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Student Mothers in Senior High Schools in Asene Manso Akroso  
District, Ghana.**



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## Exploring the Psychosocial Challenges Experienced by Teenage Student Mothers in Senior High Schools in Asene Manso Akroso District, Ghana.

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** This study explored the psychosocial challenges experienced by teenage student mothers in senior high schools in Asene Manso Akroso District, Ghana.

**Methodology:** The qualitative research approach was employed to understand and explore the psychosocial challenges experienced by teenage student mothers in senior high schools in Asene Manso Akroso District. Purposive sampling method was used to select the population of the study. Data saturation point was used to select a sample of twelve teenage student mothers from a population of fifty-five teenage student mothers from the two senior high schools in the district. Interview guide was used for the data collection and content analysis was used to analyse the data.

**Findings:** The study revealed that teenage student mothers were ridiculed and rejected by their peers in school. It was also found that the teenage student mothers felt lonely and isolated as most of their friends shunned them for fear of being classified in the same category with teen mothers.

**Unique contribution to theory, practice and policy:** It is therefore, recommended that guidance and counselling units in senior high schools should liaise with school authorities to provide academic and social support systems to help them adjust into the school system.

**Keywords:** *Psychosocial, Teenage Mothers, Counseling, Stigmatised, Psychological Challenges, Social Changes.*

## Introduction

Parenting can be a herculean task and hectic experience for any person, but it can be especially difficult for teenage mothers when they combine maternal roles with academic activities (Thomson, 2010; Krugua, Mevissen, Münkkel & Ruiter, 2016). Teenage is the transitional phase of growth and development between childhood and adulthood between ages thirteen and nineteen, during which people undergo extensive biological, psychological and social changes (World Health Organization [WHO], 2009; Ghana Statistical Service [GSS], 2015; Dick & Ferguson, 2015). According to Save a Child Report (2000), teenage motherhood refers to birth by a young woman, who has not reached her twentieth birthday when the birth occurred, regardless of whether the woman is legally married or otherwise. According to WHO, 16 million births occur among mothers between ages 15 and 19 years and this number of births constitutes 11% of total births worldwide (WHO Fact Sheet, 2014). Approximately 95 percent of these births occurred in less developed countries (United Nations Population Fund, 2013). About 14 million pregnancies occur across Sub-Saharan Africa, with nearly half of them occurring among women aged 15 to 19 years (UNFPA, 2013; Loaiza & Liang, 2013; Dick & Ferguson, 2015).

Similarly, amongst the various ethnic groups in Ghana, teenage is the pre-pubertal stage after childhood within which the individual attains physical, sexual and social maturity (Awusabo-Asare; Kumi-Kyereme; & Biddlecom, 2007). This period is often associated with sexual socialisation and experimentation, and through these, pregnancy may occur.

Report indicates that one out of every ten births that occur in Ghana is from a teenage mother (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014). A study conducted by Gyasi (2020) found that teenage mothers in public senior high schools in Ghana, who re-entered schools after delivery encountered various forms of challenges in their bid to integrate into the school system. It is noted that the main perpetrators, who are teachers and students (peers), who should assist the teenage mothers to integrate in the schools rather stigmatized and abused them. It was found that the students and teachers gave “names” (names, words, phrases that attract laughter from people) to adolescent student mothers. Such behaviours from the people around them make it difficult for them to attend school regularly and also contribute effectively in class. According to Gyan (2013), adolescence pregnancy and its associated motherhood are mostly characterised with shame, disgrace, stigmatization and loneliness, which result in teenage mothers experiencing psychological challenges. These conditions most often lead to complicated situations where these mothers may have low self-esteem and feel uncomfortable in the school. The situation that the adolescents have become mothers presents a great challenge; and studies have alluded to the fact that adolescent motherhood sometimes ends individual dreams of achieving higher academic qualifications (Gyan, 2013).

Studies on the psychosocial challenges of student motherhood in Ghana have focused on the student mothers at the tertiary level (Opong-Mensah, Ahiatrogah & Deku, 2008; Esia-Donkor,

2014). Apparently, research findings on student mothers at the tertiary level may not wholly be applicable to adolescent student mothers in the senior high schools because of contextual differences. Again, virtually no studies have been conducted on psychosocial challenges of teenage mothers in senior high schools in the Asene Manso Akroso District in the Eastern Region of Ghana. Unearthing the psychosocial challenges confronted by teen mothers would enable policy makers and in the Ghana Educational Service introduce and sustain strategies to help such students cope with the academic environment to achieve their academic goals. This study seeks to fill the research gap with regard to the psychosocial challenges of teenage mothers in senior high schools in the Asene Manso Akroso District and how they cope with these challenges. Also since this study used the qualitative approach, participants would have the opportunity to give first-hand information for heads of institutions and parents to find innovative ways to enhance teen mothers to complete their SHS education.

### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of the study was to explore the psychosocial challenges experienced by teenage student mothers in senior high schools in Asene Manso Akroso in the Eastern Region of Ghana.

### **Objectives of the study**

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Identify the psychosocial challenges faced by teenage mothers in senior high schools in the Asene Manso Akroso District.
2. Highlight the effects of psychosocial challenges faced by teenage student mothers in senior high schools in Asene Manso Akroso District.
3. Identify strategies that teenage mothers in senior high schools in Asene Manso Akroso District can employ to assist them cope with the psychosocial challenges they face.

### **Research questions**

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the psychosocial challenges faced by teenage mothers in senior high schools in Asene Manso Akroso District?
2. What are the effects of psychosocial challenges faced by teenage mothers in senior high schools in Asene Manso Akroso District?
3. How do teenage mothers manage the psychosocial challenges in senior high schools in Asene Manso Akroso District?

## **Research design**

A case study and a qualitative research approach was employed to explore and understand the psychosocial challenges experienced by teenage student mothers in senior high schools in Asene Manso Akroso District. A qualitative research approach was used because the researchers wanted to grasp the teenage student mothers' first hand experiences of the phenomenon under study in their natural setting (2013). A case study was carried out as a basis for identifying and understanding the psychosocial challenges experienced by the teenage student mothers in senior high schools. A case study was used to explore and understand the psychosocial experiences of teenage student mothers, the challenges they encounter and their coping strategies.

## **Population**

The study was conducted in Atweaman Senior High School and Akroso Senior High Technical School in Asene Manso Akroso District in the Eastern Region of Ghana. Asene Manso Akroso District is one of the newly created districts in the country and has only two senior high schools. These two schools were sampled because of their vicinity and the high number of teenage student mothers.

The target population for the study was 55 teenage student mothers with the average age of 18 years in the two senior high schools in Asene Manso Akroso District namely Atweaman Senior High School Akroso Senior High Technical School.

## **Sample and sampling procedures**

Purposive sampling was used to select teenage student mothers as participants of the research. The sample was made up of teenage mothers who were between the ages of 16 and 19 years and this was because at this age, the teenage student mothers could articulate and could narrate their lived experiences (Zenabello & Achilowik 2018). Teenage student mothers who agreed to participate in the study could communicate in English. Teenage mothers who were married or co-habiting with their partners were excluded. This was because after marriage in Ghana, it is expected that the woman gives birth. When this happens, they are given the necessary support they need. And this was not the case of the teenage mothers who participated in the study.

Teenage student mothers were identified in the schools with the assistance of the school counsellors who deal directly with the students who have problems and/challenges who need expert assistance to overcome them (Namale, 2012). The counsellors assisted the researchers to locate the teenage student mothers and established contact after the purpose of the study was made known to them. Those who were interested were selected to participate in the research. In all, 12 teenage student mothers participated in the study after reaching the point of data saturation where enough data has been collected to draw necessary conclusions, and any data collection will not produce value-added insights (Creswell, 2013). The participants were assigned pseudo names for

anonymity reasons. For example, participant 1 was referred to as TSM 1; participant was referred to as TSM 2 and so on.

### **Semi-structured interview guide**

Semi-structured interviews are conducted where the researcher has topics and questions in mind to ask, but questions are open-ended. The primary goal of semi-structured interviews is to hear what respondents think is important about the topic at hand and to hear it in their own words. The self-developed semi-structured interview guide was subjected to face validity and content validity by colleague lecturers to ensure that it was useful. Further, the interview guide was piloted on five teenage student mothers who did not take part in the actual study to help clarify some of the questions that were previously deemed unclear.

### **Data collection procedures**

A member of the research group who hailed from Asene Akroso District, where the schools for the study are located conducted the face-to-face interviews after obtaining permission from the heads of institutions, in each school, to conduct interviews on teenage student mothers. Willingly, the school counsellors vacated their offices for interviews to be conducted to gather data for the study. The interviews were recorded using a mobile phone. Approximately, 36 minutes were used for the interviews for each student mother.

### **Data analysis**

In this research, content analysis was used to analyse the transcribed data. Content analysis represents a process of identifying and coding data. It involves coding one piece of data (one interview) and comparing it with all others that may be similar or different in order to develop conceptualizations of the possible relations between various pieces of data. Audio recordings of the interview data were transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were checked against recordings for accuracy. To ensure anonymity in the data analysis, pseudo names were used to identify each interviewee in the study. For example, 'TSM 1' represented the response for teenage student mother 1; TSM 2 represented teenage student mother 2 and so on.

Themes and patterns were generated within the interview accounts. The researchers then compared the accounts of different participants and came out with similar or different experiences. The purpose was to generate knowledge about common themes and patterns within their experiences. The emerging themes and sub-themes were reviewed by the researchers and the relationships among categories were used to describe the psychosocial experiences of participants.

### **Results**

Following indexing (coding) and categorization of the data based on identified patterns, sub – themes were identified and appropriately categorized under the major themes.

## **Psychosocial Challenges**

From the interviews it was revealed that the most common forms of psychosocial challenges faced by teenage student mothers in senior high schools included ridicule, gossiping and rejection.

### **Ridicule**

The teenage student mothers reported that they were ridiculed, so that affected their psychological state as teenage student mothers. One of the participants recounted that:

*My classmates eventually replaced my name with the name of my daughter and it was quite disturbing. They do call me 'Maame Rose' or 'Bervilin Maame'. I know this situation has hurt me a lot but I know one day I will reap some benefit from the child. This child can at least fetch water for me (TSM 6)*

Another lamented that:

*Some of my mates will at times want to embarrass me. Whilst in class, they will come and call me 'Maaame' (mother) go and breastfeed your baby, your baby is crying. This makes me annoyed and despair (TSM 10)*

Yet, another recounted that:

*I always keep quiet in class because some boys whether you get it right or wrong will still mock you, complimenting you as a queen mother of all (TSM 11)*

The data showed that, ridicule was one of the psychosocial challenges that hurt teenage student mothers which made them felt embarrassed among their peers. Name-calling could intimidate some of them to the extent that they will feel uncomfortable in school. These findings are supported by Gyasi (2020) in his study of teenage mothers in public senior high schools in Ghana. Shaningwa (2007) found that teenage mothers did not see the school as a welcoming environment because both fellow students and teachers no longer called them by their names (Shaninggwa, 2007 & Gyasi, 2020). This has the tendency to intimidate and make them resentful which may steadily affect their contribution in class (Dlamini, 2014 & Gyasi, 2020).

### **Rejection**

From the interviews participants revealed that rejection was one of the unwelcoming psychosocial challenges teenage student mothers encountered in school. Four of the participants expressed this in the following quotations:

The first person observed that:

*They thought people might say they are also bad girls so they do not visit me anymore. I am also shy to visit them. As for my best friend at school, she said her mother has warned her not to talk with me again because I am a bad girl. (TSM 1)*

Another participant said that:

*They do not visit me anymore because my mother insulted one of them when she visited me. Some of them have been laughing at me when I visit them with my baby and they behave as if I have an infectious disease which will infect them when they come close to me. (TSM 11)*

Again, a participant observed that:

*They don't visit me for us to talk. I feel so bad at all that is happening. They don't want me in their company any longer because I asked one of them why and she told me birds of the same feathers flock together. (TSM 10)*

Also, a participant said:

*I have not been seeing my friends who advised me to have a boyfriend because my mother met them on their way home from school and insulted them so they are angry and don't want to talk to me. (TSM 4)*

It was realized from the data above that teenage student mothers felt rejected. They were deserted by their friends and peers primarily due to warnings ostensibly received from their parents, mothers especially, do not want their daughters to associate with their peers who are teenage mothers. In Ghana, people believe in the adage that says “show me your friend and I will tell you your character”. It is for this reason that the peers of the teenage mothers rejected them. According to the participants, their peers thought people might say they are also bad girls so they did not visit them. Some of the peers were warned by their parents not to talk to the teenage mothers again because they were bad girls. This finding lends support to Gyasi (2020) when he observed that teenage student mothers experienced discrimination repeatedly from peers and teachers.

### **Gossiping**

The interviews revealed that students gossiped about teenage student mothers, and that was a psychosocial challenge to teenage student mothers. Three of the participants shared their experiences on that challenge.

One participant commented that:

*Those close to me treat me well; it is those who like gossiping that are spreading the false information about me which makes people look at me in a way. This is a big problem for me apart from that, I do not have any problem with my peers. My friend that introduced me to the guy was my senior and she has completed school, so I do not see her again.*

(TSM 5)

Another participant observed that:

*Some of my friends hurt me because they said I am a bad girl. They gossip behind my back so I do not want to have anything to do with them.* (TSM 8)

A participant revealed that:

*A class mate of mine asked me whether it is true that I am a mother and I told her the truth. She went to tell all my friends, so it was all over the place and everybody thinks I am a bad girl. When I see them, I run away because I am very shy, so I don't talk to them at all.*

(TSM 3)

The data revealed that teenage student mothers were disappointed about the way their colleagues gossiped about them. This brought a lot of embarrassment to the teenage mother and tried to avoid their mates.

The study established that teenage student mothers were mocked, rejected and became objects of gossip. These findings are supported by Gyasi (2020) and Shaninggawa (2007) who found that teenage mothers did not see the school as a welcoming environment because both fellow students and teachers no longer called them by their names. This has the tendency to intimidate and make them resentful which may steadily affect their lesson contribution in class (Dlamini, 2014 & Gyasi, 2020). Gyasi also found that teenage student mothers were verbally and physically abused by both teachers and peers.

### **Effects of Psychosocial Challenges Faced by Teenage Student Mothers**

The interviews revealed that the psychosocial challenges affected their lives in many ways which included loneliness in school, feeling of guilt and shyness.

### **Loneliness in School**

It was found from the participants that teenage student mothers felt rejected by their colleagues and as a result became lonely in school. A participant noted that:

*It is difficult to join them when they are conversing because of the kind of things they talk about. They don't talk about things in relation to child caring, weighing and marriage. I hardly join them and I have to be alone (TSM 1)*

The data above shows that it was difficult for teenage student mothers to join their classmates in conversation because they do not share common interests and for fear of being mocked by friends and classified as a teenage mother. It also was found that teenage student mothers felt lonely and isolated

### **Feeling of Guilt**

Most of the participants had a sense of insurmountable guilt for being student mothers. One of the participants indicated that she felt guilty about her situation and lamented that:

*Hmmm.... I feel that I am a bad girl. I think a lot about this situation and at times feel disappointed. This is because my aunt who is now looking after me in school promised to send me to Canada when I complete SHS but this situation halted the whole arrangement so I think a lot (TSM 3)*

Another participant added that:

*Mmmm..., it pains me a lot that, I couldn't wait for the right time before giving birth. It actually pains me too much. I feel much guilt within me because I have set a bad precedence for my younger siblings (TSM 7)*

The interviews unfolded guilty feelings among most of the participants who thought, they had done something unpardonable. Some of the participants felt guilty of their actions because they felt they had set bad precedence for their siblings. The teenage student mothers felt disappointed by their situations and blamed themselves. This finding seems to agree with studies that found that teenage motherhood brings shame to the entire families (Gyan, 2013; Barmao-Kipanui, Kindiki,

Lenan, 2015; & Gyasi, 2020). It has similarly been noted that shame and disgrace incurred by teenage mothers to their families has the tendency to impede emotional support from significant others (Moonga, 2014).

### **Shyness**

From the interviews it was realized that teenage student mothers felt shy because they are underage and more especially students. Some participants shared their experiences. One of the participants said that:

*I feel shy to go out, I even feel shy to come out of the room when my mother gets visitors. The only time I have no choice but to go out is when I am going to school or postnatal clinic. I no longer play active role in social activities in school and church. I can't go to parties of family members or friends because I am shy. ...when I see somebody, I know, I will walk fast and take another route so that we do not meet. Sometimes, I will have to hide, especially when I am with my baby and continue my journey later when the person is gone. (TSM 8)*

Another participant noted:

*I am shy to go out with my baby, so when my grandmother sends me around the neighbourhood I do not go with the baby. I am determined to complete my education but I feel shy to go to school sometimes. (TSM 5)*

Yet, another participant commented that:

*Now that my baby cannot walk, I always leave her in the house, when I am sent to buy items nearby, so that people will not be able to identify and mock me. When I am going to the hospital, I try to use cloth to cover myself and the baby. (TSM 12)*

The findings of the study show that the teenage mothers feel embarrassed about their situation, especially when they carry their babies in town.

It was found that teenage student mothers felt lonely and as a result found it very difficult to join their colleagues in conversation. This finding confirms Gyasi's (2020) study of teenage student mothers in public senior high schools in Ghana. He intimated that teenage student mothers were

always lonely because of negative comments made by their friends about them. He found that teenage student mothers felt they were shun by their friends because they perceived them as adults as a result were no longer interested in mingling with their peers who were not mothers.

Again, it was found that teenage student mothers felt guilty about their situations. This finding agrees with studies that found that teenage motherhood brings shame to the entire families (Gyan, 2013; Barmao-Kipanui, Kindiki, Lenan, 2015; & Gyasi, 2020). It has similarly been noted that shame and disgrace incurred by teenage mothers to their families has the tendency to impede emotional support from significant others (Moonga, 2014).

### **Coping Strategies Employed by Teenage Student Mothers**

From the interviews, it came out that teenage student mothers employed some ways to cope with the psychosocial effects they encounter. These included receiving counselling, avoiding biting comments, and drawing inspiration from vicarious experiences.

#### **Counselling**

From the interviews, participants revealed that they received counselling from the school counsellors, some teachers as well as their religious leaders. Some of their comments are reported below. One of them recounted that:

*If it had not been our school counsellor who has always been there for me, I would have quitted along the line. He advises me and encourages me to always be strong (TSM 6)*

Similarly, another participant said that:

*My Imam back home has been my source of encouragement. I always go to him after school each time I am depressed and do not know what to do anymore. He is the one who has been admonishing me not to give up this far (TSM 7)*

Another participant indicated:

*It is because of my friend Cynthia that is why I am still in school. She has always been there for me. She advises me, helps me with academics and even assists me financially most of the time (TSM11)*

The comments above show that the participants relied on the experts in counselling to cope up with the psychosocial effects they encountered. The participants are thankful to their relatives, teachers, school counsellors, priests and Imams for their financial and moral support. This agrees

with Abalos, Lagcao, Ladymer, Perocho, and Besa (2023, p.144) when they found that the “state of teenage student-mothers who comply with both their motherly duties and academic obligations depends on the amount of support they receive and the amount of inclusion and belonging they obtain from particular people”.

### **Taking Inspiration from Vicarious Experiences**

The study revealed that the teenage student mother took inspiration from girls who found themselves in a similar situations and have graduated with good grades from school. To them that consolation inspires them to move ahead in spite of the challenges they encounter as student mothers. One of the teenage mothers recounted that:

*I encouraged myself and also took solace from those in similar situation who have gone through school successfully. If others have succeeded in similar situation, then I have to rise to fulfil my dreams. This has made me focus so as to achieve my aim (TSM 5)*

Similarly, a participant had this to say:

*The same thing happened to the younger sister of my mother. She gave birth when she got to JHS but eventually she is now a nurse at the Korle-Bu Teaching Hospital. This motivated me to study hard as all is not lost (TSM 2)*

The data indicate that some teenage student mothers used learning through observation of the consequences and actions of other people’s experiences which influence them. Vicarious experience is a pathway to self-efficacy that is derived from seeing others act in a particular domain (Bandura, 2002; Brown and Walsh-Childers, 2002). Adolescent student mothers drawn inspiration from people who have relatively succeeded in education in similar situations. The present finding confirms a study by Apfel and Seitz (1991) that vicarious experience can change the negative perception of the difficulty of the task and consequently revitalise the teenage student mothers’ confidence.

### **Avoidance of Biting Comments**

In order to overcome some of the challenges teenage student mothers were facing some participants did not engage in conversations that will remind them of their situation. The comment by TSM 6 represents the views of the majority of the participants

*Mmmm, if I had decided to think about all those biting remarks, I would have been dead by now, so I decided not to mind them. This*

*helped me to confront all the unnecessary emotional challenges*

(TSM 6)

The data shows that some of the teenage mothers identified avoidance of biting comments as a strategy they could use to cope with the psychological challenges. This present study found that teenage student mothers avoided biting comments that seem to belittle or humiliate their status. This study agrees with a study by Sodi (2009) that noted that in order to cope with adolescent motherhood; they resolved to avoid situations that were found to cause distress. The avoidance of sarcastic remarks that had a tendency to cause distress enables them to live a comfortable and meaningful life in the school.

### **Conclusion**

From the findings, it is evident that teenage student mothers encounter a lot of psychosocial problems which are not observable like physical illness. Participants are emotionally disturbed by the conditions they find themselves in. For some of them, it is realised from their unspoken words that, they had no control over their situation than to try and cope with the situation. The findings of this study confirmed that the transition of the teenage student mothers to motherhood is accompanied by a number of social and psychological consequences that place them at risk in terms of later life adjustment. These encounters always put them in a state of despair. Thus, interactions with these teenagers will reveal their real problems and therefore it is important as school counsellors, teachers and parents to know the psychosocial experiences of teenage mothers, in order to help them cope with their situation.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

Teenage student mothers revealed that they sought support from their school counsellors. It is therefore, recommended that guidance and counselling units in senior high schools should liaise with school authorities to provide academic and social support systems to help them adjust into the school system. This will help in the smooth integration of teenage student mothers and result in improving psychological outcomes of these teenage student mothers.

Also, the Ghana Education Service must also recruit more professionally trained counsellors to the senior high schools in and across the country due to large numbers of teenage student mothers in senior high schools.

There is a need for Social Welfare and Old Girls, who were once teenage student mothers, to embark on intensive community education for community members to desist from ill-treating teenage student mothers in school even though they have community norms.

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