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Factors Associated with Pregnancies among Church-Going Teenagers in Rwanda

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of the study was to assess challenges faced by churchgoing teenage mothers from disadvantaged religious families in Rwanda. The study was based on the following objectives: assess how uninformed physiological and social-emotional changes contribute to GBV among teenagers from disadvantaged religious families in Rwanda and examine how family and religious teachings, poverty and inadequate childhood gender socialization enforce dependence on GBV perpetrators.

Methodology: Data were collected from 107 respondents, including 72 teenage mothers, 10 parents, 15 church leaders and 10 local leaders. The study was guided by Life Course Theory as well as the Theory of Gender and Power.

Findings: The study revealed significant challenges faced by teenage mothers and their children. They face stigmatization and exclusion, mostly within religious communities (54.2%). Teenage mothers are abandoned, rejected and tortured by their families after pregnancy (97.2%); parents and church leaders ignore their responsibilities. Factors such as poverty, inadequate family education, physiological and emotional changes contribute to sexual exploitation and abuse of girls leading to teenage pregnancy. Victims of continuing erosion of family values, 26.3% of teenage mothers were impregnated by married adults. The physical and socio-emotional environment of teenage mothers' families perpetuates a growing identity crisis. A significant number of teenage mothers (10.3%) have attempted suicide and failed, they are alive against their will; 41% have attempted abortion and failed. Unprepared and depressed, they develop a dependency on the perpetrator in order to survive. They endure silenced physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence and develop their tortures' positive justifications in order to protect perpetrators.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: The growing phenomenon of teenage mothers discloses the weaknesses of family and church education. Teenage mothers and local leaders agreed on the dichotomy between spirituality and everyday life, while parents and church leaders tend to emphasize the sinful nature of teenagers. There is a need to raise awareness among families and religious communities to improve girls' reproductive health education and build their financial resilience.

Keywords: *GBV, Teenage Pregnancies, Religion Community, Disadvantaged Families*

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INTRODUCTION

Holistic integration of gender equality has been a daunting situation in Rwandan religious families, especially disadvantaged ones. Girls from these families are more likely to be exposed to gender-based and sexual violence. Girls tolerate sexual violence and are exposed to male sexual desires as a result of their early childhood education. Although poverty, physiological changes and socio-emotional crisis are factors associated with male dominance, teenage mothers experience a triple victimization that affects their life course.

Despite the remarkable progress of international and national policies promoting girls' education and safety as an attempt of women empowerment towards reaching gender equality, various factors are still a challenge. Teenage is a transitional lifespan with numerous physiological, social and emotional changes that expose young girls to high risk of being impregnated and those who belong to church are vulnerable as well. Poverty, inadequate education, physiological and emotional changes are key factors that have been found to maintain girls from disadvantaged families under sexual exploitation and abuse (Kaplan, 2023).

In developing countries, it is estimated that annually around 7.3 million girls under the age of 18 who give birth, 70, 000 die due to pregnancy and childbirth related causes and 3.2 million are involved in unsafe abortion (Blum & William, 2015). Teenage motherhood brings several complications to mothers, their children, families, churches and the society at large (Anima 2020). Teenage mothers are forced to be mothers prematurely. Factors such as poverty, inadequate parental support, lack of information on reproductive health and poor parenting skills are complex situations affecting teenagers (Bazubagira & Umumararungu, 2023).

Even though Rwanda has approved ten years National Gender Policy and other strategies to empower girls, gender socialization at family level is still a challenge (Timothy, 2022; Umumararungu & Bazubagira, 2020). Various families in Rwanda are dominated by domestic violence, economic imbalance between men and women, discriminatory social and cultural norms that are barriers to equal rights and opportunities. Even though much effort has been invested in gender equity and inclusion in different sectors, the participation of women in decision making is still low specifically at family level (Mbangukira et al., 2020). The study is guided by two specific objectives:

- i. Assess how uninformed physiological and social-emotional changes contribute to GBV among teenagers from disadvantaged religious families in Rwanda; and
- ii. Examine how family and religious teachings, poverty and inadequate childhood gender socialization enforce dependence on GBV perpetrators.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section deals with various publications related to the topic under discussion. It poses a solid foundation of understanding the topic, a desk review of what is already known about the topic to facilitate gap identification. Various publications revealed that teenage mothers are abandoned, tortured, labeled with negative behaviours and excommunicated (Tyumre, 2020). Excluded from church activities, their children are not welcomed and cannot be baptized at early age since they are considered by most of their grandparents as curse and a shame to the family and church; they are stigmatized from their tender age. It is a devastating situation which confines both teenage mothers and their children (Ruzibiza, 2021). Religious communities imprison teenage mothers in a cruel environment prohibiting them from any church activity. Teenage mothers are often stigmatized and rejected by their communities and churches (Tyumre, 2020; Ruzibiza, 2021). They are not provided with a free space where they can be

heard and get counseling sessions that would rehabilitate and encourage them to confess (Obiako, 2021). An important number of girls do not have opportunity to complete their schools. Due to inadequate moral and financial support, rejected by the fathers of their children, their families, friends and religious communities, the situation increases their vulnerability (Farber, 2016).

Despite considerable efforts in establishing policies of promoting girls' education and safety, teenage girls from disadvantaged and religious backgrounds in Rwanda remain exposed to early pregnancies and Gender-Based Violence (GBV). Conducted studies proved poverty, lack of education to reproductive health and inadequate emotional support to be push factors of early pregnancies with its associated risks (Bazubagira & Umumararungu, 2023). However, few studies underscored the dichotomy between religious teachings and teenage pregnancies phenomenon within churches. The study seeks to address the gap through a deep analysis of these dynamics and their impact on teenage mothers. The findings will benefit policymakers, religious communities, educators and teenage girls.

Theoretical Review

Several theories in connection with the topic have been analyzed to understand the topic under discussion that are Life Course Theory (LCT) and Theory of Gender and Power (TGP).

Life Course Theory (LCT)

Developed by Elder (1974), Life Course Theory (LCT) is based on five key principles that are life-span development, human agency, historical time and geographic place, timing of decisions and linked lives (Nico & Pollock, 2022). The study of the Sociologist Elder focused on the effects of great depression on children and families which highlighted how historical contexts and social structures influence individual development over their lifespan (Elder & Johnson, 2018). His work lays the foundation for the life course perspective by indicating how socio-historical events shape trajectories of individuals' lives (Berk, 2022). LCT underscores the necessity of time, context and process that determine individual life under the influence of historical events, social changes and personal choices.

The application of Life Course Theory (LCT) in church teachings relies on the fact that teenage mothers' trajectory is influenced by values and morality from families and churches. Church teachings affect present and future choices of teenagers. In the context of teenage mothers, LCT highlights physiological changes including sexual desires throughout children development. LCT helps policy makers, researchers and practitioners design improved interventions and supports to boost individuals' life outcomes. It is a multidisciplinary framework to comprehend human development dynamics over time. Trajectories, transitions, turning points, and socio-historical context are key concepts while applying LCT (Shanahan et al., 2016). Recognizing the interconnectedness of gender and the life course allows a clear understanding of challenges faced by teenage mothers, paving the way for more effective support systems and resources tailored to their unique needs.

Theory of Gender and Power (TGP)

Developed by Connell in 1980s, the Theory of Gender and Power (TGP) explains the complexity of gender and power in societal dynamics. The theory finds its roots in feminist and sociological perspectives. It is mostly used to understand and address issues related to gender inequality, sexual health disparities and social justice (Gal, 2012). TGP provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing a systemic nature of gender inequalities focusing on sexual division of labor, sexual division of power as well as emotional

and social attachments. It is a valuable tool for researchers, policymakers and activists working towards a more equitable society. TGP engenders behaviors that impact interactions among men and women motivating the understanding of social behavior and trajectories of individual life (Rudman, 2021).

TGP highlights how power dynamics shaped by societal norms and expectations surrounding gender, impact the resources available to young mothers and their ability to effectively overcome challenges. Teenage mothers often face stigma and limited access to educational and employment opportunities which are aggravated by gendered expectations surrounding motherhood. The application of the Theory of Gender and Power offers a theoretical framework to better understand risk factors associated with teenage pregnancy and the broader implications for women's health. This theory emphasizes how power imbalances between genders shape women's vulnerability to health risks including unintended pregnancies and exposure to sexually transmitted infections (Steinfeld et al., 2020).

The Sexual Division of Labor and Power theory is useful for understanding how religious and family norms which often place women in subordinate roles contribute to teenage pregnancies by limiting young girls' autonomy and access to resources. In various cultures, girls are socialized to prioritize in-house duties restricting their ability to make informed decisions. The theory highlights how structural and cultural factors interconnect to maintain unequal power dynamics, further imbedding gender disparities and contributing to cycle of early pregnancies with limited support or opportunities to teenage mothers.

Sexual Division of Labor (SDL)

Sexual Division of Labour (SDL) is intricately linked to education systems that reinforces gender role inequalities in families, educational environment and labor market. SDL refers to the division of tasks between men and women based on perceived accepted differences and their unequal value (Blažev et al., 2017). In this regard, gender is socially and culturally constrained by community perspectives. Gender is regulated by norms, behaviours and roles which in turn create values, attitudes and ways of thinking that dictate decision making. The later engenders perceptions of femininity and masculinity creating a collective consciousness of community understanding on gender equality and inclusion (Selimbegović et al.2019). The interpretation of gender roles and stereotypes are accepted and assimilated to biological gender. This understanding is rooted to gender inequality socialized from family, school and work environment (Rogers et al., 2021).

Gender family socialization is the process through which parents shape their children's understanding and expression of gender identities and roles from their tender age. Parents are their children's role models and communicate gender expectations to their children through verbal and non-verbal communication. From childhood, boys and girls are introduced to different games and activities that reflect their distinct division of labor based on biological gender. There are games a girl is not allowed to play and a boy too as a way of revealing societal expectations. Once children start to interact with extended family and community, gender stereotypes are reinforced. Due to various factors including poverty, illiteracy and domestic violence endured by the targeted families, parents are not able to challenge traditional gender stereotypes. Children's from underprivileged families which the study was based on develop low level of self-perception, confidence and aspiration. If childhood is a foundation to equip individuals with ability to analyze and classify problems in all its angles and find out different solutions, girls and boys are natured differently (Alshaalan, 2022).

Globally, girls face significant barriers to access education due to cultural norms, early marriage and economic constraints. In families with low economic income, boys are given priority over girls which amplifies lack of girls' educational opportunities. These barriers perpetuate SDL and restrict girls to obtain skills and knowledge that could enable them to be more competitive on employment market (Stevenson et al., 2021).

Informal education provides a variety of resources within an environment in which children are born and raised up involving different activities and experiences that foster personal development. This form of education is non-structured, voluntary and self-directed, relying on social interactions with family, peers and the community (Rogoff et al., 2016). The environment of informal education of most families is driven by gender social and cultural construct that advocate for girls' submission with huge consequences when it comes to decision making (Denov, 2007). It is rare to contradict the male decision as a result of formal and informal education. Mainly, girls are led by their brothers; they are taught to keep quiet in public and wait for their brothers' decisions (Vurayai, 2021). Family social and economic challenges lessen girls' opportunities to learn and study successfully. The established hierarchy between men and women appear to motivate the in-house activities of women that are underestimated in terms of economic contribution (Gbogbo, 2020).

The out-house activities of men are overvalued which sharpened their educational orientation (Grundey, 2011). This dual environment impacts educational choices of both men and women when they are offered with opportunities to pursue their studies. Girls are encouraged to pursue fields related to domestic roles and have adopted this perspective as a suitable educational path without considering its potential drawbacks while boys are encouraged to pursue Science courses (Roberts, 2014; Mqadi, 2024).

There is a substantial disparity among males and females concerning employment opportunities particularly in senior positions. Women are dominant in secondary sector of employment market with low wages and job insecurity. On the other hand, men are dominant in the primary sector with high wages and job security (Berdahl et al., 2018). This environment outlines gender stereotypes that confines women to feminine fewer paying jobs as assimilated to domestic roles. A few females are struggling for being employed in a sector considered as men's work like construction, plumbing, electricity, etc. (Jonson, 2016).

Sexual Division of Power (SDP) and Authority within Male-Female Relationships

The Sexual Division of Power (SDP) underscores unequal distribution of power and authority between men and women at individual, family and workplace relationships (Mugisho & Umumararungu, 2024). Interpersonal relationship between men and women reflects power imbalance whereby men have power position to decide on women behaviour, body use and career development. Such decisions are taken within institutions led by men and women passively implement them. Women are economically marginalized and expect victimizers (men) to create a favorable environment for economic inclusion which is a complex situation (Parpart, 2015).

The Sexual Division of Power (SDP) has a substantial influence on teenage mothers. Their autonomy is restricted due to economic problems that enhance gender inequalities. Traumatized by their situation, teenage mothers experience imbalanced power dynamics that limits their access to education (Karimi, 2015). Because of pregnancy and responsibilities of caring their children, teenage mothers are involved in unstable low paying jobs exposing them to sexual exploitation (Loya, 2014). Socially and economically stigmatized, teenage mothers are isolated and have challenges to achieve their well-being and of their children (Tinago et al.,

2024). The problem of teenage mothers can be addressed through social and economic empowerment in a context where gender equality and inclusion are promoted (Kabeer, 2018).

One of the prominent researchers on gender conducted a study with 132 participants including girls, teachers and parents. The research focused on girls under the age of 18 who were coerced into sex, examining how social constructions of gender norms from early childhood impact their development during their teenage age. The study revealed that gender stereotypes are rooted in early childhood. Boys are defined as sexually active during teenage stage of development while girls were restricted and restrained in such context. Girls are held responsible for pregnancies prevention whereas boys are blameless and do not face any consequence. Masculine behaviour is encouraged among boys; passivity and meekness are promoted among girls. Regarding sexuality, boys express themselves easily about their engagement in sexual relation, their enjoyment but girls do not. The research discovered that even if girls are forced to have sex and are impregnated, they are still accused to be responsible. Parents and teachers underlined the restriction of girls' freedom to sexuality (Ninsiima et al. 2018).

The Structure of Affective Attachments and Social Norms (SAASN)

The Structure of Affective Attachments and Social Norms (SAASN) analyzes emotional attachment and social norms that determine individual behaviors and relationship. Family dynamics and social norms create an environment of conformity and adaptation influencing personal desires and forming individual behavior (Aslan, 2019).

Socialization is understood as a variety of practices through which children adopt and internalize values and norms. They are initiated to adapt to a well-designed system. Parents and family relatives are the first teachers towards social- emotional development of children (Lang et al., 2020). At the tender age, children socialize with gender roles including expectations and stereotypes relating to gender bias (Umumararungu, & Bazubagira, 2020). They develop at teenage age a thoughtful submissiveness to males and an attitude of inferiority and naïve obedience to their demands (Solbes-Canales et al., 2020). Through physiological and emotional changes, girls are exposed to sexual exploitation as a result of not having information about reproductive health (Martin, 2018). Girls socialize with a submissive environment to men which is justified by churches as God's instruction. This belief explains females' reaction to not say no to their exploitation and tortures (Genesis 2:23; Genesis 3:16). Family and church environment engrain girls in unconditional respect to males as a way of being prepared to be good wives (Khan, 2018).

Gender Equity and Inclusion (GEI) is hindered by patriarchal system, cultural and religious beliefs. Even if representing sex out of wedlock as immorality, there is still no robust involvement of churches in providing sexual education. One of the biblical texts interpreted by Pastors and Christians to maintain females' submission to men is found in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy. 2:11-15. The text stresses that women should keep silent in churches; they are not allowed to speak in public rather should be in total submission to men. The interpretation of this text has been enforced by societal culture which later creates unhealthier environment that subject women to men, girls to sons with all related consequences. The interpretation of biblical text nurtures an environment of total dependency. Girls and women accept tortures, frustrations and abuse as a way of adherence to spiritual and social authority of men (Ansted, 2021).

Biological Changes

During adolescence, girls experience significant physiological changes because of rapid hormonal growth and constant brain development. It is a stage marking the beginning of girls' menstrual period which is a challenging time impacting cognitive, mental and emotional health disorders as well as sexual health issues with its associated risks (Özdemir et al., 2016). It is a period of sensitivity and changes that generate stress and chaos. Teenagers undergo critical mental health changes. They are exposed to depression and anxiety if they are not socially, emotionally, psychologically and economically supported (Waugh et al., 2012). Managing the fear of giving birth, unsafe abortion, raising their children in critical condition of poverty, rejection and isolation, breastfeeding their children and being mothers in a traumatizing environment constitute a dare situation.

METHODOLOGY

The research was carried out in five Districts of Rwanda. Sampled Districts and sectors include Rwamagana, Kicukiro, Muhanga, Rusizi and Musanze. In each District, two sectors (one in urban and another in rural) were purposively selected. From the total number of ten sectors, 107 respondents (72 teen mothers, 10 parents of teenage mothers, 10 local leaders and 15 church leaders) participated in the study. Qualitative and quantitative approaches were used to collect data through questionnaire and interview (Gupta & Gupta, 2022). Survey composed with closed and open-ended questions were designed and distributed to 72 teenage mothers. Interview guide was used to conduct individual interview with parents of teenage mothers, local and church leaders. For quantitative data analysis, graphs were used to visualize identified themes. Content analysis was also used to categorize, classify and summarize qualitative data (Saunders et al., 2019).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The section presents data analysis in relation to the objectives of the study. It presents, interprets and discusses collected data creating visualization of the results and compiling findings into a well-structured corpus.

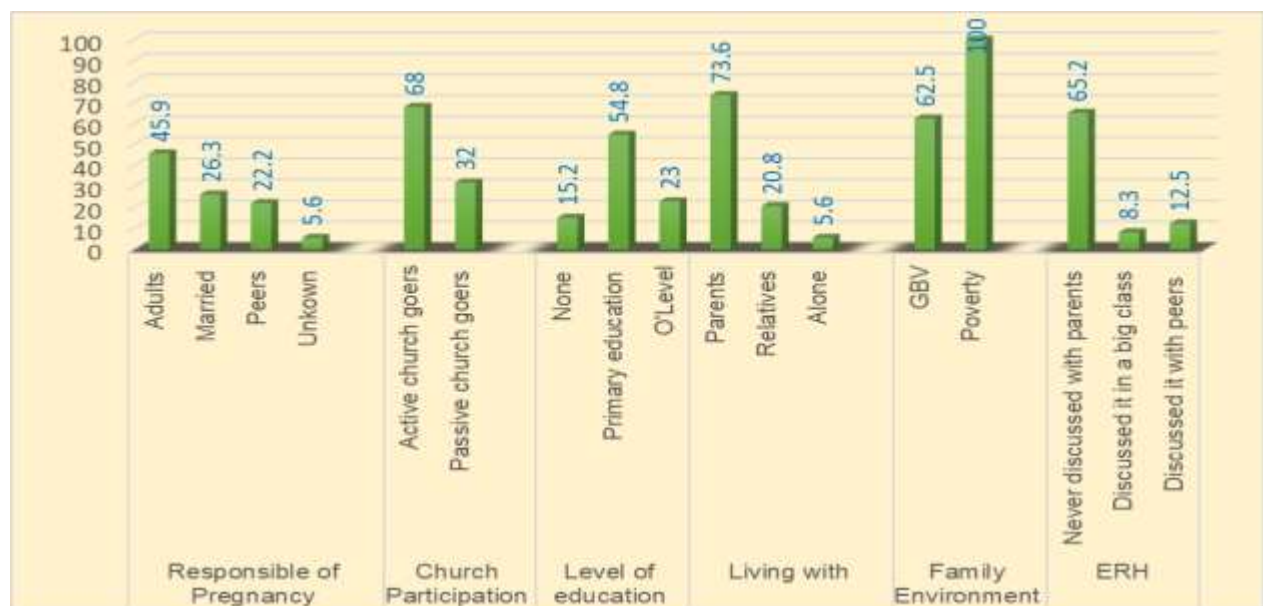


Figure 1: Factors Characterizing Teenage Mothers

Considering the age of people who impregnated teenage mothers, figure 1 highlights that a big number is found to be adults representing 72.2 % among which 26.3 % are married. Teens impregnated by peers are 22.2 %. However, there is a considerable number of teenage mothers representing 5.6% who do not know those who impregnated them which amplifies the problem of identity crisis of their children.

The socio-cultural and economic image of fathers is associated with protection, power, love and decision making. They are trusted and perceived to play a positive role to nurture teenagers. Teenagerhood is a life stage that integrates various physiological and socio-emotional changes that distress mental health (Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2019). Being attracted to the opposite sex opens a window of vulnerability. As statistics display, teenagers are manipulated by mature people who exploit them to satisfy their sexual desires. They are intimidated by authority, trust and paternity of perpetrators. The socio-emotional consideration of the father paralyzes teenagers' emotions and reasoning (Li & Meier, 2017). A significant number who were impregnated by their peers were pushed by sexual curiosity. Sexual curiosity of teenage girls is a natural part of development that can be rooted on different factors including biological changes, social influences, family environment, psychological factors, sexual education and cultural attitudes towards sex and sexuality. It is vital for it to be steered by accurate information and healthy attitudes towards sex and relationship. Girls impregnated by unknown individuals is a complex and traumatizing situation encompassing enormous consequences that include mainly anxiety, depression and intensifies the problem of identity crisis among teenage mothers' children. Instead of listening and providing a platform of socio-emotional support, teenager mothers are accused to play a role in what happened to them.

All teenage mothers sampled are affiliated to a religious community; 68% were active in their respective churches while 32% were passive. Respondents interpreted physiological feelings of sexual desire as a sin and an attack of bad spirits instead of being a natural desire. Religious preaching emphasizes and reflects everything to bad spirit instead of providing clarification on natural desires and how to positively manage them. Lack of proper understanding about sexuality which is a normal physiological need leads in fear and prayers with the belief that prayers have power to chase out sexual desire. This makes teenage girls hide their feelings rather than exposing them to adults who should provide proper orientation and guidance.

As far as the education level of respondents is concerned, the results confirm that the majority of teenage mothers completed primary schools (54.8%) and few of them (23%) have O' level. In addition, there is a significant number of girls (15.2%) who are illiterate. This means that poor parental support to education which is mainly rooted on poverty is a major cause of teenage pregnancies whereby a considerable number of teens were impregnated after school dropout.

The study also assessed people with whom teenage mothers were staying with while they got pregnancies. A big number of teenage mothers (73.6%) were impregnated while staying with parents, 20.8% stayed with relatives and 5.6% were staying alone or with peers. The majority of teenage mothers were impregnated while they were staying with both parents. It sounds that inadequate parental guidance when their children are going through physiological changes constitutes a key push factor to teenage pregnancies. In the same views, Donkor & Lariba (2017) voiced that parents are not creating a space to discuss with their children issues related to sexual education. Furthermore, if trustable people are not open to inform children about their sexual desire and physiological changes, they find out their own ways of discovering it.

All seventy-two sampled teen mothers were born and living in extreme poverty. Most of them were raised up in a harsh and unhealthier family environment. Among 72 sampled respondents, the situation of 62.5% of them is aggravated by Gender Based Violence (GBV) which adversely affected teenage mothers. Poverty has a significant influence on teenage pregnancies and its effects can be multi-faceted and far-reaching. Economic pressures, lack of family financial support and cyclical poverty were found to be predictors of teenage pregnancies (Lee et al., 2021; Bazubagira & Umumararungu, 2023).

The study elucidated that there is a big gap in Education to Reproductive Health (ERH) among sampled respondents whereby 65.2% had never discussed about sexual education and reproductive health with their parents. Only 8.3% of teenage mothers received information about ERH from their teachers but there was no discussion that could guarantee clarity and behavioral changes. A few respondents (12.5%) confirmed that they received information on reproductive healthy and sexuality through their peers and social media. Not getting information on ERH from trusted sources constitute a loophole to easy manipulation of oppressors. Education to Reproductive Health is a sensitive subject that requires the attention of parents, church leaders and teachers.

Conclusion

The study discloses significant insights on the connectedness of social, cultural, economic, religious and educational factors with teenagers' pregnancies. A considerable number of teenage mothers were impregnated by adults who manipulated and intimidated them. The findings revealed that lack of appropriate sexual education, parental guidance, religious teachings and extreme poverty intensify the situation of teenage pregnancies in Rwanda. The need arises to empower teenage girls with proper Education on Reproductive Health and sexuality, create awareness on the importance of communication between parents and children throughout their life course. Addressing issues of extreme poverty among families in Rwanda is vital for mitigating undesirable effects of teenage pregnancies. Religious communities are potential channels to alleviate teenage pregnancies through provision of comprehensive sexual education, offering social, emotional, economic, counseling and mentorship support. In addition, teenage pregnancy requires not only immediate interventions focusing on health education and access to contraceptive services but also a broader societal shift that cut off gender-based inequalities. Empowering young women through education, fostering equitable relationships and providing supportive environments can enhance their ability to make informed choices about their reproductive health. Furthermore, balancing religious teachings with accurate information and creating open spaces for discussion about life course changes are essential strategies of nurturing a healthier environment for teenagers. The results of the study raise awareness of policymakers and implementers, religious communities, educators and teenage girls on mitigation strategies so as to address the issue of early pregnancies and attract the attention of key players.

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