the teenage mothers were anger, emotional distress and isolation. This according to the participants, is because of the change that they had to make in their lives, in order to accommodate their current situation of being a parent. The changes that were also said to have taken place in their relationships with significant others in their lives, especially with their friends, seems to contribute more to their anger, emotional distress and isolation. The following responses illustrate this point:

*...So our friendship broke just like that and it made me very angry and isolated because whenever I would join them they would make excuses and move away from me one by one and didn't want to be associated with me. So I ended up not talking to them at all. This made me to hate myself and not feel good about myself so I locked myself in my house even after the baby was born for a year I didn't have friends and would only go out when I go to school. (Participant 9)*

*People were gossiping about me which made me uncomfortable to even walk in the street and I felt that everybody was turning their backs on me. (Participant 3)*

*... I decided to never socialise with them or anyone for that matter. I locked myself in my house, and never attended to any social event in my family. This continued throughout my pregnancy until the baby was a few months old. (Participant 6)*

*My friends made me feel left out. I used to cry a lot because of this and didn't feel good about myself. So I felt it was better to isolate myself. Even now I lock myself at home and only go out when I go to school. (Participant 7)*

### **Dating**

The participants reported that dating was now challenging to engage in for the majority of them, especially for those who had new partners in their lives. The fact that they were single parents has a negative impact on their new relationships. The following extracts support this statement:

*Yes I have another boyfriend. My boyfriend loves me so much, but he doesn't love my child.*

*That is the greatest challenge in our relationship. I ended up giving him an ultimatum that if he doesn't love my child, he also shouldn't love me. Its either he loves my child or we break up. So now he seems to care about the child, but I think he is pretending.* (Participant 4)

*The main challenge in my new relationship is that we don't get to see each other whenever we want to because I have to look after my child most of the time.* (Participant 9)

*I am still dating the father of my child although we don't see each other so often anymore because when I come back from school I have to take over from my mom in looking after the baby, wash the baby's clothes, cook and feed her. The baby takes all my time.* (Participant 7)

### **Reduction of the Impact of Single Parenthood on Teenage Mothers**

The following were suggested by the participants as solutions or strategies that can help to curb or reduce the socio-psychological impact of single parenthood on teenage mothers.

#### **Parental Support**

Most of the participants felt that getting support from parents, instead of them being judgemental, would make the lives of teenage mothers a whole lot easier and would help in reducing the socio-psychological impact of single parenthood. This is supported by the following statements:

*Mothers to teenage mothers should offer unconditional support, financially, physically and emotional.* (Participant 7)

*Also parents should not leave all the responsibility to the young mother. They should help and be supportive financially.* (Participant 6)

*Parents should also be supportive because if they turn their backs on their children who are teenage mothers, they make life dreadful as most of the time the boyfriend (father of the child) and friends turn their backs on them. So parents become the last resort, so they should always be supportive financially, physically and emotionally and teaching the teenage mothers about parenting duties.* (Participant 9)

*Parents should be understanding and supportive, having an unplanned child when one*

*is not married is bad enough for the teenage mother without the parents having to make it worse by being unsupportive and judgmental.* (Participant 4)

#### **Support Group**

Some teenage mothers suggested that support groups for teenage single mothers were essential in reducing the impact that single parenthood has on them. The following responses support this point:

*Teenage mothers should have a forum type of a thing at the clinic together with social workers where they discuss and help each other about the experiences they encounter in being single teenage mother. The social worker should also offer them support and teach them how to deal with such experiences and how to be effective parents and also offer counselling to those who are having great emotional or even social problems.* (Participant 8)

*Social workers should have regular meetings with teenage mothers together with those who are non-mothers, where they teach them about the disadvantages of having a child at a young age. They should also discuss with them issues of reproductive health. In this way they would have formed an organisation that supports, teaches and encourages teenage mothers to better cope with their situations and discussing their experiences with others who are in the same situation as them, in this way they will see that they are not alone in this.* (Participant 3)

*A sort of teenage forum or organization should be formed for all teenage girls in the village, mothers and non-mothers, where they have regular meetings. Chaired by teachers or respected members of the community who are seen as role-models. In these meetings they should discuss issues such as sexual activity in the younger age, the pros and cons and also how to prevent teenage pregnancy and giving tips to those who are mothers already as to how to make their experience of being a teenage mother be less distressing. These tips should include aspects such as how to manage their time so that they can strike a balance between caring for the child and studying and also tips on how to effectively raise a child.* (Participant 6)

*Those who have children should meet somewhere, maybe at the clinic and talk to each*

other and discuss what works for them and what doesn't in child rearing. Maybe this can reduce the stress of not knowing what to do when the baby does something that seems strange to them or is sick. (Participant 9)

### **Teachers Support**

Teenage single mothers who were still going to school suggested that teachers' support and non-judgemental attitude towards them would make their situation and experiences much less negative, especially where their schooling is concerned. The following statements support this point:

*Teachers should stop being judgemental and throwing nasty comments at those who are pregnant and those who are single mothers because that makes the teenage mothers to not enjoy their time at school because when teachers throw nasty comments, the classmates laugh and that is not good for the teenage mother, she might end up dropping out of school. (Participant 9)*

*... teachers should also be understanding and give notes to those who fell behind because of missing school due to crises with their children and they should be supportive to teenage mothers instead of mocking them. (Participant 3)*

### **Increase of Child Support Grant**

One participant felt that the government should increase the social child grant amount, in order to curb the financial impact that comes with being a teenage single parent and not working. The following extract illustrates this:

*The government should increase the amount of money allocated for the child support grant and have it received by the teenage mothers' parent (mother) as they will utilize it responsibly. (Participant 8)*

### **Community Support and Involvement**

Most of the teenage single mothers suggested that the community should support them and get involved by means of helping them. This is supported by the following statements:

*Parents and community members should support them emotionally and not blame the teenage mothers for having the children. They*

*should also help by providing what they have which can help the baby, especially clothes. (Participant 6)*

*The community members should help by means of donations and financial support. Instead of judging, they should be more accepting to make the teenage mothers' lives easier. (Participant 1)*

*Community members should be supportive and not condemn the teenage mothers by throwing nasty comments, which make them feel even worse about themselves. (Participant 7)*

*The community members should help the struggling teenage mothers with unused clothes and other things that they can use for the baby. (Participant 9)*

*Community members, especially women who are not working, should start a crèche, find a place where they can run this crèche and look after children of teenage mothers who are still going to school and cannot afford to pay for crèches or hire nannies and the government must help by paying these caregivers. (Participant 2)*

### **Contraceptive Use**

Some participants suggested that contraceptive use should be highly considered by single teenage mothers, in order to stop them from re-experiencing the negative impact of single parenthood. The following responses support this:

*Parents should talk to them freely about family planning and encourage them to go for it so that they cannot repeat the same mistake of having an unplanned baby. (Participant 7)*

*Teenage mothers should use contraceptives, in order not to repeat the same mistake (Participant 1)*

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Impact of Single Parenthood on Teenage Mothers**

Regarding the impact that being single parents has on teenage mothers, the participants' responses suggest that single parenthood has a lot of negative socio-psychological effects on teenage mothers. The effects are discussed separately below.

### *Economic Dependence*

All the participants indicated that they were unemployed as they were still teenagers. Because of that, the participants depended on their parents to financially take care of them and their children. However, the majority of them reported that their parents were either unemployed or underemployed. They largely depended on the government child support grant to meet the financial needs of their children. This is consistent with previous studies (Chilman 1980; Clement 1998; Miller and Ridge 2001; Teen Pregnancy Help 2010) that indicated that teenage single mothers are more likely to depend on government welfare assistance.

### *Education*

The obtained results show that completing high school and managing with school work both at school and at home is a tough mission for most of the teenage mothers. The finding is in line with Clement's (1998) observation that finishing school and participating in activities after the child is born becomes a big chore. Some participants also indicated that they had to drop-out of school due to parenting responsibilities. This supports Chilman (1980) who argued that adolescent pregnancy and parenthood was one factor in dropping out of high school. In addition, Corcoran (1998) indicated that half of the female high school dropouts give pregnancy and/or parenting as a reason for their quitting school.

### *Relationships with Significant Others in their Lives*

The results of the study show that falling pregnant and having children at an early age has great negative effects on the teenage mothers in terms of their relationships with significant others, especially their mothers and friends. Most of the participants indicated that their relationships with their mothers turned sour in the initial stages and recovered later but for some they never did. This supports researches conducted by Kaplan (1996), Miller and Ridge (2001) and O'Brien (1982) which revealed that teenage mothers placed great stress on their relations with their mothers. The same study also revealed

that relations between teenage mothers and their mothers can also be complex and disturbing.

### *Psychological Distress*

Most of the participants' responses suggested that being single parents and teenagers at the same time, leads to them carrying psychological baggage. The common psychological effects among the study participants were anger, emotional distress and isolation. This anchored on the dual roles being a teenager and a parent at the same time. The participants felt isolated because they could no longer fit in with their friends. This supports Whitman et al. (2001) who reported that teenage motherhood is emotionally stressful and that the teenage mothers were not emotionally ready to cope with stressors associated with parenthood. In part, this lack of readiness is due to the fact that they often have reduced cognitive resources and are forced to cope with tasks associated with adolescent development, including a search for self-identity, self-esteem, and peer acceptance, while simultaneously attempting to resolve the challenging task associated with parenthood. Consequently, they experience depression, frustration and aggression with a higher frequency than pregnant and parenting adults.

Some of the participants indicated that the fathers' non-involvement stresses them to an extent that they erase them out of their lives and deem them as non-existent to them and their children. This is in line with Clement's (1998) assertion that teenage single mothers may feel resentment for their partners for renegeing on their initial commitments. However, the study did not support Whitman et al. (2001) who indicated that adolescent mothers may transfer their hostility for the partners who abandoned them to their sons.

The participants reported that the teenage mothers' early pregnancy and parenting had a negative effect on their relationships with significant others. This supports Kaplan (1996) who reported that single-parenthood among teenagers resulted in the break-up of important relationships: the babies' fathers disappearing from their lives; friends gossiping about them; abandonments that caused the teen mothers to turn to their mothers for increased emotional and financial support, only to find both unavailable.

At the same time, they had to learn to be mothers.

### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The limitations of this study relate to the small sample size that limits the generalizing of the findings. Participants of the study were teenage single mothers undergoing emotional stress, hence, could have given misleading information. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, participants might have been reluctant to provide some information.

### CONCLUSION

From the results of the study, it is evident that single parenthood has multiple negative impacts on teenage mothers. It is psychologically distressful, affects relationships with significant others, their education and leads to economic dependence on parents and government grant. Support from parents, peers, teachers and the community were viewed as strategies for helping single parent teenage mothers to cope with the challenges that they encountered.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

There is need for early identification of the needs of single teenage mothers and to address them early to minimise their impact. Teenage mothers need support from their families, community and government for them to cope with their demanding situation. Female adolescents need education on reproductive health to enable them to reduce teenage single motherhood.

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