

Research Article

Motherhood Sans Adulthood: Future at Stake

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A B S T R A C T

The rising number of teenage mothers, especially in rural areas, has become a cause for concern in Meghalaya. Young parents are unable to take up the responsibility that comes with parenthood and this leads to several undesirable socio-emotional outcomes. A study was planned and conducted in Meghalaya to understand the causes and consequences of teenage motherhood. In depth interviews with identified respondents were carried out. The data was collected with the help of a semi-structured interview schedule and qualitative analysis was done. This paper highlights the understanding developed on the issue of teenage motherhood in the context of Meghalaya. Culturally teenage motherhood has not been perceived as a major problem by the respondents. The long term negative effects of early motherhood for the mother as well as the child are well documented.

Keywords: Teenage Motherhood, Adolescence, Psychosocial Consequences, Meghalaya

Introduction

Adolescence is conceptualized as a positive stage of life, full of possibilities and potential. It is also a time for developing independence and can be a time of both disorientation and discovery. The World Health Organization defines adolescents as young people aged 10-19 years, but changes may begin before and continue after this age group. Adolescents constitute over 21.4% of population in India.

Adolescents are an important resource of any country and on their way to adulthood they may face troubles due to lack of right kind of information regarding their own physical and/or sexual development. Many research studies have revealed that adolescent girls generally lack adequate knowledge about sexual matters and contraception which results in early pregnancy, increased pre-marital sexual activity, and increased risk of sexually transmitted infections including HIV/AIDS, maternal morbidity and mortality and unsafe abortions (Mahajan and Sharma 2004; Das et al., 2016).

A study by NCPCR, India Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy 2015-16 (NFHS-4, 2015-2016), says prevalence of child marriage among 15-19 years old and 20-24 years old is 11.9 per cent and 26.8 per cent, respectively, for girls. Findings reveal that there are 12 states where more than 40 per cent of these girls have at least one child or more. Interestingly, we find emergence of states such as Goa (64%), Mizoram (61%) and Meghalaya (53%) with the highest prevalence of teenage pregnancy amongst early married girls.

Early pregnancies among adolescents have major health consequences for adolescent mothers and their babies. Pregnancy and childbirth complications are the leading cause of death among girls aged 15-19 years globally, with low- and middle-income countries accounting for 99% of global maternal deaths of women aged 15-49 years (Neal, et.al, 2015). Adolescent mothers aged 10-19 years face higher risks of eclampsia, puerperal endometritis and systemic infections than women aged 20-24 years (WHO, 2016). Additionally, some 3.9 million unsafe

abortions among girls aged 15–19 years occur each year, contributing to maternal mortality, morbidity and lasting health problems (Darroch et al. 2016).

Early childbearing can increase risks for newborns as well as young mothers. Babies born to mothers under 20 years of age face higher risks of low birth weight, preterm delivery and severe neonatal conditions (WHO, 2016). In some settings, rapid repeat pregnancy is a concern for young mothers, as it presents further health risks for both the mother and the child (WHO, 2012).

Meghalaya, a state in India, follows the matrilineal system with its unique socio-cultural practices and traditions. The health infrastructure is not well developed and people have less access to health care facilities. The incidence of teenage pregnancy is nearly 53% in Meghalaya. (NCPCR, 2017). In this backdrop, the present study sought to study the causes and consequence of teenage motherhood in Meghalaya.

The study aimed to understand the factors leading to teenage motherhood as well as its psychosocial consequences in terms of health, education and emotional well-being identifying at-risk adolescents. The present paper focuses on the perceptions and experiences of some young mothers from Meghalaya.

Sample

The sample data comprises of 14 girls between the age group of 17 to 26 who became mothers at an early age. Out of these 14 girls, 2 (14.3%) girls were single mothers and 12 (85.7%) were married at an early age.

Purposive sampling technique was used to select the sample. Interview schedule was used for collection of data.

Socio-Demographic Profile

The data on educational qualification of the girls revealed that 28.6% of the population is illiterate; 64.3% are under metric (i.e. below Class X pass) and the 7.1% are metric pass (Class X pass). The size of their families in majority of the cases was big, that is, having five to eight members which indicate that the respondents were having big families. The young girls interviewed were from Khasi, Jaintia and Nepali families.

Methodology

The data was collected using a semi-structured self-developed interview schedule.

In depth interviews with identified respondents were carried out. The data was collected with the help of a semi-structured interview schedule which consisted of general information on the socio-economic background and specific questions pertaining to the girls' experience of becoming mothers in teenage and the consequences of

this life event. Observations of the respondents during the interviews also provided information about the way young girls were dealing with motherhood. However, most of the girls were very open about their experiences and did not really desire any confidentiality. The results are presented in the following section.

Data Analysis

The data on the Educational qualification of the girls revealed that 28.6% of the young sampled girls were uneducated; 64.3% are under metric (Below Class X pass) and 7.1% are metric pass (Class X pass).

The data also showed that 35.7% of the population had only one child, whereas 21.4% had 2 children; another 21.4% have 3 children; 14.3% had 4 children and the rest 7.1% had 5 children. It has also been observed that most of the girls are non-working (not engaged in earning a means of livelihood), engaged in rearing their own children.

Age at Child Birth

The data reveals that 28.6% of the girls were 16 years of age when the first child was born; another 28.6% were 17 years when the first child was born. Again, 28.6% of the girls were 18 years of age; 7.1% were 19 years of age at the time of first child birth; another 7.1% of the population were 21 years of age.

The data on the birth weight of the children born to the young mothers also reveals that the weight varied from 1.2 kgs to 3.3 kgs.

Perceptions about Early Pregnancy/Motherhood

57.1% of the adolescent girl population regretted getting pregnant so early in life, while 42.9% had no regrets from their pregnancy. 14.3% of the girls reported that they planned their pregnancy at the early age, while 85.7% reported that their pregnancy was unplanned.

The data also revealed that 21.4% of the population delivered the child earlier than the complete gestation time and the rest 78.6% gave birth on time.

53.8% of the sampled population informed that on hearing the news of pregnancy they were happy as well as surprised. 21.4% of the family members were not supportive towards the girl; another 23.1% were sad and angry.

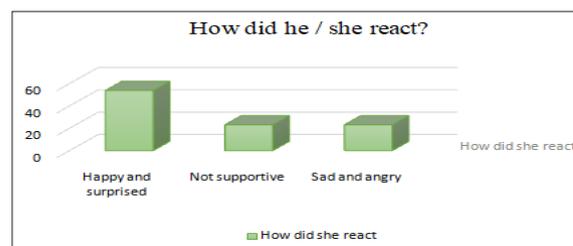


Figure 1. Reaction on Receiving the News of Pregnancy

Challenges of Early Pregnancy

The data reveals that 7.1% of the population faced instability as the main issue; another 7.1% went through mixed emotions and physical changes after the birth of their child. However, 71.4% of the population were of the opinion that they faced no challenges while coping with early motherhood. 7.1% of the young girls revealed that raising the child was the most difficult challenge before them. The other 7.1% of the population felt that unemployment was the most difficult situation to rear a child.

However, when asked, what was the most difficult challenge or health issue the child faced? 92.9% of the sample revealed that there was no difficulty for the child; but a 7.1% of the population revealed that the child was paralysed.

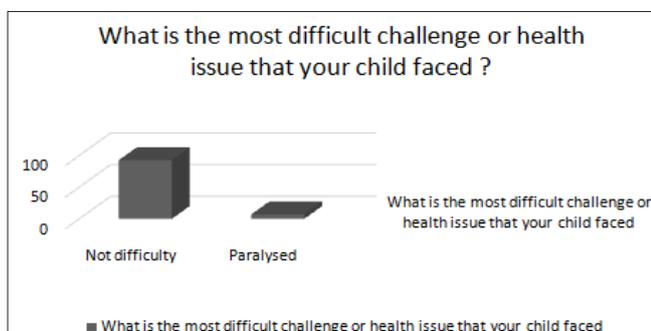


Figure 2. Challenge/ Health Issue Faced by the Child

When asked whether they could have done something differently had they not become mothers at such a young age, 14.3% of the young girls reported that they wanted to work as a means of livelihood; while 57.1% of the girls wanted to complete their studies and 21.4% had no such aspirations which they felt that they would have done differently. A 7.1% of the population did not respond to the query.

The data also revealed that the 21.4% of the girls missed attending the school whereas their friends of the same age went to school. Another 35.7% of the girls wanted to fulfil their dreams but they could not due to the responsibility of the child. 28.6% of the population felt that they missed nothing in life; whereas 14.3% of the population missed a normal life due to early motherhood.

The data reveals that 7.1% felt that their children did not get proper health check-ups; 71.4% felt that their children did not miss anything in life and they are at par with other children of their age. Again 7.1% felt that they missed on proper studying facilities; another 7.1% felt they missed being fortunate and another 7.1% felt they missed proper understanding on the part of parents.

Positive Experience of Early Motherhood

The data reveals that the young girls enjoyed their early motherhood. 78.6% of the girls revealed that the favourite

part of being a mother was to nurture the child; 14.3% revealed that it gave them happiness to be mothers. 7.1% of the population remarked that the birth of the child brought in new responsibilities.

The data reveals that, 7.1% felt that they gained responsibility by bearing child early in life. 50% of the population felt they were lucky to have children early in life; another 14.3% felt that they gained lot of knowledge by bearing child early in life. 7.1% of the population was unable to understand what they gained in life and 21.4% did not respond.

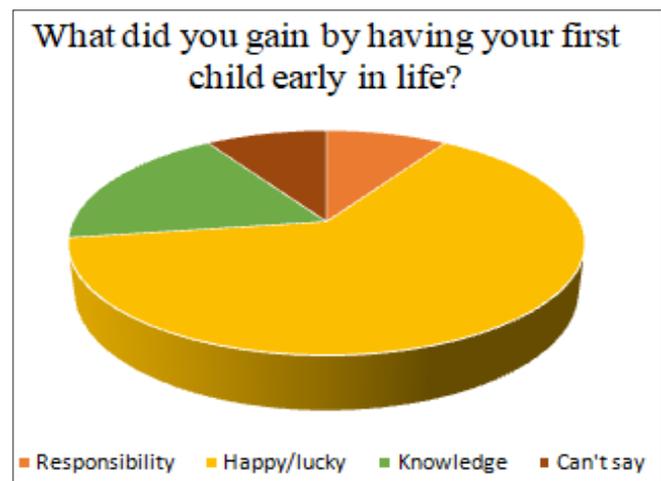


Figure 3. Benefits of Early Motherhood

Findings

Teenage pregnancy and early motherhood are a life changing event. The experience gathered while undertaking the study on early motherhood was an eye-opener. Some major findings of the study are as follows:

- The first noteworthy understanding was that early or teenage motherhood was not experienced by the participants in the study as a problematic or distressing life event. This could be because of the strong social support that young mothers, including single, receive from their maternal homes. In most cases the young girls continued to stay with their mothers and therefore the life changes that usually are a hallmark of other cultures because of the transfer to another household probably did not arise. The cultural acceptance and support of the young mother irrespective of her marital status was quite evident. The matrilineal system could be a factor in buffering the negative emotional as well as social consequences of teenage motherhood
- Most respondents reported to be "Happy" with their child. A sense of achievement was evident in most young girls probably because they experienced motherhood as an event that raised their status as independent persons who can take a decision and

responsibility. Nearly all of them reported to have gained from the experience of early motherhood be it in terms of knowledge, responsibility or good luck. However, a number of the young mothers also reported missing school, fulfilling their dreams and a normal life while some (28.6%) reported having missed nothing in life

- The process of child rearing probably did connect some of them to the hardships of being mothers at a young age. Though most of the young mothers felt that their child did not miss out on anything, a few of them realized that their children missed out on better health and proper upbringing because of their ignorance related to these issues. The lack of information on child health and rearing was observed when a young mother of a low birth weight baby did not report any problems and another one was feeding cerelac to an approximately 3 months old child. The children were actually being brought up by children
- The energy, the joy and the enthusiasm were making up for maturity and correct information. The social support did make the experience easier and manageable

Conclusion

The 'happiness' that is experienced because of the lack of awareness of the consequences needs some intervention. But before that we need to understand the probable causes of early motherhood.

As seen from different researches already taken up on the issue, lack of information about issues related to pregnancy, birth control and child health are one reason for the teenage pregnancies and motherhood. However, there are certain psycho-social issues also that were revealed as a backdrop to the narratives of the young girls. The kind of life these young girls are living makes them vulnerable to teenage pregnancy. One of the causes that could be identified through the limited number of interviews was the absence of proper monitoring of the young girls. This can be cited from one case study of a 16-year-old young mother (X). She was living with her single mother and four siblings. The father was not sharing any responsibility of child care. The mother was forced to leave the house for long hours to earn a living leaving the daughter at home to look after the younger siblings. X was not going to school. In the absence of any grown up she wandered out into her neighbourhood and got into a relationship with a young boy who was a driver. This relationship ended with the girl getting a child. The boy's family also supported the girl initially but presently she continues to live with her mother and tries to contribute to the family income by working as a housemaid.

Some inferences can be drawn from this case. The first is that there are few socio-cultural taboos related to single /

unwed mothers which allow the young people to get into physical relationships. Close communities with high levels of trust and support could also be a cause of young people getting into close physical relationships without thinking of the consequences.

Low aspirations in life, especially because of the low levels of education of parents as well as the teenagers also contribute to the tendency to get into relationships - probably for the sense of progress, achievement and growing up that bonding with a person and bringing up a child might be providing to these adolescents. Dropout may be a cause of teenage motherhood as also may be caused by it. Lack of meaningful engagement for young people, especially who do not want to continue with schooling could also be a factor responsible for the teenage pregnancies and young motherhood. School dropout also limits opportunities for future employment thus perpetuating the cycle of poverty.

To conclude it can be said that in the sample studied, teenage motherhood has not been perceived as a major problem by the respondents. This is probably because of the lack of information on maternal and child health, coupled with relatively easy experience of child care given the strong matrilineal support system and low educational and social aspirations. However, the long term negative effects of early motherhood for the mother as well as the child are well documented. In this backdrop, interventions need to be planned keeping in mind the unique socio-cultural realities of the region.

Some of the areas of intervention as suggested by the study could be:

- Imparting awareness on consequences in terms of maternal and child health and education is much needed
- Proper sex education as well as information and access to birth control methods is crucial. This is especially so as child birth is often an unintended consequence.
- The girls need to be sensitized to the long term as well as short term psychosocial effects of early sexual activity
- Need to promote programmes for engaging the adolescent
- Attempts need to be made to sensitize parents also for maintaining responsible and informed relationships with their children

This was a small exploratory study which threw up many questions apart from the answers that were being looked for, further work can be taken up for an in-depth understanding of the issue of teenage motherhood especially that of single mothers.

We also need to take up a study on the teenage fathers because that is an important other side of the coin and we need to deal with the issue holistically.

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Conflict of Interest: None

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