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## GIRL CHILD EDUCATION AND ADOLESCENCE PREGNANCY AN ASSESSMENT OF UNFPA ADVOCACY

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### ABSTRACT

*Adolescent pregnancy is a complex issue with social, economic, and health implications. Factors such as poor access to health care and education, gender inequality, and limited access to comprehensive sexual education contribute to the issue. This study examined the girl child education and adolescent pregnancy in Nigeria and the United Nations Population Fund's (UNFPA) advocacy concerning education and adolescent pregnancy. Adopting the Social Learning Theory, it examined the persistence of adolescent pregnancy in Nigeria, despite UNFPA advocacy efforts. The qualitative research approach was adopted to generate the secondary data which were obtained from published articles and online sources. The MAXQDA thematic analysis was used to generate data analysis. The study found that a comprehensive strategy is needed to prevent adolescent pregnancy, including advancing gender equality and increasing access to contraception. The study also found out that early marriage and cultural misconception limits the girl child's education. The study recommends that collaborations between UNFPA, the Association for Reproductive and Family Health, and other organizations are needed to strengthen comprehensive sexual education, advocate for gender equality, improve access to reproductive health services, and support economic empowerment.*

**Keywords - Adolescent Pregnancy, Child marriage, Peer pressure, Sexual violence, UNFP**

### INTRODUCTION

Adolescent pregnancy is a prevalent problem worldwide with established determinants and severe implications for health, social, and economic outcomes (WHO, 2022). Adolescence is a period when teenagers are susceptible to risky behaviours that expose them to various health threats. The World Health Organization (WHO) categorizes adolescents as those aged between 10 and 19 years, and they account for about one-

sixth of the global population. Adolescent pregnancies are often unintended and undesired, and many of them result in unsafe abortions, which can have lasting adverse effects on the girls' psychological and emotional well-being. Adolescent pregnancy is a global issue that requires immediate intervention (Lebina, 2015). Early pregnancy or childbirth during adolescence can interfere with girls' normal transition into adulthood and negatively influence their education, livelihoods, and

health. Many pregnant girls face pressure or coercion to leave school, which can restrict their educational and employment opportunities and prospects (UNICEF, 2022). Every year, about 21 million girls aged 15–19 years in developing regions become pregnant, and around 12 million of them give birth (WHO, 2023). The Adolescent birth rate (ABR) has decreased globally from 65 births per 1,000 women in 2000 to 43 births per 1,000 women in 2021. However, the rate of change has differed across different regions of the world, with the fastest decline in Southern Asia (SA) and slower declines in the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) and sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) regions. Despite the declines in all regions, SSA and LAC still have the highest rates globally at 101 and 53.2 births per 1000 women, respectively, in 2021. About 49 million sexually active women in East and Southern Africa lack access to modern contraception or family planning services, and more than half of them are young women. As a result, adolescent pregnancy rates in the region are twice the global average at 92 births per 1,000 girls (UNFPA, 2021). Kanem (2022) stated that the recurrent pregnancies we observe among adolescent mothers are a clear indication that they urgently need sexual and reproductive health information and services. In developed countries, adolescent pregnancies and motherhood are not regarded as a medical risk but a social problem because adolescent motherhood has numerous detrimental social consequences for both mother and child. It is strongly associated with school dropout, low education level, low income, poverty, and single parenthood, and when a girl becomes pregnant, her life can change drastically. Her education may cease, and her job prospects may diminish. She

becomes more susceptible to poverty and exclusion, and her health may deteriorate. Difficulties in pregnancy and childbirth are the main cause of death among adolescent girls.

#### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has reduced the incidence of adolescent pregnancies through various methods. These programmes include empowering girls and working with communities to end child marriage, both of which help to lower adolescent pregnancies, provide comprehensive sexual education to young people, invest in girls' education, advocate against early or forced marriage, build gender-equal societies, and advocate against sexual violence and coercion. The Action for Adolescent Girls programme provides knowledge on sexual reproductive health and human rights to thousands of females, and other members of society in Nigeria, Zambia, Guatemala, Ethiopia, India, Mozambique, Niger, and Sierra Leone. However, despite these efforts, adolescent pregnancy rates remain high in many countries. Why do these strategies employed by the UNFPA seem ineffective? Could it be a consequence of inadequate education, and health care services or poverty? This paper, therefore, examined the relationship between poor investment in girl child education and increased incidences of adolescent pregnancy in Nigeria.

#### THE CONCEPT OF ADOLESCENT PREGNANCY

Adolescent pregnancy is the term used to describe pregnancies that occur among girls aged 10-19 years. It is a global problem but is especially common in developing countries like Nigeria. It can have severe social and health implications. Socially,



adolescent pregnancy can cause early marriage, disrupt education, and limit opportunities for future employment. It often leads to stigmatization and can reinforce cycles of poverty. Health-wise, adolescent pregnancy poses dangers to both the mother and the child. Young girls' bodies may not be ready for childbirth, leading to complications. Children born to adolescent mothers are vulnerable to the challenges of low birth weight, premature birth, and infant mortality. Kanem (2022) asserts that Society often blames only the girl for getting pregnant. The reality is that adolescent pregnancy is usually not the result of a deliberate choice but rather the lack of options and situations beyond the girl's control. It is an outcome of minimum or no access to employment, health care, school and quality information. This highlights the societal and systemic factors that contribute to adolescent pregnancy. Adolescent pregnancy is likely to be higher among those with low education and economic status. Moreover, there is slower progress in reducing adolescent first births among these and other vulnerable groups, leading to increasing inequity. Child marriage and sexual abuse puts girls at increased risk of pregnancy, often unintended. In many places, barriers to obtaining and using contraceptives prevent adolescents from avoiding unintended pregnancies (WHO, 2023). Teenage mothers are prone to become school dropouts and have repeated pregnancies (Alade, 2018). Findings from Alabi and Oni (2017) revealed that some girls who had children experienced dropouts. This could make them liabilities in life, having been deprived of the right to education.

## EXPRESSIONS OF ADOLESCENT PREGNANCY

**Lack of Education:** One of the crucial ways to achieve academic empowerment for girls is through education. Providing education for girls is a pressing concern in Nigeria due to the country's evidence of ethnicity, culture, illiteracy, ignorance, and religious views. Many parents regard education for a girl child as a waste of time, energy, and resources compared to a boy child (Akintolu, Dlamini, & Oladebo, 2021). Girls are also preferred by mainly Nigerian women to assist in the labour force (Okam & Shuaibu, 2019). Girls in a certain class are unable to access educational opportunities due to these barriers.

Adolescent pregnancy has a huge impact on a girl's education and wage-earning potential. Most girls who become pregnant are pressured or forced to leave school. Girls not in school are also more likely to become pregnant, and, in many cases do not continue their education. For each additional year of education, there is a ten per cent reduction in fertility (UNESCO, 2017).

Early and unwanted pregnancy is less likely to occur in girls with higher education levels. When adolescents are not educated about reproduction and safe sex, they may not understand the risks associated with sexual activity, like pregnancy. They may not know how to use contraceptives properly or where to get them. In some cases, they may not even realize they can get pregnant. Moreover, a lack of education can limit their future opportunities, making early pregnancy seem like a less significant risk compared to their peers, who have better educational and career prospects. Education is a key factor in preventing teen pregnancies.

When adolescents are educated, they are more likely to understand the implications of early pregnancy, including the health risks and long-term socio-economic consequences. They're also more likely to know how to prevent pregnancy, such as the proper use of contraceptives. Furthermore, education often leads to better opportunities, which can decrease the likelihood of teen pregnancy as adolescents may have more to lose if they become pregnant.

Lack of education removes these protective factors, increasing the risk of teen pregnancy. Alabi and Oni (2017) reported inadequate information on sexual knowledge as one of the reasons responsible for pregnancies among teenagers; this is because teenagers in secondary schools have little knowledge regarding sex and sexuality. They further discovered that adolescents face many threats, stretching from unwanted pregnancies, HIV and AIDS, other STIs, and sexual exploitation, yet they lack sufficient information to help them negotiate this difficult path to adulthood.

Alabi and Oni (2017) concluded that adolescents require particular information about how their bodies function and how to preserve their bodies, as well as information about sexual behaviour and its consequences. They contend that teenagers should know about sexuality to help them avoid unwanted pregnancies. According to the National Policy on Gender in Basic Education, the Federal Government of Nigeria affirms education as its top priority, both as a right and as an instrument of development, to address the wide gap of inequalities caused by illiteracy, ethnicity, culture, ignorance, and religious beliefs within society. The policy strongly ensures gender equity in the delivery of basic

education provision in Nigeria (FMEN, 2004). The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund indicates that any government should not expect immediate rewards from empowering girl children through education but must see it as the best investment for the country's development (UNICEF, 2021). Therefore, the education young girls receive aids in the development of key traits, including self-confidence, the ability to contribute meaningfully to society, and resistance to illnesses and other forms of sexual exploitation. The age at which girls begin childbearing has important implications for their health and social outcomes, as well as for national development goals (UNFPA 2014).

#### UNFPA'S EFFORT AT COMBATING ADOLESCENT PREGNANCY

Countries are working to prevent adolescent pregnancy. However, these efforts often implicitly blame girls and work towards a change in behaviours rather than mitigating the root causes of adolescent pregnancy. Such drivers encompass child marriage, exclusion from educational and job opportunities, poverty, gender inequality, social pressures, sexual violence, and a fatalistic perception of girls. Also, many efforts overlook the role of boys and men. A more holistic technique is required to support girls' rights and empower them to avoid early pregnancy (UNFPA 2017). This technique should include the provision of age-appropriate sex education for all adolescents, investment in girls' education especially through the secondary level, prevention of early child and forced marriage, sexual violence and coercion, building gender-equitable societies by empowering girls and putting measures in place to enhance adolescents to acquire

information on sexual and reproductive health, as well as empower their choices (UNFPA 2017).

UNFPA collaborate with partners, including governments, civil society, and youth-based organisations, to increase channels of information on contraception, counselling, and sexual and reproductive health issues. UNFPA also champion the integration of comprehensive sex education into school curriculum and promotes programmes supporting gender equality, particularly those reaching vulnerable adolescents and those that support young mothers (UNFPA 2014).

#### THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

The Social learning theory is adopted to situate this study. This theory was propounded by Albert Bandura in 1961 and 1963 in the Bobo Doll experiments, which entailed children observing the behaviour of a model doll and how they imitated its behaviour over time. (Online MSW Programmes. 2022). According to Crossman (2019), the Social Learning Theory explains the effect of socialization on the individual. He further explained that the theory is hinged on the process of learning behaviour. Crossman (2019) posits that a crime or deviant behaviour is a learned activity and that over time, the individual learns to accept such a learned crime or deviant behaviour as being favourable. According to social learning theory, people acquire new behaviours by observing, imitating, and modelling others.

This theory integrates cognitive, behavioural, and environmental factors and emphasizes the role of attention, memory, and motivation in learning. Social learning theory can be utilised to understand various aspects of human behaviour, including sexual behaviour and pregnancy among

adolescents. Adolescents may learn from their environment, such as their peers or the media, about sexual behaviours and their consequences. They may then copy these behaviours, which can result in pregnancy if they involve unprotected sex. The theory also suggests that adolescents can learn from the outcomes of others' behaviours, whether positive or negative. For instance, if an adolescent sees a peer being rewarded for having a baby, they may be more likely to reproduce the behaviour that led to that outcome.

#### RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POOR INVESTMENT IN GIRL CHILD EDUCATION AND INCREASED INCIDENCES OF ADOLESCENT PREGNANCY IN NIGERIA

The lack of investment in girls' education is associated with higher rates of adolescent pregnancy in Nigeria. The RSIS International (2021) reports that adolescent pregnancy is a serious problem in Nigeria, as confirmed by a fact-check by Africa Check. The Nigeria Demographic Health Survey (DHS) and the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) provide a reliable and comprehensive picture of adolescent pregnancies in the country and reveal that 3.1% of young women under 15 years old had given birth at the time of the survey and 19.2% of those aged 15 to 19 had started having children. They identify the following factors as obstacles to girls' education in Nigeria, especially in the north: poverty, early marriage, cultural and religious beliefs, and teenage pregnancy. RSIS International (2021) also demonstrates that adolescent pregnancy hurts female education in Nigeria (Alukagberie, Elmusharaf, Ibrahim, & Poix, 2023).

Girls' education has transformative effects on individuals, communities, and

societies. UNICEF (2022) opines that girls who are educated are more likely to delay marriage and have healthy, and gratifying lives. This is because they earn higher incomes, participate in the decisions that affect them, and create better futures for themselves and their families. Girls' education also strengthens economies, reduces inequality, and contributes to more stable, strong societies that foster equal opportunity for all people, including boys and men, to achieve their potential. But education for girls is not only about access to school. UNICEF (2022) further argues that it is important for girls to feel supported in their academic choices and safe in the classroom, even in fields where women are often underrepresented. About 49% of countries have attained gender equality in primary education. At the secondary level, the gap increases, with 42% of countries achieving gender equality in junior secondary education, and 24% in upper secondary education. The reasons vary among communities and countries, from barriers to girls' education, such as poverty, child marriage, and gender-based violence, to poor families often prefer investing in boys' education. In certain areas, schools do not meet the safety, hygiene, or sanitation needs of girls, and in others, teaching practices are not gender-responsive and result in gender gaps in learning and skill development.

The United Nations Population Fund is working to promote girls' education through various programmes, one of which is the Joint Programme on Empowering Adolescent Girls and Young Women through Education, which is a partnership between UNESCO, UN Women, and UNFPA. Launched in 2015, it applies a

collaborative, coordinated, and multi-sectoral approach to ensure girls' and women's rights to quality education. The Joint Programme focuses on this specific time in the lives of adolescent girls and young women. It aims to empower them in and through education, enabling them to thrive in the learning process and fulfil their potential as empowered individuals. From poverty and social practices to education quality and gender-based violence, the journey to school remains challenging for girls. This is especially true during adolescence, a time when sexual and reproductive health issues significantly affect girls' ability to take advantage of educational opportunities. Through community-based training and outreach, UNFPA also worked with governments to deliver comprehensive sexuality education in schools and other settings. Extensive sex education helps young people protect and prioritise their dignity, health, and well-being by furnishing them with a fundamental toolkit of attitudes, skills, and knowledge. It is a requirement for exercising full bodily autonomy, which requires not only the right but also the ability to enable adolescents to make knowledgeable, decisions about their bodies and their lives. They also uphold human rights principles and foster gender parity and the rights and empowerment of young people. UNFPA also advocates for and invests in sex education programmes that comply with internationally accepted standards.

#### ANALYSIS OF SECONDARY DATA

The MAXQDA thematic analysis software was used to analyse the secondary data as follows.

**Themes Supporting the Relationship Between Poor Investment in Girl Child Education and Increased Adolescent Pregnancy**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Key Points</b>
Barriers to Girl Child Education	- Poverty, early marriage, and cultural and religious misconceptions are barriers. - These limit girls' access to education.
Impact of Teenage Pregnancy on Education	- Teenage pregnancy negatively affects girls' education. - The RSIS International study highlights this impact.
Importance of Girls' Education	- Girls' education leads to healthier lives and reduced teenage pregnancy.

Source: MAXQDA Thematic Analysis

**DISCUSSION OF THEMES**

**Obstacles to Girls' Education**

The data reveals the existence of obstacles that prevent girls from accessing education in Nigeria. Some of the main factors are poverty, early marriage, and cultural/religious misconceptions. Poverty makes families allocate resources to boys' education, often neglecting girls' education. Early marriage, prevalent in some regions, imposes premature responsibilities and reduces educational opportunities for girls. Moreover, cultural and religious misconceptions about girls' roles and education contribute to restricting their access to schooling. These obstacles collectively create a cycle of low educational attainment among girls. This supports Omar et al.'s (2010) view that adolescents who are not enrolled in school, have no formal education, or have a lower level of education, are more likely to become pregnant.

**Effects of Teenage Pregnancy on Education**

The data emphasizes that teenage pregnancy has a significant negative effect on girls' education. The RSIS International study illustrates the magnitude of this effect. Adolescent pregnancy leads to early motherhood, interrupting girls' educational trajectories and limiting their ability to pursue higher education or careers. The

responsibilities associated with motherhood often force girls to drop out of school, perpetuating a cycle of low educational attainment and increased vulnerability.

**Benefits of Girls' Education**

The data highlights the transformative power of investing in girls' education. Girls who receive an education are more likely to lead healthy, productive lives and are less likely to marry young. Education not only empowers girls to make informed life choices but also contributes to economic growth and reduces societal inequality. By providing girls with educational opportunities, societies can lessen the incidence of teenage pregnancy and its associated challenges.

In summary, the thematic analysis of the data reveals three key themes that support the idea that poor investment in girl child education leads to increased adolescent pregnancy in Nigeria. The obstacles hindering girl child education, the negative effect of teenage pregnancy on education, and the recognized benefits of girls' education collectively stress the urgent need for targeted interventions to break the cycle of limited opportunities for girls. By addressing these themes, policymakers and stakeholders can work towards minimising the incidence of teenage pregnancy and fostering a more equitable and empowered future for young women in Nigeria.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study found that barriers to girl child education result in poverty, early marriage, and cultural and religious misconceptions. Poverty prioritizes boys' education, while early marriage and cultural misconceptions limit girls' education opportunities. This is consistent with the position of Mathur *et al.* (2003), who stated that poverty is a major factor in child marriage, which leads to adolescent pregnancy, as low-income families use early marriage as a survival strategy, especially in high-mortality regions and poor rural areas. Similarly, Moletsane (2017) stated that adverse cultural practices, stemming from asymmetrical gender norms make girls and young women vulnerable to negative health, education, and economic outcomes. She added that the disparity in gender norms, which places girls and women differently in intimate and social relationships, means that they are powerless to confer and make decisions about their lives and bodies, thus negatively affecting their chances of completing their education. Also, UNESCO (2017) asserts that girls with an advanced level of education are less likely to have an early and unintended pregnancy. Challenges to Child Marriage Advocacy in Nigeria: The study suggested that child marriage advocacy in Nigeria faces difficulties due to weak enforcement of laws, inconsistent adoption and implementation, and sociocultural norms. The Nigerian constitution contains provisions that conflict with child marriage prevention, affecting the effectiveness of advocacy efforts, ineffective implementation, and societal beliefs that sustain early marriage, leading to a higher adolescent pregnancy incidence. Advocacy initiatives like the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme and

the African Union campaign aim to end child marriage but encounter barriers, requiring a more holistic and sustained approach. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights admits the right to "free and full" consent to a marriage, conceding that an agreement cannot be "free and full" when one of the parties involved is not adequately mature to make an informed decision about a life partner (UNICEF, 2005). Therefore, early marriage is considered a human rights issue. Furthermore, Itumoh (2020) agreed, stating that ending child marriage in Nigeria requires addressing its root causes through the law, community efforts, and leaders' good standing, addressing dysfunctional cultural traditions and promoting gender-discriminatory norms. Nwonu and Oyakhiromen (2014) asserted that gender discrimination, harmful traditional practices, poverty, weak legislative frameworks and enforcement, and a lack of alternative opportunities for girls, particularly education, are all major drivers of child marriage.

Adolescent pregnancy constitutes a threat in which the victim has little or no power over major economic, health, and social, outcomes, consequently, they are socially confined without ample knowledge and skills to successfully go through the challenges of life. It can also be viewed as an early warning signal of inequality in society. Adolescent pregnancy is a complex issue that requires a comprehensive approach. It's not just a health issue but also involves social, economic, and cultural factors. Efforts should focus on education, access to healthcare, and addressing gender inequality. Despite progress, there's still much work to be done to ensure the potential of every young person is fulfilled. This study concludes that there have been

international efforts to combat sexual violence, but internal factors within society continue to hinder progress. Global organisations, the United Nations Population Fund, have been working towards addressing the issue of adolescent pregnancy by focusing on the protection and fulfilment of girls' rights. This includes promoting an all-inclusive sexual and reproductive health care education to help girls avoid pregnancy.

### RECOMMENDATION

The paper, therefore, recommends the strengthening of comprehensive Sexual education, with the UNFPA collaborating with the Nigerian Association for Reproductive and Family Health to enhance and expand comprehensive sexual education programmes. These programmes should aim to provide adolescents with accurate information about sexual health, contraceptives, and the potential consequences of early pregnancy.

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