

Unveiling The Effects of Stigmatization on Adolescent Mothers in Africa.



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Written For
Emerald Light Initiative

**UNVEILING THE EFFECTS OF
STIGMATIZATION ON
ADOLESCENT MOTHERS IN
AFRICA**

(Sample Edition)

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Sample eBook Edition; October, 2021

<http://selahseries.com/emeraldlight>

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to teen girls who through some life's circumstances beyond their controls (rape and incest) and those who through wrong decisions, soared in untimely pleasure (youthful exuberance) only to land into motherhood - totally unprepared. The shame, scars, and lessons learned coming together in rolling balls of tears which often meet with sarcasm and judgment from the society – heart-wrenched and disenfranchised from social supports which they dearly need. Also, this book is dedicated to pregnant adolescents' families, as well as the entire society who are hurt and disappointed by their adolescents' unintended pregnancies.

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

The adolescent stage of life bubbles with cravings for adventures and explorations. Sometimes, adolescents find it difficult to set boundaries to guide these cravings. This lack of boundaries may culminate into engaging in risky behavior such as unsafe sexual relationships and may result in unintended pregnancies. Although unintended pregnancy among teenagers is a global issue affecting both developed and developing countries, however, the social impacts of teenage pregnancy differ across board¹. It has been reported that the African continent has the highest rates in the world².

Unintended pregnancy changes the narrative of a girl's life. The actions and inactions of her family, as well as the society to the news of her pregnancy, could inadvertently make or mar the rest of her life and that

of her baby. In our anger and in the pain of our disappointments in her choices that led to the accidental pregnancy, as well as in the strong impetus to punish her “rebellion”, we need to understand the reality of how our actions and attitudes can further jeopardize her opportunities in life and the wellbeing of her baby.

Now that she is pregnant - caught in the act, she is inevitably wrapped with a web of moral judgment by the society and her family through subjective perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes, most times, without seeking to understand the course of the actions that led to her accidental pregnancy. It's all her fault! Isn't it? There is no more hiding place for her! It is not unusual that all sorts of derogatory names are thrown at her: Shameless! Worthless! Promiscuous! The list is endless.



Society's stance to shame and stigmatize pregnant teens encourages deceit and denial through unsafe abortions or dumping of unwanted babies in unthinkable places. Although most of the African societies frown at the concept of abortion, due to religious, cultural, societal, and personal perspectives, the punishment and stigma placed on teen mothers are very extreme. In a bid to be perceived as "innocent" and avoid societal censure, several

adolescent girls lose their lives every year through unsafe abortions.

It is ironic though, that the partners of these adolescent mothers (in some cases, young boys and in other cases married men who are seeking "fun" outside of wedlock) live without any form of repercussion - "stigma unscratched", tucked away by the society as if nothing ever happened. This is such a biased societal perspective.

Consistent stigma and discriminative behavior towards pregnant teens have major short-term and long-term deleterious effects on the lives of teenage mothers, their babies, and the economy in general.

Are we fostering “value neutrality” about adolescent pregnancy or motherhood? NO. We are only creating awareness about the toxic effects of stigmatization on these girls. We believe there are better and constructive ways of doing things”

The brutal shaming, discriminating and negative attitudes we throw at pregnant and adolescent moms are not helpful. We need to look deeper to discover the “WHYs” and how to prevent subsequent recurrence in our society. What good has the ageless stigmatization of these girls achieved for us?

WHATEVER GOES AROUND COMES AROUND!

World Health Organization gave a pictorial view of an adolescent mother in sub-Saharan Africa as that of an unhealthy looking girl with an unhealthy child, poorly educated, suffering from poverty, unemployed, crushed future, lacks access to reproductive health services and stigmatized for having an unintended pregnancy³. This submission could not be truer!

The long-term negative effects of stigmatization on both teen mothers and their children are grossly understated in our society and very few people speak about it. The negative effects cut across various areas of life and range from physical to social, mental, emotional, and psychological traumas. Unfortunately, these traumas can span the teenager's lifetime, marring both hers and her baby's life forever.

Psychological, Mental, & Emotional Effects

Pregnant and teen moms face various forms of stigma, discrimination, and assault in our society. They are forced to cope with many malicious looks, verbal assaults, physical assaults, societal and family boycotts, as well as emotional abuse.



These forms of stigma emanate from various sources in our society – family, schools, hospitals and clinics, churches, mosques, marketplaces, media, etc.



Stigmatization and discrimination acts often result in deep feelings of shame and guilt for teenage moms, which may lead to mental, psychological, and emotional traumas that could affect them for the rest of their lives. It is important to note that, often times, children born by these teens also suffer stigmatization

along with their mothers. Also, parents are hurt, angry, and disappointed especially because they are often silently labeled “irresponsible parents” by the community. This is because the community assumes that if the parent had paid sufficient attention to the teenager, there would be fewer chances of the teenager getting pregnant. Some parents react to this silent label, by physically abusing these teens, driving the pregnant teen out of their homes into the streets, forcing them to marry the man responsible (if she can locate him and he accepts the baby as his), and in many instances fail to give necessary support to their adolescent girls. The loss of friends, peers, and associates, coupled with the rejection from her parents, and often rejection from the male responsible for her pregnancy usually leave the pregnant teenager shattered and in a state of high vulnerability to mental health challenges (including suicidal behavior). Other

desperate measures some pregnant adolescents take to redeem themselves include: having an unsafe abortion (then claiming a miscarriage), taking extreme measures to hide her pregnancy, abandoning the baby after delivery or committing infanticide; sale of babies to ritualists or couples who are desperate for babies but do not want to go through appropriate adoption routes.



To survive the societal boycott, assaults, and discrimination as well as the resultant feeling of shame and guilt, some teenage mothers develop different coping mechanisms. For instance, in a bid for a pregnant teen to avoid or minimize criticism and feelings of guilt and shame, she intentionally isolates herself from friends and family members. This isolation may lead to depression, which may further worsen her vulnerability status. She may be encouraged to indulge in social vices like non-suicidal self-harm, use of hard drugs, violence, or suicidal acts. In addition, due to the social stigma, the pregnant teen may decide to stop attending school, antenatal clinics, social and religious gatherings². Poor or no antenatal clinic attendance increases the risk of undesirable health outcomes and a higher risk of complications for the mother and the baby.

WHAT TO DO

It is evident that stigmatization has an extremely deleterious effect on the physical, mental, emotional health and reduces the likelihood of reintegration of pregnant and teenage moms into the society. It lowers their self-esteem, as well as affects their ability to readjust to the demands of their new status and still achieve their dreams in life. Deliberate efforts are required from every member of society and the government towards the reorientation and support of teenagers with unplanned pregnancies.

Here We Go!

Enough of finger-pointing and "holier than thou" attitudes! Our toxic attitudes are pushing these already vulnerable girls off the bridge of life and destiny. Some girls opt for unsafe abortions because of the fear of the brutal stigmatization awaiting the

discovery of their pregnancies. Thousands of lives have been lost to unsafe abortion. If we all want to be forgiven and given second chances in life, then we ought to forgive, accept, and support these girls who ended up with unintended pregnancies.



Parents of pregnant adolescents/teenage moms need communal and social [support](#), not discouragements. Kindly desist from backbiting and bickering!

MY PLEA TO YOU

... The voice of a pained pregnant teen

**There in the middle of the mess I made
Wallowing and trying to live with my scar
My eyes are tired from my tears
Though what is done is done!
I have a lot to deal with
Will you please not add to my burdens?
The judgment in your eyes
The sarcasm in your voice
Your toxic actions towards me are adding to
my burdens
I take responsibility for my actions and
decisions
However, do not make life more difficult for
me!**

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ABOUT US

[Emerald Light Initiative](#), a Selah Series project, is established to give pregnant and adolescent moms second chances to life by advocating against the toxic stigmatization mounted on them by our society, by supporting as well as empowering them to make the most of their lives.

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We, often, are reluctant to accept the multifactorial causes of teenage pregnancy in the African society as real. So we, usually, dump our anger only on pregnant adolescents. The anger in our hearts toward them is preventing us from seeing the reality of the negative effects of our attitude on their lives and babies. In our pains, it is important to remember that their lives are not yet over.



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