

Girl-Pupil Dropout in Secondary Schools in Botswana: Influencing Factors, Prevalence and Consequences

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Abstract

This is a position paper that presents the authors' views and what pertains in the literature regarding school teenage-pregnancy in Botswana. It also analyses the educational statistics of Botswana secondary schools' pupil dropout due to pregnancy. The global literature on the subject augmented the analysis. The resultant discussion of the analysis was made under the sub-headings: factors that influence pregnancy among secondary school girls; what the law of Botswana says on the school girl who falls pregnant; prevalence of the problem in schools; and consequences of school girls' pregnancy to the government and to the girl pupil. The analysis concluded that although pregnancy among schoolgirls is a global problem, developing countries are worse off because of the socio-economic factors that affect the level of education and the advancement in medicine. Within the developing countries the problem is more acute in rural than in urban schools. The prevalence of the problem, the authors argue, has cost implications to the government. Governments incur costs on the affected girls in different ways such as cost on unemployment, cost on the girl's health during pre-natal care and the cost increases if they happen to have contracted the HIV virus or fall sick due to AIDS-related diseases. Additionally, cost is incurred on post-school programmes aimed at behaviour rehabilitation of the affected girls.

Introduction

School girls' pregnancy is an international crisis that affects the socio-economic welfare of countries, societies and families at large. This is due to the fact that it is one of, if not the leading cause of school-dropout for female students (Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Grant, 2012). The discussion on school dropout due to pregnancy in this paper is in the context of schools in Botswana. Data, particularly from the Botswana Education Statistics and the review of literature were used in analysing and discussing the prevalence, reasons, and consequences of school girls' premature pregnancy. According to literature findings and data from the Botswana Education Statistics, pregnancy is the number one reason that accounts for girls' "disappearance" from the classroom. The literature reviewed also suggests that school dropout rates due to pregnancy are higher among girls from lower socio-economic families. The Botswana Education Act provided what the position of the law of Botswana is regarding school girls' pregnancy.

Defining a School Drop-out

The definition of a school dropout could be determined from who reports the learner's missing from school; and for the female student who is pregnant, the accuracy of the situation also depends on who reports the pregnancy. A dropout is defined by Ramirez and Carpenter (2008) as a student who has discontinued school before graduation with no intention of returning. To adopt Ramirez and Carpenter's definition would be to exclude a girl who drops out of school due to pregnancy. School girls usually do not plan to become pregnant, thus, it is generally not intentional. The pregnancy happens in the majority of cases as an accident as most of them are still underage or teenagers. Teenage pregnancy refers to a girl aged 19 or less becoming pregnant (Chen, Wen, Fleming, Yang & Walker, 2008). The majority of pupils in Botswana secondary schools fall within this cohort.

In the context of this paper, a drop-out is defined as a student who discontinued school with or without the intention of returning. The term will be used also to refer to teenage pregnancy drop-out globally since almost all of secondary going pupils are teens.

Factors Influencing School Girl Dropouts

Findings from the Dallas Commission on Children and Youth Report (1998-2000) and from Nelligan (2003) show reasons for dropping out of school as varied and influenced by among other factors, a student's ethnicity, socio-economic status, home life, poor attendance and failing grades. Reyhner (1992) attributes school related factors such as uncaring teachers, passive teaching methods, inappropriate curriculum and poor conditions created by large schools to school dropouts. In Botswana, pupils can drop out of school for a variety of reasons related to pregnancy, expulsion for deviant conduct, death, illness, desertion and even marriage as shown in Table 1. According to Ramirez and Carpenter (2008), reasons for dropping out of school are categorized into four issues: home-based; society/community-based; school-based and student-based. In their study on school dropouts, they cited homes with single parents; home poor environments; homes with many siblings, homes with a history of dropouts; home environments where substance abuse and physical violence are rife and exposure to wider culture to pupils drop-out as rendering school a low priority to the pupil. Any of these factors or a combination of them can contribute to girls leaving school due to pregnancy. By implication, more girls drop out of school than boys do. Ramirez and Carpenter confirmed in their study that this is the case. They found out that pregnancy was one of the main reasons for school dropout.

An earlier study by Meekers and Ahmed (1996) also found out that in spite of great improvements that the Government of Botswana has witnessed in education since independence in 1966, there has been a high rate of schoolgirl pregnancy after primary school. Their study revealed trends that show more boys dropping out of school than girls at the primary school level, and double the number of girls dropping from school between Form two and three. Previous and current Education Statistics in Botswana also show that school drop-out due to pregnancy is the most common form of drop-out. Most girls drop out of school due to this reason (Education Statistics, 1998-2002, 2004 & 2007). The Botswana Education Statistics (2007) show a huge disparity in the number of boys (2107) and girls (3375) dropping out of school. Within this number of girls, 1057 dropped out of school due to pregnancy (Government of Botswana, 2007).

Another reason that accounts for school dropout in Botswana context is the school vacation period. The Primary School Leaving Examinations end in early October and the pupils do not resume schooling at the Junior Secondary School level until January of the following year. This vacation period is unreasonably long and in most cases there is no formal arrangement to engage students in meaningful activities. As a result, the students are likely to engage in risky behaviours including unprotected sexual activity. This way, the school vacation for the primary school final year pupils is likely to be a factor that contributes significantly to the school pupils' involvement in behaviour that could result in pregnancy, and consequently school dropout.

Additionally, due to the school holiday that serves as the transition period between junior and senior secondary, the Junior Certificate pupils also make a late start at the senior level after an early finish of their examination the previous year. The reason for the early writing of examinations at Standard 7 and at Junior Certificate levels is to allow enough time for the markers to finish before the Christmas break to give time for the results to be processed. The delay in starting classes by those proceeding to the senior school level (classes may resume between February and March of the following year) is due to the admission procedure. This long waiting time exposes the school pupil to risk-factors that can be detrimental to their schooling. Such an exposure is partly due to a shift to a new socio-economic practice where pupils stay in villages or towns or cities with their working parents or their working relatives during school holidays. Previously, pupils would go to the cattle posts and/or ploughing fields during the school holidays to be usefully engaged.. They idle throughout the day with little or nothing to do when their parents or guardians are at work, this is an opportunity for undesirable behaviours (Moswela, 2006) between boys and girls, and pregnancies may result during the period. What else can sustain young minds in town during school vacation other than watching television the whole day long, walking the streets purposelessly and influencing each other into antiestablishment behaviours. We make a comparison between the old and new life styles in order to look at the problem of schoolgirl pregnancy from the present context.

The Law and Schoolgirl Pregnancy

Section 34 (1) of the 1967 Botswana Education Act requires a pupil who has fallen pregnant to withdraw from school and that she can be re-admitted on condition that she goes to a school other than that from which she was withdrawn after one calendar year after the cessation of pregnancy and subject to the approval of the Minister. Section 34 (3) and (4) respectively state that such a pupil shall not be allowed to write an examination at a school while she is pregnant; and she shall not be allowed to write an examination at a school until at least six months after such pregnancy has ceased. The provision of the Act was heavy-handed on the girl pupil despite the presumptions that the legislator did not intend that which is harsh; that which deprive an individual of his/her vested rights such as education and did not allow for inequality and partiality of treatment (Fombad & Quansah, 2008; Madhuku, 2010).

The particular education statutory provision does not guarantee the return to a school by the girl even after meeting all the requirements stated above. Her return to a school was also dependent upon the availability of space at the school to which she has applied. Classroom space, even if it was available, the admitting school would look at other factors such as the girl's performance before she was withdrawn. These other factors were not legal requirements. Decisions were left to the discretion of the admitting school and therefore to admit or not was prone to arbitrariness and subjectivity in the form of nepotism, and/or favouritism. Because of the biased system, many academically able girl pupils have been deprived the second chance to return to school because of these provisions in the Act or lack thereof.

It is worth noting that the authors have used both the present and past tenses in the foregoing paragraph. The present tense is what is contained in the current Education Act whereas the use of the past tense towards the end of the paragraph was to indicate that Section 34 of the Act has been amended through directives from the then Ministry of Education and such amendments have not been incorporated into the existing Act. The amendment to the enactment is now less harsh. The girl can return to her former school after the cession of pregnancy as long as the doctor has certified her fitness. However, there is no guarantee for the return to school by such a girl, as it is still dependent on the availability of space in the relevant class. A girl who drops out towards the end of the year has a limited chance of returning to school than one who drops earlier in the year because schools do not reserve places for dropouts. This is particularly true if the girl is weak in academic skills (Makwinja-Morara, 2007). Providentially, Meekers and Ahmed (1996) study on girl pregnancy in Botswana schools reported that returnees are quite successful. Only one in four returnees did not make any progress. This is perhaps the case because as pointed out earlier, schools will tend to re-admit a dropout who had a good academic record before pregnancy-related dropout.

Prevalence

The Botswana Education Statistics are produced in arrears; therefore, the Government Central Statistics Office reports are therefore not current. The most current are reflected in the 2007 Education Statistics document. Evidence for the discussion of this paper draws mainly from the 1998 to 2002, the 2004 and the 2007 education statistics (see Table 1).

Table 1: Girl-Pupil Dropout in Secondary Schools by Reason

Year	Fees	Expulsion	Illness	Death	Marriage	Pregnancy	Desertion	Other	Total
1998	112	4	51	22	21	1259	648	204	2321
1999	87	5	80	37	5	1473	689	124	2500
2000	131	4	86	33	15	1659	851	143	2922
2001	63	6	89	37	6	1468	903	147	2718
2002	78	9	88	32	12	1369	716	72	2376
Total	471	28	394	161	59	7228	3806	690	12837

Source: Botswana Education Statistics, 1998-2002

Table 1 clearly shows pregnancy as the number one reason why girls drop out of school. The already high number could even be higher given that pregnancy is not always declared and it is not compulsory to give reasons why girls leave school. In order to have numbers tally, unknown reasons for dropping out would be recorded as desertion or other. Parents sometimes report a pregnant girl as being ill and such statistics would fall under the variable illness.

Pregnancy is a culturally disapproved condition for a teenager and a stigma to the girl and the family. This could be the reason some parents do not report their children's pregnancy to schools. Taking figures under illness (394), desertion (3806) and pregnancy (7228) as all falling under the variable pregnancy, girl pregnancy portrays a high trend in secondary schools in Botswana (see Table 2).

Table 2: Dropout Rates due to Miscellaneous Reasons: Boys and Girls Compared

Year	Boys	Girls
1998	966	2321
1999	1054	2500
2000	1196	2922
2001	1214	2718
2002	1193	2376
Total	2623	12837

Source: Botswana Education Statistics, 1998-2002

Table 3 below shows that most girls drop out of schools at form three. The table does not however, show when the pregnancy occurred. Without such information, it cannot be said with certainty at which Form girls fall pregnant most but it can be said with conviction, which Form loses most girls due to pregnancy. Schoolgirls drop out of school due to pregnancy at Form 3 followed by Form 2s and Form 5s. Dropping out of school at Form 3 could be during the transition vacation period while waiting for admission into senior secondary school to do Form 4.

Table 3: Pregnancy Dropouts by Form

Year	Form 1	Form 2	Form 3	Form 4	Form 5	Total
1998	265	499	238	136	131	1259
1999	196	407	496	195	179	1473
2000	219	405	540	238	257	1659
2001	200	351	426	228	263	1468
2002	178	327	391	220	253	1369
Total	1058	1989	2091	1017	1073	7228

Source: Education Statistics, 1998-2002

Table 4 below shows a drop in the number of girl pupils who leave school because of pregnancy. The total number of girls who dropped out due to this reason was a low 324 compared to each one of the years shown in Tables 1 and 3 above. This drop could be attributed mainly to among other reasons, the constant national educational and health intervention programs such as abstinence from sex at early age, the danger of practicing unsafe sex, particularly in relation to the HIV and AIDS. Both the print and electronic media have and continue to play an effective role in disseminating information on HIV and AIDS to the general public including schools. The 2007 Botswana Education Statistics shows that 429 (40.5%) out of 1057 girls returned to school after the end of their pregnancy (Botswana Government, 2007). This is the result of the improved conditions on re-entry/re-admission to a school after the cessation of pregnancy.

Table 4 Number and Percentage of Schoolgirl Dropouts by District in 2007

District	Type of District	No. of pupils enrolled	No. of dropouts due to pregnancy	% drop-out
Gaborone	Urban	9 524	62	0.65
Ngwaketse	Rural	8 128	89	1.09
Ngamiland	Rural	6 268	101	1.61
Francistown	Urban	4 655	44	0.94
Jwaneng	Urban	496	2	0.40
Barolong	Rural	709	26	3.67
Orapa	Urban	407	0	0

Source: Education Statistics 2007

Pregnancy as a Socio-Economic Factor

Worldwide, rates of teenage pregnancy range from 143 per 1000 in some sub-Saharan countries to 2.9 per 1000 in South Korea http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teenage_pregnancy. In the Indian sub-continent, teenage pregnancy is more common in traditional rural communities compared to the rate in cities (Mehta, Suman, Grenen, Riet, Roque & Francisco, 1989). Economically poor countries such as Niger or Bangladesh have far more teenage mothers compared to economically rich countries such as Switzerland or Japan. A study on school dropouts by Reyhner (1992) revealed that youth in the USA from poor ethnic groups are at a higher risk of dropping out than those from middle income families and much higher than youth from wealthy backgrounds.

There are 70 000 reported teen girls pregnancy in developing countries each year (Mehta et al., 1989). For example in Botswana, the trend is no different. Teen girls from economically disadvantaged families are more likely to fall pregnant than their counterparts from affluent families. This is partly due to the economic pressures and partly because of limited awareness of the risks and consequences of premature pregnancy.

Table 4 above shows pregnancy prevalence by type of district in Botswana secondary schools. Overall, teen girls from rural areas tend to drop out of school due to pregnancy than those from the urban areas. Two possible reasons for the difference can be advanced as first, pupils in towns or cities are more exposed to information and therefore are more educated in issues of sexuality such as the use of contraceptives when they become sexually active than those in rural areas. Having better access to information in varied formats such as books, newspapers, the internet, radio, literate people as well as organizations that deal with sexuality issues places them at a huge advantage. This makes them less likely to fall pregnant while still at school. Secondly, pupils in rural are more economically disadvantaged than their peers in urban centres, therefore, they are more prone to sexual abuse by males who earn an income. By falling in love with such an individual, the teenager expects monetary benefit from the relation. Pregnancy has debilitating effects not only on the girl-child but also on the economy of the country.

Consequences of Pregnancy

Pregnancy has some direct and indirect effect on all the affected individuals and at the institution level. It impacts the individual female student, the family, the school and government. For the scope of this paper, only the impact of a schoolgirl's pregnancy on the government and the individual herself is discussed.

The government: Unlike social issues that equally afflict the youth and that are of general public discussion such as HIV and AIDS, relationship conflicts, youth behaviour problems and unemployment, the issue of school pregnancy and school drop-out has not attracted much public attention to the extent of the aforementioned. It would seem to be an issue affecting individual pupils and their parents. Its publicity has been limited to a one off annual prize giving function when schools heads present their annual school reports to students, staff and the public. The media captures such statistics and such information rarely goes beyond the newspapers. Although readily available in education statistics documents, not many people easily access information on pregnancy in Botswana. For example, people only buy a document like the Government Gazette to read it for a specific purpose and the same would apply to the one on teen pregnancy statistics.

School dropout due to pregnancy is a cost to government. When a girl falls pregnant, she would have had unprotected sex and that can result in contracting HIV and eventually developing AIDS. In Botswana, all citizens affected by the virus who fall ill are entitled to the antiretroviral medication at government cost. For a third world country such as Botswana that is in need of skilled human resource, pregnancy causes a huge loss.

Although a pregnant girl can later return to school, the initiative to do so lies with the pupil and their parent and not the school because the latter or the education system does not have mechanisms to call teen girls who dropout back. A study carried out by Meekers et.al. (1996, p.6) on pregnancy-related school dropouts in Botswana show that few of the girls who drop out of school due to pregnancy return. The authors attribute this partly to two factors; first, "parents who are angry about their daughter's pregnancy are more likely to encourage her to find a job during the mandatory leave period, which then reduces her chances of returning to school". Second, Parental resources could also be an important factor in determining whether girls will return to school after the end of their pregnancy. Such is a form of a loss to government.

Furthermore, for many years (1988-2005) government has been paying school fees for all pupils at all levels of schooling. There was a reintroduction of school fess in 2006 but at a highly subsidized rate of 5% of the total payable fee.

Pupils identified as coming from needy families have their fees fully paid by government (Ministry of Education, 2006). Thus, school dropout for whatever reason in Botswana entails cost to government. Additionally, school dropouts may result in other social ills such as delinquency, unemployment, teen parenthood and criminal behaviour all which can be a major cost to society as a whole (Dallas Commission on Children and Youth Report 1998-2000).

The girl drop-out: The dilemma often facing a pregnant girl is how to break the news to parents and when to tell the parents. This may arise from fear, embarrassment or disappointment (Makwinja-Morara, 2007). Parents, on the other hand, can be strict or lenient that the girl-child fears risking harsh confrontation or disappointing the parent. Either way, this does not help the schoolgirl especially in preventing pregnancy (Sekiwunga & Whyte, 2009). Nevertheless, whatever the case, pregnancy will sooner than later be exposed. Therefore, it is better for the girl not to suspend punishment or disappointment in the interest of good health. Delaying in reporting can only make things worse for the would-be mother and the baby by losing time on counselling, general pre-natal care, and advice on health risks (Wahn & Nissen, 2008). Pregnant teens who do not break the news to their parents in good time may be subjecting themselves to nutritional deficiencies from poor eating habits including attempts to lose weight through dieting, snacking and consumption of fast foods (Gutierrez & King, 1993). Other risks related to teen pregnancy are complication at birth that can be fatal which are common among pregnant girls between the ages of 15 and 19 particularly in developing countries where medicine is not that advanced. Whereas age is in itself a risk factor in developing countries because of socio-economic factors, it is not in the West countries.

During the early days of childbirth, mothers need emotional and even financial support not only from parents but from the fathers of their babies. In Botswana, because of customs, such support is nonexistent in teen mothers because the father could be another pupil who does not have an income and who is not free to visit because he is not a husband to the girl or it could be family man elsewhere. In the UK, half of all the teenagers with children are lone parents, 40% are cohabiting as a couple and only 10% are married (Gutierrez & King, 1993). There is evidence that when fathers are included in the decision-making during pregnancy and birth, they are more likely to report increased involvement with their children in later years. In the USA, eight out of ten teen fathers do not marry their children's mothers (Plevin, 2011). In the majority of cases where the child grows with a lone parent, this might not provide an environment that is conducive for balanced and maximum growth and development of the child the same way a child with both parents would. No matter how convenient it seems to be no other parenting arrangement is superior in ensuring desirable and positive influence on the growing child than the two parent family. The presence of both parents complements each other in creating a relatively more complete and natural environment for a growing and developing child (Nenty, 2009).

Conclusion

This paper concluded that pregnancy is the main reason for girls to discontinue from school in large numbers. A total of 1057 girls discontinued from school because of pregnancy alone in 2007. The drop-out rate as shown in the Botswana Education Statistics is higher in rural than in urban centres. This, according to the authors of this paper, was perhaps due to the amount of education girls have access to on issues relating to health and sexuality. Evidently, girls in urban areas have more exposure and access to varied types of information. Literature on the phenomenon of teenage pregnancy suggests that girls from economically disadvantaged families are more susceptible to teenage pregnancy than those from families that are not poor. This perspective corroborates the authors' view that girls from economically disadvantaged families willingly or unwillingly get into relationships expecting monetary benefits and this is likely to contribute to premature pregnancy during teen years. An analysis of the rather tenuous Education Act of Botswana of 1967 reveals its harshness on girls who fall pregnant while attending school. Thus, the authors of this paper advocate review of this Act to align it with the Millennium Development Goals universal education and gender equality by 2015, and to the National Vision 2016 of an educated nation. With the advent of inclusive education, we call upon the Government of Botswana to (i) put in place measures to enforce the legislation on sexual harassment especially on school-going girls; (ii) provide essential support services to teen girls who drop out of school due to pregnancy to continue with their education; and (iii) embark on more effective and efficient education programmes regarding schoolgirl pregnancy-prevention.

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