



LIVED TEENAGE SINGLE MOTHERS EXPERIENCES OF SELF-CONCEPT: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF NAIROBI INFORMAL SETTLEMENT SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Single motherhood particularly among teenagers who are students is a growing social concern with far-reaching implications. This phenomenological study explored Teen Single Mothers' lived experiences of self-concept from a criterion sample of three teenage single mothers aged 18 and 19 years. The participants were students in one of the informal settlement secondary schools in Nairobi County. Data collection was conducted through a recorded focus group discussion, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis. Six salient themes emerged from the analysis namely, the challenges of teenage motherhood, the impact of poverty, the impact on self-concept, rejection, coping strategies, and the importance of education. Findings revealed that these young mothers face emotional difficulties such as shame, guilt, and identity crises, often compounded by societal discrimination and stigma. The findings may contribute to the discourse on teenage motherhood and provide valuable information for educators, policymakers, and social workers seeking to create interventions that support the educational and emotional needs of teen mothers.

Keywords: Teenage Single Motherhood, Self-Concept, Mental Health, Educational Attainment, Empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

Teenage single motherhood (TSM), particularly in urban informal settlements, is a growing social concern with significant consequences. Although previous research has investigated the difficulties faced by single mothers in general, there is still a lack of understanding about the distinct experiences and self-perceptions of teenage single mothers in these environments. This research purposed to examine the subjective lived experiences and self-concept in one of the secondary schools in the Kibra slum in Nairobi, a typical example of an informal settlement. These young women juggle multiple roles as mothers, students, and community members within the unique

context. Through a phenomenological approach, the researcher aimed to gain a deep understanding of their perspectives and self-perception. To guide this inquiry, the study addresses the following research questions: What is the personal experience of being a teenage single mother in Nairobi's informal settlements? How do teenage single mothers view themselves in relation to their roles as mothers, students, and community members in Nairobi's informal settlements? What strategies do teenage single mothers use to cope with the challenges they face in their roles as mothers and students in Nairobi's informal settlements?

The concept of single motherhood is a complex social phenomenon characterized by mothers raising children without a partner present in the household consistently (Halwiindi, 2024). Single-family structure has become increasingly prevalent globally, and its societal implications vary significantly across cultures. Single mothers often encounter a constellation of challenges, including economic instability, social stigmatization, and psychological distress (Stack & Meredith, 2018). Single motherhood among Teenagers in schools is a family-emerging family form in Kenyan society, spreading wide yet unspoken and still in search of recognition (Meda, 2013). Media links this situation to the rapid migration from rural to the city of Nairobi and cultural social transition. These teenage mothers face a unique set of challenges that impede their academic progress and overall well-being limiting their future opportunities and presenting a range of physical, emotional, and social challenges. Despite these adversities, research consistently underscores the resilience of Teen Single Mothers (TSM) in their ability to navigate challenges and provide for their children. However, a comprehensive understanding of Teen single mothers' self-perception remains a critical gap in the existing literature.

Self-concept is a multifaceted construct referring to an individual's subjective evaluation of their own worth, abilities, and attributes (Bailey, 2003). It encompasses a dynamic interplay of self-perceptions, beliefs, and values, shaped significantly by social interactions and experiences. In his book, Rogers (1959) highlights the core components of self-concept that include self-schemas, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. A robust self-concept is instrumental in shaping motivation, attitudes, and behaviour (Mercer, 2012). Self-schemas are cognitive representations of oneself, manifested in beliefs such as "I am a strong woman", "I do not need a man to take care of my child" or "I am a reliable person." The self-concept further incorporates role identities. In this context, reflecting the Teen Single Mother's perception of their position within various social contexts, and self-evaluation, which pertains to judgments about personal competence and worth.

Globally, the lived experiences of single mothers have emerged as a critical area of inquiry, with growing concern about the psychological and social implications of this role. Previous related literature has highlighted the multifaceted challenges faced by TSM including emotional, financial, and practical difficulties

In United States of America, Caldwell (2018) and Durett (2015) highlight themes of isolation, exclusion, judgment, and stigmatization, often leading to feelings of shame, guilt, and disenfranchisement among single mothers. Similarly, Johnson's (2022) phenomenological study of American single mothers underscored the complex interplay of emotional turmoil, role conflicts, and resource constraints in their experiences. These findings align with Reloj's (2024) exploration of single mothers in a Philippine satellite campus, which revealed a cyclical pattern of emotional distress characterized by affective, cognitive, physical, and behavioural symptoms. In another study, Malik et al., (2022) examined the self-reported experiences of unmarried Korean mothers, revealing a combination of negative emotions and a strong determination to provide for their children.

In Cameroon, Sobngwi-Tambekou et al. (2022) conducted a study to identify the factors contributing to school dropout among teenage mothers where out of 18,791 single mothers who participated in the study, 41.6% of them had dropped out of school due to pregnancy that was accompanied by multiple stressors affecting mental wellbeing of the teenage mothers. Furthermore, the socioeconomic consequences are substantial, as many of these young mothers face the challenges of single parenthood with limited resources and elevated health risks associated with early childbearing.

Research from various African countries have highlighted the significant similar challenges faced by teen single mothers. In Rwanda Patrick (2022) noted how teen mothers often experience emotional distress, including depression, loneliness, and feelings of isolation, as well as rejection from their families. Similarly, a broader review by Ajayi et al. (2023) confirms these findings, emphasizing the additional challenges of social stigma,

poor mental health, limited access to contraception, and a lack of support, factors that contribute to increased risk of mental health problems and difficulties in accessing necessary care for both mothers and children.

Findings from Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, (2022) indicate that approximately 18% of girls aged 15-19 have initiated childbearing, a phenomenon that is particularly prevalent in some regions in Kenya. This is noted to have impacted their education severely as evidenced by an estimated 13,000 girls dropping out of school annually due to pregnancy (UNESCO, 2021). Additionally, the socioeconomic implications are significant, as numerous young mothers are forced to raise children alone with minimal support and increased health concerns related to early pregnancy

Further research in Kenya by Clark et al., (2024) reveal many teen mothers reported feeling extremely sad, overwhelmed, and having trouble thinking clearly. They are also experience physical symptoms like fatigue and sleep problems, as well as withdrawing from others or engaging in harmful behaviors including suicidal thoughts (Clark et al., 2024).

Despite the prevalence of teen single motherhood, particularly in low-income urban settings like Nairobi's informal settlements, a critical gap exists in understanding how these young women perceive themselves. While existing research offers valuable insights into single mothers' experiences and self-concept theories, qualitative studies specifically exploring the lived experiences of self-concept of TSM remain scarce. This study addressed this gap by employing a phenomenological approach to investigate the lived experiences of teen single mothers who are students in one of the schools in Kibra, a slum within Nairobi County. Through this exploration, the research aimed to examine how these young women navigate their dual roles as mothers and students, ultimately contributing to a more nuanced understanding of their self-concept and identity.

Research Questions Guiding the Study

What are the lived experiences of being a Teen Single Mother in Nairobi's informal settlements in Nairobi County?

How do teen single mothers perceive themselves in relation to their roles as mothers, students, and community members in Nairobi's informal settlements Nairobi County?

What strategies do teen single mothers employ to mitigate the challenges they face in their roles as mothers and students in Nairobi's informal settlements Nairobi County?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was anchored on Intersectionality theoretical frameworks. The theory examines how various social and political identities, such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability, combine to create unique experiences of discrimination and privilege. It recognizes that individuals may experience multiple forms of oppression

simultaneously and that these intersections can shape their life experiences in complex ways.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality, as a theoretical framework, was initially conceptualized by Crenshaw (1991) to address the multiple layers of discrimination faced by women of colour. It focuses on how various forms of social stratification, such as race, gender, class, and other identities, intersect to create unique experiences of oppression and privilege. In the context of this study, Intersectionality will be used to examine the lived experiences of TSM in informal settlement Secondary schools in Nairobi County, considering how their identities as young women, mothers, students, and residents of a marginalized urban area interact and shape their self-concept. Intersectionality can empower marginalized groups by recognizing their unique experiences and advocating for their rights.

Intersectionality and the Lived Experience of Teen Single Mothers

Intersectionality allows for a comprehensive exploration of how the intersecting identities of these teen mothers contribute to their unique lived experiences, especially as mothers, students, and teenagers. The theory helps in understanding the complex and interconnected nature of social inequality concerning this population. The compounded challenges of being a young mother in a socio-economically disadvantaged area like Kibera can be understood through the lens of multiple overlapping identities (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2000). For instance, the stigma associated with teenage motherhood is likely intensified by the socio-economic status of the slum environment, where resources are scarce, and cultural norms may further marginalize these young women (Amuyunzu-Nyamongo & Ezeh, 2005).

Self-Concept and Identity Construction

The self-concept of TSM in this study was examined through the lens of Intersectionality, which emphasizes the complexity of identity construction in the face of multiple, often conflicting, social roles. These young women must navigate their identities as mothers, students, and members of a community that holds specific expectations for each role. Intersectionality provides a framework for understanding how these intersecting identities influence their self-perception and the strategies they employ to reconcile these roles (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013; Mirza, 2009).

Coping Strategies and Structural Constraints

Intersectionality also informed the exploration of the coping strategies these TSM develop to mitigate the challenges they face. By considering the intersecting systems of oppression such as poverty, gender norms, and limited access to education and healthcare the framework helped in identifying both the individual and collective strategies these young mothers use to navigate their circumstances (Dill & Zambrana, 2009 ; Mutua & Mwanja, 2017). Additionally, it highlights the structural constraints that limit these strategies, such as systemic

poverty and inadequate social support in Kibera (Hancock, 2007).

Integrating Intersectionality with Phenomenological Research Design

Phenomenology seeks to understand the essence of lived experiences by focusing on individuals' subjective perspectives (Husserl, 1970). When integrated with Intersectionality, this approach allowed a deeper understanding of how overlapping social identities and power structures shape these teen mothers' experiences. This integrated framework guided the methodological approach of this study, ensuring that the complexity and diversity of these young women's experiences are fully captured and understood (Ahmed, 2000). Using Intersectionality as a theoretical framework in this phenomenological study enabled a more thorough exploration of the lived experiences of teen single mothers in informal settlement Secondary schools in Nairobi County. It provided insights into how their intersecting identities as mothers, students, and residents of a marginalized community shape their self-concept and coping strategies, while also acknowledging the structural barriers they face.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Subjective Experiences of Teen Single Mothers

Around the world, people are increasingly interested in understanding the lives of single mothers and the challenges they face. There is a growing worry about how being a single mother can affect their mental health and social well-being. Studies have shown that teenage single mothers often experience a range of problems, including emotional distress, financial hardship, and practical difficulties.

In America, Johnson's (2022) phenomenological study explored the experiences of single-parent students attending community college in the United States. 13 participants, including 10 females and 3 males, were purposefully selected. 9 students were full-time, while 4 were part-time. Semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom revealed a complex interplay of emotional challenges, financial difficulties, and balancing parenthood with academics. Despite these obstacles, participants demonstrated resilience and effective time management skills. The study highlights the significance of intrinsic motivation and support systems for the success of single-parent students in higher education.

In Africa, Ajayi et al. (2023) examined the Lived experiences of pregnant and parenting adolescents that targeted mothers aged 10 to 19 years. A three-step search strategy was employed to identify relevant research articles published between 2000 and 2021 in various databases. After screening over 1,000 articles, 116 met the inclusion criteria. Data extraction was conducted using a standardized template, followed by descriptive and thematic analysis. This research on pregnant and parenting adolescents was noted to be limited in scope, with a disproportionate focus on South Africa, accounting for 41.4% of all studies. The majority of research was

noted to be African-led (81.9%) and has not received external funding (60.3%). Most studies adopt qualitative designs (58.6%) and have been published in recent years, with 48.3% published between 2016 and 2021. The researchers found that most studies focused on the challenges these young mothers faced, particularly in terms of their education and overall experiences. Findings consistently highlight the social exclusion faced by pregnant and parenting adolescents, with significant implications for their physical, mental, and socioeconomic well-being.

In Cameroon, Sobngwi-Tambekou et al. (2022) conducted a study to identify the factors contributing to school dropout among teenage mothers. 18,791 single mothers were sampled using statistics from the country's national registry. Bivariate analysis and logistic binary regression models were employed to explore the connection between adolescent motherhood and School drop out (SDO). The study examined various socioeconomic, family, sexual, and health-seeking behaviors to understand their relationship with school dropout (SDO). The findings revealed that 41.6% of the 18,791 single mothers had dropped out of school due to pregnancy. The study emphasizes the importance of strong social support to help teenage mothers continue their education. Furthermore, the socioeconomic consequences are substantial, as many of these young mothers face the challenges of single parenthood with limited resources and elevated health risks associated with early childbearing.

Zulu's (2017) study in Zambia examined the challenges and coping mechanisms of single mothers. Through interviews and focus groups, the research revealed that these women often come from impoverished backgrounds, face unemployment, and lack childcare support. Despite these difficulties, they demonstrate resilience by relying on social networks and limited external aid. However, government assistance is insufficient. The study underscores the need for comprehensive support to address the complex circumstances of single mothers and their children. Similarly, Clark et al., (2024) investigated the stressors experienced by single mothers in an African slum. Their findings highlight a lack of support from both child fathers and the community, contributing to the mothers' psychological well-being challenges.

Teenage pregnancy in Kenya presents a significant challenge, (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2022) indicating that approximately 18% of girls aged 15-19 have initiated childbearing. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent in regions such as Narok, Homa Bay, and Migori, where rates can surpass 40%. The consequences are far-reaching, with education being severely impacted as evidenced by an estimated 13,000 girls dropping out of school annually due to pregnancy (UNESCO, 2021). Moreover, the socio-economic ramifications are profound, as many of these young mothers are left to navigate single parenthood amidst limited support systems and heightened health risks associated with early childbearing.

Kabue (2021) investigated the lived experiences of single mothers within the Methodist Church in Kenya. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study utilized surveys and in-depth interviews with 52 unmarried single women. The research framework drew upon feminist and phenomenological methodologies to explore the challenges faced by these mothers. A purposive and snowball sampling technique was used to recruit participants from the church congregation. Data analysis involved coding interview responses and using NVIVO software for thematic analysis. Findings revealed that abandonment was the primary reason for single parenthood, followed by accidental pregnancies and solo parenting choices. The study identified a crucial issue of stigma and discrimination faced by single mothers within the religious community. They were often excluded from church activities and events, hindering opportunities for finding partners within their faith. Social interactions varied greatly, ranging from acceptance to marginalization and judgment, both inside and outside the church. While some participants found the church to be a source of support, others reported feelings of isolation and criticism.

Self-concept Among Teen Students Single Mothers

In a phenomenological qualitative study, Malik et al., (2022) explored the experiences of unmarried mothers raising their children in Korea. The study delved into the lived experiences of 9 unmarried Korean mothers residing in government-funded residential facilities with their children. Through in-depth interviews and interpretative phenomenological analysis, the research revealed a complex interplay of challenges, including identity adaptation, the overwhelming burden of single parenthood, and inadequate support from the facilities. Participants reported experiencing a range of negative emotions while maintaining a strong determination to provide for their children. These findings underscore the critical need to explore single mothers' lived experience of self-concept which does not come out clearly in this study which the current study intends to explore among TSM.

Ogunsiji and Wilkes (2005) explored the experiences of 5 undergraduate nursing students who were also single mothers in Australia. The study focused on understanding the challenges of balancing motherhood, academics, and personal well-being. Results showed a combination of physical and emotional difficulties, including constant tiredness and overwhelming stress. However, despite these challenges, the participants reported improved health and self-esteem due to their university experience. It's important to note that this study focused on student mothers, unlike the current research which examines lived experiences of TSM who are students in one of the informal settlement secondary schools.

In a phenomenological study done in Philippines, Reloj (2024) investigated the experiences of single mothers following childbirth in a Philippine satellite campus. 15 single mothers with 1 to 3 children were purposefully and snowball sampled. Participants reported experiencing

various postpartum depression symptoms, including insecurity, tearfulness, irritability, physical symptoms, self-blame, self-harm, unreasonableness, giving up, isolation, and suicidal ideations. These symptoms were often attributed to the significant life changes associated with new motherhood.

Similarly in South Africa, Moganedi and Mudau (2024) investigated lived experiences of Stigma and Mental Well-Being among Teenage Mothers in the Rural Areas of Makhado, Limpopo Province. The researchers utilized a qualitative critical participatory action research approach to explore the experiences of teenage mothers in rural communities. Using purposive and snowballing sampling techniques, the researchers recruited 11 participants for the study. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions and analyzed through qualitative thematic analysis. The findings revealed that teenage mothers faced humiliation, rejection, and social isolation due to stigmatizing attitudes from schoolmates and community members. The study concludes that inconsistent support from parents and community members contributed to these negative experiences, leading to a lack of belonging and acceptance. This called for Policymakers and authorities in education and healthcare to promote social change and transformative learning to address the stigma and social isolation faced by teenage mothers.

In Kenya Clark et al. (2024) conducted a study to examine the factors influencing stress among single mothers in urban slums. Utilizing data from the Nairobi Urban Health and Demographic Surveillance System (NUHDSS), the researchers analyzed survey responses from 1,221 mothers. The study investigated the impact of demographic, socioeconomic, and support factors on stress levels. Findings revealed that single mothers experience elevated stress primarily due to limited paternal support, despite receiving more assistance from relatives. These disparities in support contribute to the heightened stress experienced by single mothers in precarious urban environments, highlighting the importance of strong social support networks for their psychological well-being.

Possible Strategies for Mitigation: Lessons from Best Practices

Since Teenage single motherhood presents significant challenges, This research question examined global strategies to support Teen Single Mothers that aimed at identifying effective interventions that can improve educational outcomes and well-being. In examining the challenges faced by teenage single mothers, it is crucial to explore how different contexts have addressed similar issues. Various regions have implemented successful strategies that could inform local practices.

Targeted educational programs in countries like Canada and Sweden provide scholarships and childcare support to young mothers, significantly improving their chances of completing their education (Smith & Johnson, 2020). Similarly, peer support networks have emerged in several contexts, enabling young mothers to share experiences

and strategies for overcoming common challenges (Lee, 2022).

The study by Nkansah et al. (2022) in Ghana highlights the experiences of unmarried teenage mothers in Enyan Denkyira, revealing a reliance on precarious employment and male support, which often perpetuates a cycle of unplanned pregnancies. This underscores the importance of addressing socioeconomic factors and providing comprehensive support systems that empower young mothers. Kubai (2023) emphasizes the role of single mothers' associations within the Methodist Church, which offer vital emotional and practical support. These associations illustrate how community-based approaches can effectively enhance the well-being of both mothers and their children.

Kenya's "Back to School" initiative is a notable example of a locally implemented policy. This policy aims to facilitate the continued education of young mothers' postpartum, fostering intellectual and personal growth. However, critiques of this policy highlight the inadequacy of existing support systems, often leaving young mothers without the necessary resources to balance their dual roles as students and parents (Koech, 2021).

Despite these insights, there remains a significant gap in research regarding teenage single mothers' lived experiences and self-concept. The current study aims to fill this void by focusing on teenage single mothers who are also students in an informal settlement secondary school in Nairobi County. By investigating their unique experiences, this research hopes to identify effective strategies that can improve their educational outcomes and overall quality of life, drawing lessons from successful practices observed in other contexts. Through this exploration, we can better understand how to support these young women, ensuring they have the resources and opportunities necessary to thrive.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

This study employed a phenomenological research design to delve into the subjective experiences and self-concept of teenage single mothers. This qualitative approach provided a rich and nuanced understanding of participants' lived experiences. Criterion sampling was utilized to select three participants with diverse backgrounds, strong communication skills, and a willingness to share their narratives. Data were collected through a focus group discussion and transcribed using Otta ai. Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological approach guided the data analysis process. Open coding was conducted to identify key themes and patterns related to participants' self-concept and lived experiences. Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the study. Participants provided informed consent, their anonymity was maintained, and they had the right to withdraw at any time. This research offers valuable insights into the unique challenges and resilience of teenage single mothers, contributing to a deeper understanding of their self-perceptions and experiences as highlighted in the following section.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Demographics

Table 1: Social Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Participants	Age	Level of Education	Child's Age	Child's Gender
T1	19	Form 4	2 years	Boy
T2	18	Form 2	8 Month	Girl
T3	19	Form 4	2 years	Girl

Results in Table 1 show the age of participants who are identified with their pseudonyms T1, T2, T3 assigned to protect their identities. T1, a 19-year-old Form 4 student, is presented as the mother of a 2-year-old baby boy. T2, an 18-year-old Form 2 student and a mother of an eight-month-old baby girl. T3, a 19-year-old Form 4 student, is the mother of a two-year-old baby girl.

The findings of the study were presented according to themes that emerged from the data analysis which are: Challenges of Being a Teen Single Mother, the Impact of Poverty, Impact on Self-concept, Rejection, Coping Mechanisms and the Importance of Education

Lived experience of being a Teen Single Mother

The first research question that explored the lived experiences of Teenage Single Mothers in the informal settlement Secondary Schools revealed two themes: challenges of Motherhood and impact of poverty.

Challenges of Teenage Motherhood

A thematic analysis of the lived experiences of adolescent single mothers attending secondary schools in Nairobi County's informal settlements identified several prominent challenges. These challenges included social stigmatization, educational disruptions, financial strain, emotional distress, and familial conflict

One of the Participants reported experiencing significant social ostracism and judgment due to her pregnancy as she narrated:

People treated me differently because I got pregnant,...being a student and a mom at the same time is incredibly tough, Most girls in my situation would go back to their family homes, but in my case, my mom wasn't very supportive (Interview, Participant T2 , July, 2024)

In relation to the same challenges participant T1 expressed:

It was like everyone was watching and judging me. When I found out I was pregnant, I was so confused, I worried about how I would take care of a baby without money just like my mom did. ... My mom called me a curse because I had a baby out of wedlock, I felt so rejected and hopeless, I can't provide for my son, and I feel like a terrible mother (Interview, Participant T2 , July, 2024), (Interview, Participant T1 , July, 2024)

Bitter with the social stigma and the challenge of balancing roles, participant T3 expressed.

People are rude to me, ...Balancing motherhood with schoolwork proved to be a major obstacle, ... It is even hard to find time to study because I must do chores and take care of my baby...I ended up engaging in unhealthy relationships a thing I regret doing just to survive. (Interview, Participant T3 , July, 2024)

These statements highlight the significant challenges faced by teen single mothers, particularly in balancing motherhood with education and navigating societal judgments. These challenges can have significant negative implications for both the individuals involved and society.

Impact of poverty

A central theme emerging from the participants' narratives was the pervasive impact of poverty on their lives. Poverty constrained educational and career opportunities, leading to feelings of anger, hopelessness, and despair. It contributed to early marriages, further exacerbating challenges faced by adolescent single mothers. Desperate measures for survival, such as sex work, were necessitated by poverty, which also eroded self-esteem and self-worth. Poverty perpetuates a cycle of disadvantage, making it difficult to escape.

Participant T1 shares her challenging part of life,

I was forced to get married when I was in high school, Last year, I was working to make money. I had to stop to focus on my studies, but now I am doing laundry for others to earn money for my son. It is hard... I feel so angry and hopeless because of poverty, I feel like I'm worth less because I'm poor, to survive, people in my community have to do desperate things, like sell their bodies. I can't provide for my son, and I feel like a terrible mother, living in poverty is hard, especially when it comes to basic needs like buying sanitary towels... Sometimes, I must find ways to earn money to support myself and my son. (Interview, Participant T1, July 2024)

Another participant stated, "I think poverty made me get pregnant so young". (Interview, Participant T3, July 2024)

Accompanied by sobs the third participant expressed.

"Poverty is a huge problem where I live. When my mom couldn't afford to give me what I needed, I ended up doing things I regret just to survive. It's tough growing up poor." (Interview, Participant T3, July 2024)

This reflects the overwhelming challenges and sense of despair faced by individual participants who find themselves caught in a cycle of poverty. The statements highlight the devastating effects of poverty on the lives of teen single mothers, emphasizing the need for effective interventions to address this issue

Self-Perception of Teen Single Mother in Nairobi's Informal Settlements Schools

The second research question that sought to understand the Self-Perception of Teenage Single Mothers in the informal settlement Secondary School, Nairobi County revealed two themes: The Impact on self-concept and the theme of Rejection.

Impact on Self-concept

Another central theme emerging from the participants' narratives was the significant impact of teenage motherhood on their self-concept. They reported experiencing negative emotions such as shame, Self-rejection, guilt, and self-appointment with frustrated future dreams and hopelessness. Additionally, they demonstrated self-doubt, perceiving themselves as vulnerable, and questioning their identity and ability to balance motherhood and education. The findings suggest that internalized stigma, particularly societal judgments and negative stereotypes, contributed to these negative self-perceptions. One of the Participants expressed her lived experience of self-concept:

I felt so ashamed and alone... I feel guilty for not being there for my son, and it's hard to focus on my studies, I have become vulnerable, ...I often feel lost, like I don't know if I'm a young person or a grown-up...I am disappointed in my future dreams... I feel like I've let myself down, I felt so rejected and hopeless, and I feel like I'm worth less because I'm poor. The man I married wasn't even my child's father. It was not a real marriage; I was so unhappy at home that I wanted to escape. (Interview, Participant T1, July 2024)

In an attempt to respond to the question that sought to understand the participant's self-perception, the second participant expressed the following sentiments

"I felt bad about myself after I got pregnant. I thought I was a failure. People still judge me for being a young mom. It is unfair and frustrating." (Interview, Participant T1, July 2024)

With emotion, the third participant responded.

"But I also feel a lot of guilt, I know who I am and what I've been through, so their opinions don't matter. But others judge me and think less of me because I have a baby so young". (Interview, Participant T3, July 2024)

However, the participants also demonstrated resilience and a positive outlook: Some participants expressed feelings of strength and pride in overcoming challenges. The level of self-acceptance was felt because, despite negative experiences, some participants developed a sense of self-acceptance and self-worth and demonstrated resilience in the face of adversity.

"I feel strong and proud of myself... have been through so much... and I see myself that I am a conqueror! I can stand up for myself now" (Interview, Participant T3, July 2024)

At the same time, the participant has developed a kind of resilience and a good feeling. She added, "...I feel strong

and proud of myself". (Interview, Participant T1, July 2024)

These statements highlight the complex interplay of negative emotions and positive coping mechanisms experienced by TSM in this informal settlement Secondary School.

Rejection

The findings from participants' narratives were the experience of rejection received through stigmatization due to their adolescent pregnancies. Participants reported being judged and ostracized by peers, family, and community members. Some were even rejected or abused by their own families. Harmful stereotypes and assumptions about their future perpetuated the stigmatization. These experiences of rejection contributed to feelings of worthlessness and hopelessness, as expressed in the following statements

Everyone in the neighborhood seemed to be looking at me. They tell their kids not to play with me because they don't want them to end up like me. My mom was abusive. She used to hit me and even stabbed me once. They tell me I have no future and that I'm worthless, Even my mom didn't treat me like her daughter anymore (Interview, Participant T1, T2, T3, July 2024)

Strategies to Mitigate the Challenges Faced by Teenage Single Mothers

The findings for the third research question identified two primary themes: coping mechanisms and the significance of education.

Coping Mechanisms

The findings from thematic analysis identified coping mechanisms as a central theme emerging from the participants' narratives. This highlighted participants' resilience and ability to cope with the challenges of adolescent single motherhood. Participants utilized social support, positive thinking, and the development of coping strategies. Extended family support was identified as crucial for childcare, while for some, children served as a primary source of motivation. Despite the challenges, participants expressed joy and fulfillment in their role as mothers and maintained a positive outlook. They demonstrated resilience and strength in overcoming adversity, learning the importance of self-advocacy and child protection. For one participant, music served as a coping mechanism for managing stress and emotional challenges. The following statements express their deep expressions.

My mom is supportive, It motivates me to keep going, I believe in myself and my ability to overcome challenges. People can say whatever they want about me, good or bad. I don't let it bother me. . . I learned that I need to stand up for myself and protect my child . Music is my escape. When I sing, I forget about everything else. I learned that I need to stand up for myself and protect my son, or people will keep taking advantage of me. ... Sometimes, I must find ways to earn money to support myself and my son. But when things get tough, I just try to stay positive and believe

that help will come eventually "My baby is my motivation, my child is my biggest motivation. She is the reason I am working hard in school (Interview, Participant T1, T2, T3, July 2024)

Importance of Education

Another central theme emerging from the participants' narratives was their unwavering commitment to education despite facing numerous challenges. Participants emphasized the transformative power of education, viewing it as a source of hope, motivation, and personal growth. They recognized education as potential to improve their lives and provide for their families, often linking it to specific career aspirations. Despite the challenges, education fostered resilience and determination. Participants reported positive outcomes, such as academic success and a hopeful outlook for the future. This is supported by their powerful statements such as;

I felt hopeful when I realized I could go back to school, It was hard to stop Studying, but I knew it was important for my future. I dream of a successful future where I can support my family, Yes. I like to become a journalist or a lawyer, Education motivates me to keep going, even when things get tough.: My focus is on my education and my child, and I'm going to succeed. I feel hopeful about my future. Coming back to school after having a baby was tough, but I did it. I get amazing grades (Interview, Participant T1, T2, T3, July 2024)

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study reveal a complex and challenging lived experiences for teen single mothers in Nairobi's informal settlement secondary schools. Participants faced a range of challenges, including social stigma, educational disruption, financial hardship, emotional distress, and family conflict. This study supports Yardley's (2008) findings that young mothers often feel judged by others, leading to feelings of isolation and frustration. Similar to Johnson's (2022) phenomenological study that sought to understand the experiences of single parents attending a community college who faced significant challenges in balancing motherhood with education. This study confirms Zulu's (2017) findings that single mothers face unemployment challenges and lack of childcare support. Similar to Kabue's (2024) findings, financial constraints were a significant challenge for the participants in this study, limiting their ability to provide for their children. Participants found themselves facing the challenge of coping with their emotional distress. These findings align with Brown & Nichols' (2013) findings that poverty can lead to emotional distress and negatively impact the well-being of single mothers. These emotional challenges were similar to those observed earlier by Ogunsiji and Wikes (2005) among single mothers. Additionally, the findings align with previous research indicating that many single parents rely on external support networks due to inadequate family support (Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002; Schumacher, 2013).

The participants were noted to be engaged in demanding jobs after school like water fetching or laundry for income. Failure to get any job opportunity, teen women report to turn to men for support thus increasing their vulnerability to further unplanned pregnancy which align with Nkansa et al.,(2022) whose findings noted single mothers engaging into demanding jobs. Similarly, (Clark et al., 2024) investigated the stressors experienced by single mothers in an African slum. Their findings highlight a lack of support from both child fathers and the community, contributing to the mothers' psychological well-being challenges which is in line with the current study findings where participants express frustration with the father of the child not taking up responsibilities.

In relation to the second objective on the impact on self-concept, Teen Single Mothers in this study experienced significant emotional distress, including feelings of shame, guilt, and inadequacy, This study confirms Relej (2024) findings that single mothers struggle with self-blame, self-harm, unreasonableness, and find themselves giving up. They struggled to balance their roles as mothers, students, and community members, often feeling overwhelmed and conflicted. Societal judgment and negative stereotypes further impacted their self-esteem and self-perception.

In relation to their self-concept, findings highlighted the theme of Self-esteem and self-perception which explain the situation of participants lived experiences of self-concept. The findings reveal that Teenage mothers often reported feelings of shame, humiliation, rejection and guilt, particularly in relation to their perceived failure to adhere to societal norms or meet their own expectations. Similar findings were found by Moganedi and Mudau (2024) who found that teen single mothers faced humiliation, rejection, and social isolation due to stigmatizing attitudes. The participants in this study experienced identity crises and self-doubt, similar to those reported earlier in previous studies by Mollborn (2010), SmithBattle (2000), and DeVito (2010) as they struggled to reconcile their new role as mother with their identity as a young person

The participants employed various coping mechanisms to navigate their challenges. These strategies included seeking support from family and friends which is in agreement with Scott et al.'s (2018) findings that strong social support and educational opportunities can be effective coping strategies for teen single mothers

The participants in this study demonstrated resilience by developing strong relationships with their children, and focusing on education as a means to improve their future prospects. This finding aligns with SmithBattle (2006) who highlights that teenage mothers often view education as essential for improving their circumstances and achieving a better life for themselves and their children. They express determination and resilience in balancing motherhood with their academic pursuits. This is asserted by Johnson (2022) whose participants demonstrated resilience and effective time management skills highlighting the importance of motivation and support

systems for the success of single-parent students in higher education.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight the complex and multifaceted challenges faced by teenage single mothers in Nairobi's informal settlements secondary school. These young women navigate a range of obstacles, including social stigma, educational disruption, financial hardship, emotional distress, and family conflict. Despite these challenges, the three teenage single mothers demonstrate remarkable resilience and determination. They seek support from their social networks, prioritize their children's well-being, and view education as a pathway to a better future. To effectively support these young women, policymakers, educators, and community organizations must implement comprehensive programs addressing their unique needs. These programs should focus on challenging societal stereotypes, promoting understanding, fostering positive family relationships, investing in education, and providing access to mental health services. By addressing these challenges and providing adequate support, we can empower teenage single mothers to overcome adversity, achieve their educational goals, and build brighter futures for themselves and their children.

Implication

The findings of this study underscore the urgent need for policymakers, educators, and community organizations to implement comprehensive support programs for adolescent single mothers in Nairobi's informal settlements as highlighted by (Johnson, 2022; Zulu, 2017; Kabue, 2024). These programs should address the multifaceted challenges faced by this population, including social stigmatization, educational disruptions, financial strain, emotional distress, and familial conflict. Efforts to challenge societal stereotypes and promote understanding of the challenges faced by adolescent single mothers are essential. Additionally, family-centered programs can foster positive relationships and reduce the impact of familial conflict. Investing in education is crucial for empowering these young women and breaking the cycle of poverty. Finally, prioritizing access to mental health services is essential for addressing the emotional distress experienced by adolescent single mothers."

RECOMMENDATIONS

Teen single motherhood is a complex issue characterized by interconnected challenges. A comprehensive approach is necessary to effectively address the multifaceted needs of these young women and their children. Key interventions include providing comprehensive sex education and legalized methods of family planning to avoid unintended pregnancies, supporting continued education and career development to foster economic independence, offering mental health services to both mother and child, providing economic assistance and support programs to alleviate financial burdens, and cultivating strong social support networks to offer

emotional and practical support. Similarly, the "Back to School" policy in Kenya is a positive step towards supporting young mothers' education. While it has shown potential, its effectiveness is limited by inconsistent adherence due to insufficient support systems (Koech, 2021). To improve outcomes, the policy should be complemented with practical resources like flexible schedules and childcare facilities (Adhiambo, 2020)

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