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Enhancing collaborative partnerships: Empowering parents to address adolescent pregnancy in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Adolescent pregnancies continue to pose significant challenges in South Africa, impacting economic, health, social, and family domains. This paper explores the challenges of parents facing an adolescent's pregnancy within a South African context, underlined by the Ubuntu theoretical framework to suggest interventions for social work practice. A qualitative phenomenological research approach was utilized. A qualitative phenomenological research approach focuses on exploring and understanding individuals' lived experiences of a particular phenomenon. This study employed a non-probability purposive sampling technique and selectively recruited 32 parents from the Tshwane and City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality, Gauteng, South Africa, whose adolescents experienced pregnancy within that past year. The participants participated in semi-structured interviews conducted by eight field workers. The data analysis, according to Tesch's eight steps of thematic analysis, revealed critical themes related to parents' challenges regarding their adolescent pregnancy. The findings included those parents of pregnant adolescents experienced stigma, financial hardship, and strained family relationships. Findings further indicated that high unemployment and widespread poverty worsen their struggles, highlighting the lack of community support despite Ubuntu principles. The study urges collaboration among social workers, health practitioners, and educators to involve parents in prevention efforts through sex education and awareness programs, promoting communication and reproductive health skills.

KEY TERMS: afro-sensed perspective, adolescent pregnancy, adolescent mother, challenges, coping strategies, collaborative partnerships, South Africa.

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INTRODUCTION

Adolescent pregnancies persist as a pressing concern globally and in South Africa, precipitating multifaceted challenges across public health, economies, and social spheres. The repercussions of adolescent pregnancy extend beyond the public and economic circumstances of countries, negatively influencing familial dynamics, values and relationships, as adolescent families are often not emotionally and economically prepared to cope with the adolescent's pregnancy. Within this context, understanding the challenges of parents navigating their adolescents' pregnancies becomes imperative because parents often serve as primary caregivers and the sources of emotional and practical support for their pregnant adolescents. This paper delves into the challenges parents face in communities of Tshwane and the City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality, Gauteng, South Africa, and through the lens of the Ubuntu theoretical framework, emphasizing the interconnectedness and communal responsibility of communities inherent in African philosophy.

This study explores the challenges of 32 parents using a qualitative phenomenological approach. The findings highlight the crucial need for collaboration among social workers, healthcare providers, and educators to address the challenges of adolescent pregnancy. Instead of working in isolation, these professionals must integrate their efforts to provide more effective support. The study emphasizes the importance of preventative strategies that go beyond assisting adolescents, focusing on equipping parents with the knowledge and confidence to discuss sexuality openly with their children. The Ubuntu philosophy, centered on collective support and shared responsibility, underscores the need for more substantial community involvement. By fostering unity and strengthening partnerships, communities can create a more supportive environment for adolescents and their families.

BACKGROUND

Adolescent pregnancies, occurring in girls between the ages of 13 and 19 years, both internationally and nationally, persist as a critical public health and social concern, exerting profound implications on the economic, health, and societal dimensions of the family and broader community (Gunawardena, Fataye & Yaya, 2019; Swartz, Colvin & Harrison, 2018). Globally, 11% of all births stem from adolescent pregnancies, with 16 million women aged 15-19 giving birth annually (Akpoy, Thupayagale-Tshweneagae & Mmusi-Phetoe, 2017). It can be estimated that approximately 16 million sets of parents will be affected by their teenagers' pregnancies each year. Given that each birth involves two parents, this would translate to roughly 32 million parents impacted annually by adolescent pregnancies worldwide. Adolescent birth rates vary significantly across different income countries, with rates in middle-income countries being twice as high as those in high-income countries and five times higher in low-income nations (Akpoy et al., 2017). Regions such as Latin America and the Caribbean, South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa exhibit higher prevalence rates of adolescent pregnancy compared to other parts of the world (Gyesaw & Ankomah, 2013). Various factors, including socioeconomic status, access to comprehensive sex education, cultural norms, availability of contraceptives, and family influences, contribute to these disparities (Skosana, Peu & Mogale, 2020).

Adolescent pregnancy remains a pervasive concern in Sub-Saharan Africa, with prevalence rates exceeding 90 pregnancies per 1,000 adolescents aged 15-19 (Gunawardena, Fataye & Yaya, 2019). Assuming an average population of 1,000 adolescents aged 15-19, over 90 of them experience pregnancy, and that each pregnant adolescent has two biological parents, the total number of parents involved and affected by their adolescent's pregnancy would amount to 180 parents per 1,000 adolescents aged 15-19 in Sub-Saharan-Africa. These calculations give an estimate of the number of parents engaged in adolescent pregnancies in Sub-Saharan Africa, highlighting the profound impact on both the pregnant adolescents and their parents, with implications for family dynamics, socio-economic stability, and intergenerational relationships (Skosana, Peu & Mogale, 2020). This underscores the importance of involving parents in collaborative strategies aimed at empowering parents to prevent teen pregnancies effectively and not only implement preventative interventions about pregnancy for adolescents.

Notably, South Africa grapples with a reported pregnancy rate of 28% among 19-year-old women, with higher rates observed in non-urban areas (Ngubane & Maharaj, 2018). Assuming each pregnant adolescent has two biological parents, the number of parents involved would be 560 parents per 1,000 among 19-year-old women who are affected on multiple levels by their pregnant adolescent. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has led to a significant increase of 60% in the number of children born to teenage mothers in Gauteng, South Africa's most populous province with a population of 16 098 571 (The Gauteng Health Department, 2021 & Gauteng City-Region Observatory, 2023). Although media, peers and family have a tremendous influence on risk factors for teen pregnancy, parents can play a significant role in preventing teenage pregnancy (Skosana, Peu & Mogale, 2020). Investigations conducted in both developing and developed countries reveal notable variations among ethnic groups concerning the prevalence of adolescent pregnancy (Xoko, 2016; Rajapaksa-Hewageegana, Salway, Piercy & Samarage, 2014). These variations are also evident among the approximately eleven ethnic

groups within South Africa.

The cultural nuances and ethnic diversity within African societies contribute to distinct interpretations of pregnancy, emphasizing motherhood as a manifestation of fertility in cultures such as the Zulu, Xhosa, and Swati (Dlamini, 2016). This cultural context is crucial in understanding the challenges experienced by parents dealing with their adolescent pregnancy. For instance, Xoko (2016) identified a higher incidence of pregnancy among isiZulu-speaking adolescents compared to Afrikaans- and isiXhosa-speaking counterparts, signalling a need for nuanced approaches to parental support within specific cultural contexts. Mchunu Peltzer, Tutshana, and Seutlwadi (2012) found a notable occurrence of adolescent pregnancy among Sepedi-speaking adolescents, highlighting the localized nature of challenges faced by parents within specific cultural communities. The role of sociocultural predictors, including ethnicity and religion, in influencing adolescent pregnancy is further accentuated in urban areas compared to rural settings (Mkwanzani, Lebelo, Mashinini, Ngake, Paledi & Thwala, 2022). In essence, the intricate interplay between cultural and sociocultural factors underscores the need for a multifaceted and culturally sensitive approach when examining the challenges of parents dealing with adolescent pregnancies in diverse South African contexts.

Seven million South African caregivers receive child support grants (CSGs) for their children. Of the 20 million children in South Africa, just over 13 million receive the CSG monthly, with more than seven million children below the food poverty line (Children's Institute, 2023). Child support grants can offer some assistance but may not fully alleviate families' difficulties in these circumstances. This places additional strain on already overburdened foster care systems and childcare grants in South Africa (Ngubane and Maharaj, 2018). The implications of child support grants and the strain on support systems in South Africa highlight the complex challenges faced by parents dealing with adolescent pregnancy.

Research extensively covers the causes, risks, and consequences of adolescent pregnancies. Still, little attention has been paid to the challenges faced by parents dealing with their daughters' pregnancies in South Africa.

Exploring adolescent pregnancy through the lens of Ubuntu: A theoretical framework

The Ubuntu theoretical framework adopted in this study is rooted in the African worldview, where communities thrive in harmony, and community members contribute to each other's well-being by sharing challenges. They will support families with their challenges of experiencing adolescent pregnancy (Sekudu, 2019). The theoretical framework of this study highlights the crucial role of supportive human interactions within family and community relationships (van Breda, 2019). With a focus on behavior and attitudes towards others, Ubuntu promotes a collective approach that nurtures harmony and interconnectedness among individuals. Relating this to the challenges of parents dealing with adolescent pregnancy, the Ubuntu theoretical framework suggests that within the community, community members should support and contribute to the well-being of parents and their pregnant adolescents (van Breda, 2019). This could involve sharing knowledge, providing emotional support, and collectively finding coping strategies that benefit both parents and the community. The Ubuntu philosophy underscores the importance of a unified and supportive community approach in navigating and mitigating the challenges posed by adolescent pregnancy (Sekudu, 2019). One of Ubuntu's framework values includes the importance of a family and the connectedness to stand together when facing challenges (Sekudu, 2019). The principles of Ubuntu also include addressing challenges in a fair, compassionate way, with deliberations and consensus to enable the family members to take responsibility and strengthen members' ties to be part of the community. This approach emphasizes the importance of understanding and supporting pregnant adolescents and their families rather than ostracizing or stigmatizing them. By fostering open discussions and consensus-building within the community, Ubuntu values encourage a supportive environment where pregnant teenagers and their families can receive assistance without fear of judgment or discrimination.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research aimed to explore and describe parents' challenges regarding their adolescent's pregnancy, providing insights for social work practice. The research question guided the researchers to use the most appropriate research methodology. The research questions for this study were formulated as follows: 'What are the parents' challenges with a teen child's pregnancy?' and 'What suggestions can be offered from parents with pregnant adolescents for social work practice?' Employing a phenomenological research design complemented by an explorative study design focused on exploring and describing an ill-researched phenomenon in-depth and developing a thorough understanding of the participants' lived challenges regarding their adolescent pregnancy in the municipalities of Tshwane and Johannesburg in Gauteng, South Africa. Due to time and financial constraints, purposive and snowball sampling methods drew a sample of 32 participants meeting specific inclusion. Biological parents of adolescents aged 13 to 19 with an adolescent child who gave birth within the past year were purposefully selected. Only one parent per family participated. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by eight social work students using an interview guide. Data collection continued until saturation was reached, resulting in 32 participants. The data was independently coded by both field workers and researchers,

with the final analysis conducted collaboratively.

The project was approved by the University's Research and Ethical Committee (Ref: 2018-SWREC-SCK4810). Careful preparation for the research study included participant selection, the orientation of participants, ethical considerations, and obtaining voluntary written consent (The San Code of Research Ethics, 2017). Participant confidentiality and privacy were safeguarded using pseudonyms in the research report. The interviews were further audio-recorded, with the participants' written permission, and the audio recordings of the thirty-two interviews were carefully transcribed for conducting thematic data analysis, according to the eight steps of Tesch. (cited in Creswell, 2014). The researchers reviewed the data to understand the overall content before identifying key themes and patterns. Similar ideas were grouped and organized into main themes and subthemes for clarity. Different fieldworkers and researchers then carefully analysed, discussed, and verified the findings. This thorough process helped ensure accurate and meaningful insights into the challenges parents face and their recommendations regarding adolescent pregnancy.

FINDINGS

The ethnic population groups the participants presented in this study included a diversity of South African cultures such as Zulu, Pedi, Ndebele, Northern-Sotho, Tswana, Tsonga and Xhosa. Most of the participants in this study were female (29 participants), and the males were underrepresented, with only three male participants. Most of the participants of this study were single female parents relying on a single income, if employed, to provide for their families. The data analysis produced the following key themes that will be discussed, namely, parental challenges arising from adolescent pregnancy and parental recommendations for adolescent pregnancy support. From the five themes that emerged from the data collection, two themes are discussed, and the first key theme had three subthemes, which are described as follows.

Theme 1: Parental challenges arising from adolescent pregnancy

The participants described their various challenges, which emerged from the data analysis and three subthemes were identified, namely, facing community stigma and judgment regarding their adolescent's pregnancy, financial difficulties and family relationship stressors.

Subtheme 1: Community stigma and judgment

Communities have different social and cultural norms and beliefs about adolescent pregnancy. Some communities are more tolerant towards teenage pregnancies than others. The responses of the participants indicated that their communities perceived teenage pregnancy as unacceptable and a disgrace to their families, leaving parents feeling rejected, judged and incompetent as parents. Many participants expressed feelings of rejection, embarrassment, and judgment due to societal disapproval of their child's pregnancy. The use of words such as "gossiping," "laughing at me," "rejecting," and "disgrace" highlights the profound emotional impact of stigma.

The following excerpts of the participants confirmed the discriminating experiences because of their adolescent's pregnancy in their communities:

It was tough. Relatives and neighbors were gossiping about my teen child's pregnancy, and my daughter was also negatively impacted by their behavior. (Participant 10)

The community members label me as a mother who did not teach my children how to behave. (Participant 17)

I was so embarrassed in my community and even at church since we are a born-again family. People were laughing at me, saying that I must leave the church because I have no discipline for my children. I felt like my community and friends were rejecting me. (Participant 21).

Subtheme 2: Financial difficulties

In addition, another challenge most participants experienced was that having already financial burdens to provide for their families financially, the idea of another added person to the family whose financial needs must be met created further emotional stress and despair. Words and phrases such as "struggling financially," "making ends meet," "extra financial support," and "severe problem" were frequently used, illustrating the depth of their financial distress. The phrases indicated by Participant 12, "challenge on its own" and "severe problem", highlight the situation's overwhelming nature. These findings indicate that financial struggles were about providing for the baby and maintaining stability and emotional well-being in the household. The following responses from the participants underlined the financial challenges they were facing:

Providing for the baby's needs as I was already struggling financially; the other challenge that I had

was how I was going to prepare her for motherhood as she was still a child herself who was dependent on me. (Participant 6)

As a single parent and a breadwinner, it was tough for me as I struggled to make ends meet. I was stressed to have an unplanned additional family member who needed extra financial support. (Participant 8).

Being a single parent and unemployed was a challenge on its own; therefore, having the additional financial responsibility of raising another child one did not anticipate was a severe problem. (Participant 12)

Subtheme 3: Family relationship difficulties

Participants, mostly the mothers of the pregnant adolescent, experienced difficulties in family relationships with the biological father or stepfather or with their present partner. These excerpts highlight the strain experienced by mothers due to societal blame and expectations regarding sex education and adolescent pregnancy. The participants described feelings of guilt, conflict, and financial pressure, reflecting broader gender dynamics and societal norms surrounding parental responsibility and communication about reproductive health. For instance, Participant Two, with the phrase: “My husband blamed me”, suggests a strong sense of personal accountability, while “had to lie” reveals the financial strain and desperation experienced. Participant Six, shared the words “did not know what to tell” the husband, highlighting the communication challenges, while “dodging the house at night” indicates prior concerns about the adolescent’s behavior, suggesting unresolved family tensions before the pregnancy. The following excerpts underlined this challenge:

My husband blamed me and said it was my fault, and when it came to money, I had to lie to him so that he could give me money for my daughter and save for my future grandchild. (Participant 2)

I did not know what to tell my husband as he is the stepfather to my child; he was always complaining about the behavior of my child of dodging the house at night. I am depending on my husband for maintenance in the house. It was difficult as I had to take care of the child, and the mother would have to return to school. My husband was always complaining that I was the one who caused the child to be pregnant. I have failed to speak to the child about sex and teenage pregnancy. (Participant 6)

After finding out, I told her father. My husband was unhappy; it was the worst experience ever. It caused many problems in my marriage. The reason for that was that I was blamed for the child's irresponsibility and that I should have educated the child and introduced her to contraceptives. (Participant 16)

Theme 2: Parental recommendations for adolescent pregnancy support

The following theme includes two subthemes: suggestions on preventing pregnancy among adolescents and empowering parents with the necessary knowledge and skills to raise adolescents in their communities.

Subtheme 1: Preventative services for adolescents

The participants' responses included that social workers need to assist adolescents in the form of school-based programs, which include sex education, family planning, and awareness projects of the consequences of unprotected sex and teenage pregnancies. Phrases such as “awareness campaigns,” “partnering with schools,” and “teaching children about unprotected sex” highlight the importance of early intervention. The feedback provided by the participants underscores the absence of preventive services and comprehensive sex education targeting adolescents within their communities. Participant 17 suggested partnering with the Department of Health which implies a multi-sectoral approach, emphasizing that addressing adolescent pregnancy requires collaboration between educators, social workers, and healthcare professionals. This multi-faceted issue extends beyond social workers' purview and necessitates collaborative efforts involving educators and healthcare professionals. The participants' responses focused dominantly on preventative measures for adolescent pregnancies rather than remedial services. The following excerpts illustrated the need for rendering preventative services regarding sex education and teenage pregnancy:

Social workers can partner with the Department of Health to provide awareness campaigns in the communities, schools and churches to give adolescents information about the risks and consequences of sex before marriage. (Participant 17)

Social workers must work hand in hand with the schools to teach children about unprotected sex. (Participant 28)

They can support this by raising pregnancy awareness in the community and educating our children on how to take care of themselves. (Participant 32)

Subtheme 2: Empowerment of parents with knowledge and skills

Some of the participants' responses underlined the need for support for parents to be empowered and assisted in learning the necessary skills to communicate with their adolescents about sex, contraceptives, and pregnancies. Many parents felt uncomfortable and unprepared to talk about sex, leading to a lack of communication. The words "uncomfortable," "never thought," and "never told them how" in the excerpts reflect the difficulties parents face. Parents advocate for support from social workers and clinics in educating them on effectively discussing sexual protection with their children, acknowledging discomfort and gaps in their knowledge. The following responses of participants confirm this theme:

Partnership with stakeholders, including clinics by social workers, and educating parents about how to talk about protection on sexual intercourse. (Participant 1)

They could help with educating parents to talk with their children about sex because for me, it is a subject I feel so uncomfortable talking about, especially with my teen child. Hence, she is pregnant now. I never thought that she was already involved with boys. (Participant 6).

Social workers can help parents learn how to talk to our children about sex because what I told my children was to stay away from boys and that if they have sex, they will fall pregnant, but I never told them how to prevent pregnancy and so on. (Participant 16)

DISCUSSION

The study findings reveal significant challenges experienced by parents due to their adolescent's pregnancy, including stigmatisation, financial restraints, and difficulty in family relationships. Existing research by Akpor et al. (2017), Maranhão et al. (2018), and Gunawardena, Fataye & Yaya (2019) underscores the pervasive discrimination faced by parents of pregnant adolescents within their communities, leading to feelings of embarrassment and inadequacy regarding their parenting practices. The interpretation of the Ubuntu theoretical framework in the context of communities not fully practicing its principles can be seen in the disconnect between the ideals of mutual support and the reality of stigma and judgment faced by parents dealing with adolescent pregnancy. This discrepancy underscores the importance of promoting Ubuntu principles within communities, encouraging mutual respect, empathy, and assistance for families facing challenges like adolescent pregnancy. It also highlights the need for efforts to address and overcome societal norms and beliefs that perpetuate stigma and judgment, creating a more inclusive and supportive environment aligned with the ideals of Ubuntu.

Statistics South Africa (2023) noted that high unemployment rates in South Africa exacerbate financial difficulties, recorded at 32,9 %, and are among the highest in the world, supporting the burden of the participants expressing their struggles to meet the additional financial needs associated with their adolescent pregnancies. The statistics on child support grants (CSGs) in South Africa further illustrate the significant number of children relying on monetary assistance, indicating widespread poverty within the country (Children's Institute, 2023). This context is crucial when considering challenges such as adolescent pregnancy, as it underscores the financial strain already experienced by many families, exacerbating the difficulties parents face in providing for additional family members.

The final subtheme, complementing the overarching theme, highlights and underscores how societal norms and gender dynamics strain family relationships in the context of adolescent pregnancy (Masuko, 2017; Skobi and Makofane, 2010). Mothers face blame and conflict from husbands or partners, exacerbating guilt and financial pressure. Promoting gender equality and shared responsibility in reproductive health can alleviate these burdens. This approach seeks to reinvigorate the principles of Ubuntu within communities, fostering collective action to address issues such as adolescent pregnancies.

In the initial subtheme of the second theme, participants emphasized the need for preventative measures, such as comprehensive sex education and awareness campaigns targeting adolescents. This finding highlights the role of social workers in launching initiatives within communities and accentuates collaborative efforts involving educators and healthcare professionals. Harding, Zieb, Farb & Margolis's (2020) research findings indicated that while partnerships are crucial for meeting the needs of pregnant adolescents, service providers frequently work independently and lack awareness of available services in their area, resulting in duplicated efforts. This finding further suggests the focus is on preventive services rather than remedial ones, with an emphasis on educating adolescents about the risks and consequences of unprotected sex. The second subtheme underscored the importance of empowering parents with knowledge and skills to effectively communicate with their adolescents about sex, contraceptives, and pregnancies. Participants advocate for support from social workers and health professionals in educating parents, acknowledging gaps in their knowledge and discomfort in discussing these

topics. This finding again emphasizes partnerships between stakeholders to educate parents and equip them with the necessary tools to address sexual health issues with their adolescents.

In essence, the parental recommendations for adolescent pregnancy support highlight the need for a comprehensive approach that addresses both preventative measures for adolescents and the empowerment of parents. Collaborative efforts involving various stakeholders, including social workers, educators, and healthcare professionals, are essential to provide adolescents with the necessary knowledge and support to make informed decisions about their sexual health while also equipping parents with the skills and confidence to engage in open and effective communication with their adolescents.

CONCLUSIONS

The study highlights significant challenges experienced by parents of pregnant adolescents, including stigmatization, financial strains, and strained family relationships. Societal norms and gender dynamics exacerbate family tensions, with mothers often facing blame and conflict from partners. Promoting gender equality and shared responsibility in reproductive health can alleviate these burdens. Participants stressed the importance of preventative measures such as comprehensive sex education and awareness campaigns targeting adolescents. Collaborative efforts involving social workers, educators, and healthcare professionals are crucial in launching effective community initiatives. Empowering parents with knowledge and skills to communicate effectively with their adolescents about sex, contraceptives, and pregnancies is essential. Partnerships between stakeholders, including social workers, health professionals and educators, can help educate parents and equip them with the necessary tools for addressing sexual health issues with their adolescents. The Ubuntu theoretical framework provides a valuable lens for understanding these challenges and suggests community members should be part of initiatives addressing adolescent pregnancy. By fostering understanding, empathy, and collaboration, communities can create a more supportive environment for parents and pregnant adolescents. The study underscores the necessity of a comprehensive approach that addresses preventative measures for adolescents and the empowerment and equipment of parents with the necessary knowledge and skills.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

Considering the challenges faced by parents of pregnant adolescents, communities must address the underlying societal norms and gender dynamics that perpetuate stigma and strain family relationships from an Ubuntu theoretical framework. Promoting gender equality and shared responsibility in reproductive health can help alleviate the burden on mothers and foster a more supportive environment for families dealing with adolescent pregnancy. Additionally, preventative measures and not just remedial services, such as comprehensive sex education and awareness campaigns targeting adolescents, are essential. Collaborative efforts involving social workers, educators, and healthcare professionals should be prioritized to launch effective initiatives within communities, especially for parents. Moreover, empowering parents with knowledge and skills to communicate effectively with their adolescents about sex, contraceptives, and pregnancies is crucial. Partnerships between stakeholders, including social workers, can play a pivotal role in educating parents and equipping them with the necessary tools for addressing sexual health issues with their adolescents. By adopting a comprehensive Ubuntu approach that addresses both preventative measures for adolescents and the empowerment of parents, communities can provide the necessary support to mitigate the challenges associated with adolescent pregnancy and foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for families. Furthermore, investigating the role of community organizations, religious institutions, and other stakeholders in implementing and sustaining these interventions could inform strategies for scaling up successful programs and fostering community resilience in addressing adolescent reproductive health issues.

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