Drivers of and solutions to teenage pregnancy and school dropout in Malawi: A qualitative study

Chikondi Kasamba, Claire E Jensen and Nyovani J Madise
African Institute for Development Policy (AFIDEP)

INTRODUCTION

- Between 2010 and 2016, the rate of pregnancy among teenage girls in Malawi increased from 25% to 29%. Overall, teenage pregnancies constituted one-quarter of all pregnancies in Malawi in 2016.
- Teenage pregnancy and school dropout rates have a two-way relationship, meaning that being out of school increases the risk of teenage pregnancy, while pregnancy also elevates the risk of dropping out of school.
- Both teenage pregnancy and school dropout often have similar root causes including early sexual debut, poverty, school performance, age for grade, family circumstances and community norms and attitudes to girls’ education.

OBJECTIVES

Generate evidence about the causes of teenage pregnancy and school dropout among girls and boys in school in Malawi to inform policies and programmes to reduce the school dropout rate due to teenage pregnancy.

METHODS

- The study used qualitative primary research.
- Data collection: The qualitative data was collected through unstructured key informant interviews (KII) and focus group discussions (FGDs). The researchers used open-ended questions which allowed the researcher flexibility in probing participant responses. Data was collected through unstructured key informant interviews (KII) and focus group discussions (FGDs). The researchers used open-ended questions which allowed the researcher flexibility in probing participant responses. Data was collected using paper-based data collection forms.
- Study population: The study was conducted in two districts in Malawi, Dowa and Mangochi. Following consultation meetings with district officers and other local non-Governmental Organizations (NSOs), one secondary school per district was identified for the FGDs due to their high rates of teenage pregnancies and school dropouts. These CDSS in Mangochi and Kawangwi CDSS in Dowa.
- Recruitment: Purposive sampling was used to identify participants. The researcher employed the saturation point principle whereby sample size was routinely adjusted. However, there was a rough estimate sample of 100 KIIs (5 in each district) and 8 FGDs (4 in each school).

FINDINGS

Findings from the key informant interviews and focus group discussions with teenagers at two schools in Dowa and Mangochi suggest that several factors lead to both teenage pregnancy and school dropouts, namely:

- Poverty
- Early marriage
- Cultural practices
- Family-related issues and peer influence

Additional factors that were found to cause teenage pregnancy were:

- Unprotected sex
- Media influence
- Lack of role models

Additional factors that were found to lead to school dropouts were:

- Distance to school
- Poor academic performance
- Poverty

“...it is possible for some young people to have the desire of going far with school but because of lack of school fees and soap as well as lack of food at home, these act as barriers to their education.” (FGD with girls, 17-year-old, form 3, Mangochi)

“A lot of girls get pregnant because of lack of money. If a boy has money and he asks you to sleep with him, you cannot say no when you have no money to buy soap for washing your uniform with. That is why a lot of girls get pregnant and drop out of school.” (FGD with girls, 15-year-old, form 1, Dowa)

Early marriage

“For instance, if there is a boy from Johannesburg with money, parents get carried away when he gives them soap and creomora [milk], and the result is that they just tell the person to marry their daughter. When she says no, they threaten to chase her away. This is what is causing pregnancies.” (FGD with girls, 18-year-old, form 3, Mangochi)

Policy implications:

- In line with the finding that poverty is a key driver of both teenage pregnancy and school dropouts, providing financial support for needy students in form of school fees and other learning materials was suggested in almost all interviews.
- Construction of safe boarding facilities, particularly for girls, so that they are not walking long distances to and from schools.
- Support for youth clubs in which youth can discuss issues of importance to them, including issues around attending school and sexual and reproductive health.
- Increase accessibility of contraceptives to young people – respondents in Dowa noted that contraceptives, including condoms, were not readily available to young people.

REFERENCES

2. Ibid
4. Ibid

CONTACTS

- Chikondi Kasamba Email: chikondi.kasamba@gmail.com
- Claire E Jensen Email: claire.jensen@afidep.org
- Nyovani J Madise Email: nyovani.madise@afidep.org

Many thanks to the African Institute for Development Policy (AFIDEP), the Malawi Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare and all the participants that partook in this qualitative study.