Improving educational inclusivity: A guideline for transforming the lives of pregnant teenagers and unmarried young mothers in Nigeria

Executive summary

This policy brief is a call to action, highlighting the educational challenges faced by pregnant teenagers and unmarried young mothers in Nigeria and offering practical solutions for educational inclusion. It seeks to illuminate the path forward for policymakers, educators, and communities to empower pregnant teenagers and unmarried young mothers and create an educational system and society that is more inclusive, equitable, and responsive to their needs. Recommendations result from a workshop conducted in August 2023 with twenty-two key stakeholders in health, media, community and education from Osun State, South-Western Nigeria. They represent a collective effort to bridge the gap between education, pregnancy and early motherhood while safeguarding the rights and dignity of pregnant teenagers and young mothers.

Background

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa and the sixth most populous in the world, with the population projected to increase to 377 million by 2050.[1] Half of the current Nigerian population – estimated at 105 million – comprises young people aged 18 years and below[1]. For the Federal Government of Nigeria, improved access to quality education, particularly among young people, is a major social, economic, policy and health goal, as it is essential for national growth and development. However, a specific concern regarding education in developing countries, including Nigeria, is the gender disparity whereby the girl-child is significantly underrepresented.

Between 12 to 15 million children are out of school in Nigeria, and about two-thirds (approximately 7.6 million) of this population are female[2]. As at 2022, senior secondary education completion rates was 53% for females who complete school compared to 67% for males[3]. To encourage girl-child education, there have been international partnerships on girls' education [with UNICEF], establishments of special schools for young women [see, for example, the World Banks' AGILE programme], and interventions to increase female educational engagement [see for example, Girls Educational Project]. However, a constantly overlooked group are pregnant teenagers and unmarried young mothers.

In Nigeria, there is an increasing prevalence of early pregnancy and motherhood among secondary-school girls. Statistics estimate adolescent fertility rates to be 102 births per 1000 women aged 15-19 years[4]. Our research shows that pregnant teenagers and young mothers face multiple challenges in completing their education. Such experiences in Nigeria include expulsion from school, being physically beaten and verbally abused by teachers, and many voluntarily dropping out of school due to fear of being stigmatised. For instance, during our workshop, a key stakeholder noted that:

> *"The norm here is to stop them from coming to school once they get pregnant. I don't think I have ever seen a pregnant girl going to school with her big belly. Even the girls know this, so they will stop coming to school."*
>
> Community Member

Our findings also showed how young mothers often struggled with combining childcare and financial responsibilities, with some dropping out of school because they could not afford to fund their education alongside their children's. These findings highlight the discrimination and injustice perpetuated within institutions and suggest that school drop-out rates can be gendered, impacting differently on girls and boys.

To accommodate pregnant teenagers and young mothers in education, a policy text in Section 15 of Nigeria's Child Rights Act allows young mothers to return to school after they have given birth[5]. However, it does not specify pathways for retaining or re-integrating pregnant teenagers and young mothers into education. In 2017, an inclusive policy on education was developed to increase access to education[6]. This policy discusses the objectives and needs for ensuring inclusive education for all learners, irrespective of their identities. However, it did not address the problems of exclusions associated with early pregnancy and motherhood. Several objectives and implementation strategies were carefully detailed to improve gender mainstreaming in education in the 2021 National Policy on Gender in Education in Nigeria[7].

While the policy framework addressed pressing gender issues such as gender and sexual-based violence, and violence in conflict regions, not one of these implementation strategies or objectives addressed the issue of school expulsion among pregnant teenagers, challenged gender norms regarding young mothers in education or advocated for return-to-school campaigns for pregnant teenagers and young mothers. This silencing of in-school pregnancy and motherhood, lack of gender-sensitive educational infrastructures, and the absence of clear national guidelines and procedures for school re-integration mean that educational practices will vary across schools and be dictated by prevalent sociocultural norms, which often view pregnant teenagers and young mothers in school as a moral contradiction.

Policy Recommendations

During the workshop, stakeholders acknowledged pregnant teenagers and young mothers as unique individuals at the intersection of education, pregnancy, and motherhood. From their discussions, it was collectively agreed that it is not the occurrence of early pregnancy and motherhood that leads to poor educational outcomes but rather the response to in-school pregnancy and motherhood:

"Even if there is a law that mandates that these girls come back to school, how will it work? If you look at the current educational structure, it does not accommodate pregnant teenagers or young mothers. Eventually, these young girls will still drop out of school because our educational structures are not supportive. Even if schools want to help, they don't know where to start, and many teachers don't know how to deal with a pregnant student. So, it's not just about passing a policy. We really need to think about the practicalities."
School Principal

"It's not expected that a girl will become pregnant at that age, so nobody is really thinking of it, or discussing how we can make schools more open to these young girls. And if nobody is thinking about it, then it's like the problem doesn't really exist, but as a teacher, I know it does. I know many girls who have left school because they got pregnant."
School Teacher

Thus, addressing these parallel roles and educational needs is important as this can improve the quality of life of pregnant teenagers and young mothers, enable them to be active economic participants within their communities and protect them and their children from adverse long-term outcomes. To ensure that no girl is left behind, stakeholders recommended that policymakers need to:

- **Raise awareness of existing policy among key stakeholders (Parents/Guardians, Teachers and Students):** There needs to be increased awareness among parents, guardians, teachers and students on the legal educational rights of pregnant teenagers and young mothers in education. This can be done through community engagement techniques [such as mass and social media] and collaborations with School Based Management Committees (SBMC), Parent Teacher Associations (PTA), and other educational associations.

- **Implement training to reduce stigma towards teenage mothers in educational settings**: Teachers are one of the major stakeholders of the academic industry and can be chief implementers of inclusive education. Training programmes on de-stigmatisation practices are vital to challenge and transform negative attitudes towards supporting pregnant teenagers and unmarried young mothers and ensure their retention in mainstream education. Teachers must be trained to create inclusive and individualised supportive learning environments for pregnant teenagers and young mothers. Their training curriculums need to be updated to reflect support for managing in-school pregnancy and motherhood. These training strategies should include workshops for educational professionals and policy sensitisation briefs which depict young women being successful in motherhood and education.

- **Develop a more robust policy, and implement monitoring and evaluation strategies:** Current educational policies need to be extensively expanded to address in-school pregnancy and motherhood. The expanded policies should create a code of conduct outlining procedures and specific responsibilities of different key stakeholders towards ensuring the continuity of pregnant teenagers and young mothers in education. Good policies that are not supported by adequate resources are bound to fail in their implementation. Thus, the Ministry of Education should conduct periodic state audits to ensure that re-entry policies are being implemented and that pregnant teenagers and young mothers are adequately supported when

schools are unable to meet the expected standards. Further, routine data collection systems are also needed to track school drop-out and attendance rates due to pregnancy, motherhood and childcaring responsibilities. This will help to assess and refine current policies, ensure that policies are evidence-based, and monitor progress for impact and sustainability.

- **Tailor educational systems to suit young mothers' needs:** Many pregnant teenagers and young mothers experience interruptions to their studies due to financial constraints, childcare responsibilities or adjusting to formal educational systems. Educational systems should be made flexible in the delivery and timing of lectures to make it easier for young mothers to return and remain in school. Such flexible teaching methods can include part-time learning, evening classes, accelerated education programs (AEP), online learning or multi-modal learning (i.e., a combination of online, radio and traditional face-to-face learning). These have been used extensively and successfully in other African settings, and more recently in Nigeria during the Covid-19 pandemic [see, for example, Oyo State's School On Air (SOA) program which aimed to address educational access for secondary students during the Covid-19 school closures from March to September 2020][8,9]. Implementers should plan with young mothers rather than for them in meeting their felt needs. This can be done by involving pregnant teenagers and young mothers in the design of these strategies and pilot-testing to identify potential challenges in implementation processes. Considering Nigeria's multi-ethnicity, state governments should also be encouraged to work out sustainable and relevant modalities to their contexts.

- **Explore vocational training as an alternative education pathway:** Not all young mothers are able to return to formal education. Vocational training can address this shortfall by offering a practical and alternative educational path for young mothers, equipping them with valuable skills that can lead to employment opportunities, self-sufficiency and reduced dependence on social welfare. Vocational trainings can involve skills development in areas that are

relevant to the context in which young mothers live and seek their livelihoods such as agriculture, cosmetology, handicrafts, tailoring, and interior designing. In the long-term, deeper collaborations between vocational institutions and stakeholders in higher education can be forged to explore how vocational certifications can become a route into tertiary education.

• **Provide social welfare packages for unmarried young mothers to improve school retention:** In many African and Asian countries, economic interventions such as (conditional) cash transfers to tackle child marriage have been instrumental in improving female enrolment in education, lowering drop-out rates and creating access to opportunities for young girls[10]. In collaboration with international development agencies and civil society organisations, (conditional) cash transfers can be adapted and provided for young mothers to reduce the burden of balancing motherhood and schooling. Such packages can be used specifically for childcare, tuition, uniforms and school books bursaries. Cash transfer interventions have been critiqued for not being sustainable and prone to unintended consequences – such as poor school attendance when welfare funding stops[10]. As such, conditional cash transfer programs should be seen as complementary interventions, and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be built into the design of these programs to manage any unintended consequences.

Conclusion

The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 seeks to achieve inclusive, equitable and quality education for all by 2030. In Nigeria, a crucial part of achieving this goal requires non-discriminatory education for pregnant teenagers and young mothers. The recommendations provided here are big steps to be taken; however, they can pave a way for improving the current school completion rates and access to education for young women and girls.

Credit

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