Situational Analysis: Understanding Factors of High Pregnancy Rates

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Teen pregnancy is a condition that negatively impacts communities worldwide. Young girls just completing primary school are rushed into a world of sex, drugs, alcohol and abuse that all have negative consequences. Rates of teen pregnancy, although high worldwide, have maintained a high rate in the Western Cape despite free and easily accessible contraceptives. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), “about 16 million women 15–19 years old give birth each year” (2015). Some not yet old enough to drive a car are suddenly in a spot where they could be the parent of a child. There then lies two specific questions, why is there a gap between contraceptive use and accessibility in the community, and what part of society’s view of woman contribute to unplanned pregnancy? The following will work to identify effects of teen pregnancy, factors that lead to high numbers of teen pregnancy, recommendations to combat this and observations through the eyes of faith.

As addressed above, teen pregnancy is an issue that is seen in all economic levels worldwide. It is a condition that not only affects woman and children involved, but can negatively impact an entire community. To begin with, pregnancy drastically affects the health of young adolescents. According to the World Health Organization (2015) “about 2.5 million adolescents have unsafe abortions every year, and adolescents are more seriously affected by complications than are older women.” There are multiple complications as referenced by Oxford Journals (2014), which include hemorrhage, sepsis and maternal death. Specifically in Sub-Saharan African communities, abuse tends to be an issue. Women become involved in abusive relationships or are raped, which result in unwanted pregnancy, trauma and psychological disturbances. Alongside negative affects on mothers, the babies of the adolescents also experience many health related effects. The WHO (2015) addresses again that “in low- and middle-income countries, babies born to mothers under 20 years of age face a 50% higher risk of being still born or dying in the first few weeks versus those born to mothers aged 20-29.” Not only is a mother affected, but because of lack of maturity and resources, a baby can become ill and die within the first year because of lack of proper care. In addition to affecting mother and child, a pregnant teen can impact her entire community. When an adolescent becomes pregnant, it is most likely that she will drop out of school to care for the child and recuperate. During this time, the young girl becomes settled at home and never pursues completion of her diploma or other degree. Davis (2015) states only around one third of pregnant students return to school after giving birth. With this, she has fewer skills and opportunities presented to her for future employment. The lack of education can lead to poor childcare, lower-income living and potential for abuse and neglect. On the world community scale, teen pregnancy as noted by WHO (2015) also accounts for “23% of the overall burden of disease.” Overall, teenage pregnancy is a pressing issue for it greatly affects the health of the mother, child and the surrounding community.

As evidenced above, teenage pregnancy affects the community on a global scale and impacts the health of many. Through experiences in the field, conversations with healthcare professionals and community members and further research about the community, it is obvious to see that combating teenage pregnancy is a challenge for it is a condition that stems from a web of interconnected factors. The greatest challenge that society must overcome when dealing with teen pregnancy is the issue of culture and value. Specifically focused on the Western Cape, there are multiple cultural beliefs that shape an individual’s understanding of sex, marriage, pregnancy, value and place in society. Cultural beliefs are the parent to all other factors that impact the rates of teen pregnancy. According to Davis (2015), “South Africa adolescents are having sex young “below the legal age of consent” which creates a mess of a situation. When looking at the South African culture, there are many misunderstandings about sex and pregnancy that are evidenced in the actions of members of the communities. In particular, the use of condoms and methods of contraceptive are low compared to the rates of teen pregnancy in the area because of cultural ideology, lack of education and poor government support. One large cultural issue addressed by Amy Aaron (2015), case manager at Living Hope, is the idea that having sex is a woman’s ability to prove her fertility and value. At a young age, women are wrestling with trying to prove their value in society and fall into sex at a young age. Already wrestling with value, woman must deal with the reality of “lobolas”, which label the woman with a price, and a man must pay that amount to receive her. Two issues that directly stem from this are that suddenly a woman sees herself as only having monetary value instead as inherent value and a man becomes an owner of the woman, for he bought her. Each of these circumstances gives the man power over a woman, and even if a woman wanted to use a form of contraceptive, a man has the final say and may disregard her wishes. Another large cultural factor that increases the rates of teen pregnancy is that sex in many families is a topic that is not openly discussed. The unspoken nature of the topic restricts parents from providing their aging children with appropriate information about sex. There is a lack of openness in a house, which does not allow curious children the opportunity to talk to a responsible adult about sex. Without this support from home, children find themselves learning through experimentation or gaining false information from friends. It is unfortunate that at an age where adolescents need to be supported the most and given truthful information, there is a lack of communication, which drastically affects a child’s understanding. Without understanding, especially with contraceptives, young girls and boys find themselves experimenting without proper knowledge. Adding to the lack of family support, many children in lower-income areas come from broken families where they live daily with physical abuse, substance abuse and lack of support. Children are impressionable and if parents condone certain acts by their daily actions, a child will quickly learn that those are considered acceptable in a family, and will partake in such activities. Working specifically in Ocean View with a medical team one is able to see the effects of violence and drug/alcohol abuse in the community. Mafundityala (March 2015), a member of staff at False Bay hospital, addressed that there are growing rates of teenage pregnancy because of drug and alcohol abuse in the communities, by both men and women. In many circumstances with adolescents, women are taken advantage of when both parties are under the influence. Alongside the abuse of drugs and alcohol, physical abuse begins to take form. According to WHO (2015) coerced sex is “reported by 10% of girls who first had sex before age 15 years” which is another indicator of teenage pregnancy. In these incidents, the voice of the female is pushed away and overpowered by the male, which leaves little room for a contraceptive. Aside from cultural misperceptions, lack of family support, substance and personal abuse, the role of the government does play a partial role in the high rates of teenage pregnancy.

Abortion availability and Child Support Grants are another two factors, which have increased rates of teenage pregnancy. There are multiple locations throughout the Western Cape that offer unsafe abortions at low cost in addition to Healthcare facilities that offer safe termination at no cost. Another government-funded issue is child support. Martha (March 2015), an Ocean View carer stated that many girls rely upon the monthly financial support from the government to fund themselves. Martha stated that some girls fall pregnant to receive this monthly stipend, drop out of school and use the money to fund their activities of substance abuse, while the child is left neglected. She stated that specifically in Ocean View, there is a negative stigma attached to all women who use the funding for she states that it breeds laziness and lack of drive. Martha (March 2015) states the only thing it is good for is to “feed bad habits.” As much as this funding may encourage bad habits, there are women working hard to keep a family afloat as well as receiving this money; as with everything there are two sides to the story.

South Africa is a country in which contraceptives are free and easily accessible to its members; yet still teenage pregnancy rates are high. Above identified factors in society and culture that drastically affect the rates of teen pregnancy and contraceptive use. Amongst all of these factors the common issue tying them together is society’s view of woman. In each scenario addressed above there was an underlying theme of a lack of respect for woman. Culturally woman are seen in monetary value, families are not providing their young girls with the value and support they need, men have the power to abuse them with the help of drugs and alcohol and the government has created stigma and negative stereotype against woman in some circumstances. Without proper support and education, woman will continually fall into the deadly cycle of seeing themselves as worthless and without value. Without an understanding of worth, women will allow themselves to be abused, for they can see no other option. While woman struggle to view themselves with respect, they will allow others around them to treat them without respect. The way society devalues woman leaves them with no voice and no hope of a future, which leads them into abusive relationships and an inability to stand for themselves.

Recommendations

Although the factors affecting pregnancy are numerous, there are recommendations and actions that can take place in hopes to break the cycle of teenage pregnancy, these including mentorship programs in schools for girls and boys, improved sex education in the schools, and family support education. As observed already, contraceptives are easily accessible to young adolescents but are not used because of cultural beliefs and the lack of respect shown to woman. Tami (2015), a twenty-six year old pregnant woman, supports this understanding through her comment, “Woman are judged for getting contraceptives from clinics and are ridiculed at schools.” She mentioned it is because of this mockery that woman refrain from using contraceptives, even when they are easily accessible. To combat the lack of value and respect, systems of education and support need to be created if a difference is to be made. To begin with, a mentorship program should be placed within a school setting that pairs students with older mentors that both teach and speak wisdom and value into the younger generations. As addressed above, many young girls and boys alike lack support and guidance from home, so they turn to societally and culturally unacceptable acts of the community, like drugs, alcohol and sex to fill the void because they have not been taught otherwise. To stop this, schools should have mentors come and speak truth and love into a student’s life and show them that there is much more out there for them. Many children in lower-income communities get trapped into thinking that what they see in the community around them is all they have to look for, so as a result they settle. How much more of a difference could be made if a child who wrestles with value and identity is given a supporter to offer guidance and new understanding? Through such a program, woman could be taught the value of their hearts, their virginity, and their future. The mentors could teach about relationships and offer sex education that is reliable, understandable and speaks value. The boys, specifically, could be taught respect for themselves and woman, and how being a man is truly about developing character. There are currently programs in place working with mentorship in schools and clinics in resource low areas to provide engaging and relevant education and mentorship to students. Specifically in South Africa, LoveLife is a non-profit organization that has set up in 8000 schools and 900 hubs in the country all aimed to bring purpose and identity to students (Footprint, 2015). Although this program has had huge impact on students, particularly in the Western Cape, there is still room for expansion and development.

Unlike LoveLife, a non-profit organization, a mentorship program as mentioned above could be sponsored and supported by the churches of the community. Church members can commit their time to partnering with students and provide time during and after school for conversation, education and support. Training of the mentors could happen within one base church and volunteers from the community can give of their time. The church community could support the program financially. Although there are programs implemented in the community that focus on mentorship, a faith-based program would offer education and hope, while empowering students. There is power in encouragement and support, and having one-on-one mentoring in schools could make all the difference for boys and girls fighting their way through adolescence.

Another recommendation to combat high rates of teenage pregnancy would be improved coordination and alignment of the school sex education programs. Many carers in the communities stated that sex education is not always held in high importance let alone presented properly in schools. The schools in communities should work together to revamp a sexual education program for the students that correctly addresses the issues students are facing and aims to instill self-worth and value, offers resources and addresses issues endemic to each community. Through this revamped system, students could learn to acknowledge the presence of sexual interest and curiosity, but understand the importance of waiting for the ‘right time’. They would gain factual information about sex, learn of health issues resulting from early sexual behaviors, and could gain access to support networks in the local community. A program like this would aim to help students understand their value and provide guidance and support in major developmental years.

Another dominant factor as addressed above was the lack of parental support at home for the adolescent population. Although there are many reasons for lack of parental education, there are three main causes for the lack of communication. Some parents deem it culturally inappropriate to discuss such matters, some parents do not understand how to talk to their children about such issues so in turn abstain from discussion, and some are broken families that involve divorce and abuse so nothing is shared. It is likely that parents are a child’s first role models and if they aren’t sharing and showing a good model, how can one expect their child to behave any differently. To combat lack of parental communication and modeling, communities could put together teams that focus to educate parents about being good role models and talking to their children about sex. Through a program such as this, parents could come and learn of the importance of discussing sex with their children, discover methods to communicate and support children, and gain accountability partners with teachers and other parents during the sessions. The entire community would benefit from this for parents would learn how to encourage and communicate to children which would lead to children feeling better supported and educated about their own development and future. The material for a program as such could be developed and then given to churches in local communities. Running this organization through a church is preferred over government initiation for a church team is connected with the community and will better understand how to reach out to the community with cultural sensitivity and understanding. This program could be run with the service of volunteers in the community and sustained through financial support through the church body. The church community can gather in prayer to support a program like this and provide a place of safety and education.

Overall, these three main recommendations work at combating teenage pregnancy by reinstating value into relationships and individuals. With a sense of value and worth, individuals will learn to respect themselves and others which will break cultural stigmas. This in turn will help women to realize their inner beauty and find their voice and will help men to respect women. These changes aim to increase the use of contraceptives because a woman would be able to see hope in a bright future, would know the effects of teenage pregnancy and would work to rid herself of negative influences and situations. At the same time, the adolescent men will gain a new understanding of respect for themselves and woman and learn how to protect and not hurt woman. In addition, parents of adolescents will gain better methods of communication and implement them into their relationships with their children. The children then feeling supported and educated at home won’t necessarily run to drugs, alcohol and sex to fill a void at home. Although these are substantial aspirations and recommendations, there is power in encouraging value to both sexes and relationships. Cultural and societal norms are hard to break individually let alone in entire communities. But there is hope in knowing that one transformed life can start a chain reaction. The recommendations are large scale but hold the power to restore entire communities.

Critique of Data Sources and Findings

The sources used throughout this research were a mixture of personal interviews from healthcare workers and community members, journal articles and research found online. Although the interviewed individuals provided adequate and relevant information, there could have been opportunity to include an interview of an individual who had personally experienced teenage pregnancy. In addition, there could have been greater emphasis placed on research journals and articles identifying teenage pregnancy rates in the community. The articles themselves were also broadly based where they could have focused more on the Western Cape. Overall there were a wide variety of resources and sources to support the conclusions, however including more specific sources could have been beneficial.

Research demonstrated that teenage pregnancy rates continue to be high, even with easily accessible contraceptive use, largely because of cultural and community based stigmas. Specifically in the Western Cape, woman in certain communities are not given value, substance abuse is predominant and cultural beliefs encourage male power and sexuality. The findings demonstrated a need to engage with local communities to combat the pregnancy rates.

Faith Integration

Experiencing the negative effects of teenage pregnancy in the local communities and researching into issues was difficult to say the least. It was difficult to be in a position where I was set in my beliefs about pre-marital sex and abortion but had to change my initial instincts of judgment to understanding. A few words spoken by a service site coordinator during service days truly helped to change my perspective. They stated, “There are no perpetrators, just victims.” Although hard to understand at first, the more I engaged with the communities and heard firsthand experiences, I began to see the vicious cycle. Although the titled *perpetrators* of violence, they were once the victims of abuse, neglect and violence themselves. The lack of respect and value in both males and females was devastating to communities and individuals after individuals became victims and in response acted out on others. I believe that woman should not abort their babies and I believe that individuals should not engage in pre-marital sex based upon my upbringing in a Christian home and supportive family. Although this is my story, these adolescents are being raised in a completely different environment than I have been raised. Working in the communities has opened my eyes to differences in culture and methods that need to be changed. It is difficult knowing that I am leaving places that need to be loved and supported, but I leave knowing that God is in the communities and that although physically apart, continued prayer will keep me close. Even with a problem like teen pregnancy and the factors that come alongside of it, I am moved to pray for the hearts of woman, redemption in families and opened eyes of men. Thinking of going back to the United States, I am ready to start speaking differently about woman and learn to speak up when negative talk is present. In addition, it is of much importance to remember that men are also victims in their own way and support and education needs to be given to them. The communities have taught me much and I am so thankful that I serve a God who is greater than the brokenness in families and communities here. I leave in hope knowing that God will continue to bring restoration heart by heart and transformation will take place. I was reminded again of the importance of having an understanding heart and to see the beauty in people. This project was difficult to jump into, being a circumstance that displayed brokenness, but I leave acknowledging that work that is being done and will continue to be done to restore value into the hearts of the communities.

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