

Chapter 14: Role of Siblings in Supporting Pregnant Family Adolescent Members in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The aim of the study was to explore what sibling support is, why is it significant, and its role in supporting a family member who is a pregnant adolescent in order to understand the nature and significance of sibling support in adolescent pregnancy in rural Zimbabwe. The overall aim of this qualitative study was to investigate what sibling support is, why it is significant, and how it supports a family member who is a pregnant adolescent, and was specifically to understand the nature and significance of sibling support in the context of adolescent pregnancy in rural Zimbabwe. This study has identified and fills the research lacuna on the specific, qualitative empirical evidence for the role of siblings in the well-being and schooling continuum of pregnant adolescent women in the families in Zimbabwe. Informed consent, confidentiality and theming were used as a methodology to present the findings from 15 participants (6 learners; 2 counsellors; 2 teachers; 4 parents; and 1 Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education official) by use of focus group discussions and thematic analysis as a data analysis process. One of the main conclusions was that siblings could be seen as central in assisting the pregnant adolescent in multiple ways, not only providing emotional support but also doing so by taking care of the child, advocating with his/her parents and encouraging her/him to continue his/her education. The study suggests that this kind of family counselling, which includes the involvement of parents and siblings, should be incorporated into school-based maternal and child health care services to enhance the role of family support in the life of pregnant adolescents.

Keywords: adolescent pregnancy, family support, siblings, social support, Zimbabwe

1. Introduction and Background of the Study

Adolescent pregnancy continues to be a social and education problem in Zimbabwe which has a host of effects on the life of the adolescent girls and their families. Families play a vital and important part in influencing pregnant adolescents' educational and psychological outcomes (Chigona & Chetty,

2008). Although there has been a considerable amount of research that has focused on the role of parents, there has been relatively little research that has concentrated on the role of siblings in supporting pregnant adolescents. However, in some Zimbabwean households, siblings significantly support pregnant family members emotionally, practically and financially as parents are absent or unable to support them optimally (Imbosa et al., 2022). The family is the first place children and adolescents undergo their socialisation and sibling relationships are one of the most durable and influential relationships in human life. Siblings are a source of emotional support, role models and confidants, especially in times of turmoil (Jaffee et al., 2001). Siblings could be among the first family members to be aware of the pregnancy and could be very important in facilitating the adolescent in informing the parents and coping with the situation. Siblings' roles are especially important where there are cultural anti-norms concerning sexuality and pregnancy which limit talking between parents and adolescents (2024). Intergenerational support and care within extended families is emphasised through the cultural philosophy of *hunhu* (Ubuntu) and the extended nature of the family system in Zimbabwe (Mwapaura, 2024). Well-being of each family member is considered a family responsibility and this culture provides opportunities for siblings to be active in supporting caregivers who are pregnant and adolescents. So far, however, the kind of sibling support and its effects on the outcomes of the adolescent pregnant girl is not systematically explored in the Zimbabwean context. The purpose of this study is to fill this void by looking at the supporting role of siblings for adolescent family members who are pregnant. Adolescent pregnancy has far-reaching implications, with a significant portion of adolescent mothers having to give up their education because of stigma, lack of support and practical considerations of childcare (Marongedza et al., 2023). It's important for siblings to be able to help with continued education, giving emotional encouragement, help with schoolwork and childcare assistance. Finally, siblings can also serve as advocates for the pregnant adolescent in some situations, to parents and school officials and can also advocate for support needed to continue school.

It also has a psychological impact on a pregnant teenager if he or she is supported by their family members. For the children, siblings can offer emotional support and reassurance, which helps to reduce the stress, anxiety, and depression that may arise during early pregnancy (Echezarraga et al., 2024). Having helpful siblings can also improve a pregnant adolescent's emotions of loneliness and shame. But, not all sibling relationships are supportive and the quality and nature of sibling support changes. In some instances, siblings may say or do something judgmental or rejectant, adding to the adolescent's challenges (Hayes et al., 2006). The nature of sibling support to pregnant adolescents is determined by a number of factors such as birth order, gender, age and quality of sibling relationships. Older siblings, especially older sisters, often act as care takers and render more emotional and practical support. (Chikoko & Mwapaura, 2023). Other siblings—usually males—might also serve some other function, such as standing up for the pregnant adolescent with parents or providing financial help. How well and how much siblings are able and willing to provide support depends on the quality of the sibling relationship, such as trust and communication. There is scarce international research on Sibling Support for youth during pregnancy, however some research does exist. In the United States and the United Kingdom, research has identified the need for support from siblings to the adolescent mother, especially when parents are absent or do not provide support (Carneiro et al., 2024). A number of studies in sub-Saharan Africa have also included siblings as providers of childcare and emotional support, but often involve the entire extended family (Motsa & Morojele, 2017). Sibling support is faced with unique contexts and challenges in Zimbabwe. The availability of education, health and social services is a major barrier in the rural areas, where the majority of people reside (Das & Das, 2023). In these contexts, families may use their internal resources in the form of siblings' support in response to challenges. Extended family systems are more common in rural settings and increased opportunities exists for the support of pregnant adolescents by multiple family members, including siblings. In Zimbabwe, the

policy environment offers an avenue for supporting adolescent mothers' continued education including the policy for allowing them to return to school (Saruchera & Chidarikire, 2024). Stigma, however, and limited resources are sometimes implied barriers to implementing these policies. Siblings have a part to play in promoting these policies, in helping pregnant adolescents overcome barriers to participation in the systems and structures they encounter, and advocating for system implementation of these policies.

The current study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the causes of unintended pregnancies among adolescents in rural Zimbabwe?
2. What are the effects of unintended pregnancies on adolescents' educational and psychological well-being?
3. What solutions can be implemented to support pregnant adolescents, including the role of siblings in this support?

2. Literature Review

Studies in the United States on adolescent pregnancy have investigated the significance of family support particularly sibling support for the outcomes of adolescent mothers. Edelman (2018) studied the effects of Title IX rules on the education rights of pregnant students and how they were impacted by the ability to have family support (including from siblings). The study emphasised the need for supportive family environment as students who took encouragement and practical support from family members were more likely to stay in school. But it did not focus specifically on siblings; rather it looked at the wider family situation. The current study focuses on the particular role of siblings in the support of the pregnant adolescent by filling this gap. Margaret D. Duckworth, Chris Peterson, and others (2007) conducted a study in the United States that focused on the nature of grit and its association with achievement among underprivileged groups. Results indicated that perseverance and interest in the long-term goal were good indicators of academic success and that family support, including support from siblings, could nurture grit. The study, however, was conducted basically in urban areas and failed to take congruent problems relating to rural population into account, including the situation concerning sub-Saharan Africa. The gap points to the need for research to explore how siblings can play a part in promoting resilience in the context of adolescent pregnancy in rural Zimbabwe. Studies on adolescent pregnancy in the United Kingdom have focused on the effectiveness of the support programmes and the function of the social services. Carneiro et al. (2024) undertook a broad investigation of the effects the Sure Start programme had on school achievements for children in deprived areas. The research established the importance of early help and family support for the best outcomes and how siblings could contribute to family support. The study, however, paid more attention to outcomes than to pregnant teens, or to the importance of siblings in the lives of pregnant teens. The current study fills this gap by looking particularly at how siblings assist pregnant adolescent family members. Brede et al. (2017) conducted another study in the United Kingdom that explored the experiences of autistic students who have been excluded from school and subsequent reintegration. Supportive relationships with siblings, as well as other family members, were identified as being essential for successful reintegration. The value of siblings for emotional support and advocacy was identified and that sibling relationships could be used as a strength for vulnerable young people. The same applies in the case of pregnant adolescents, who, like others, are subjected to exclusion and stigma. But the participants in the study are not necessarily the same group and the conclusions may not be immediately relatable to the situation of adolescent pregnancy. In the present study this gap is filled by exploring the role of siblings in supporting pregnant adolescents in Zimbabwe.

In Botswana, studies have looked at the cultural and social determinants underlying family support for adolescent pregnancy. A study which investigated helping to prevent early pregnancy in South African schools with comparative data from Botswana, was undertaken by Umubyeyi (2024). The results showed that cultural values and norms regarding sexuality and pregnancy have an obvious impact on the response of families to adolescent pregnancies and that it is important to ensure siblings are providing support for the pregnant young person. The study shed light on the need to consider the context of culture when providing intervention for teen pregnancy. The research, however, centered largely around the prevention implications and not adolescent pregnancy per se or the roles of pregnant adolescents, particularly that of the siblings, and their families. The aim of the current study was to explore this lacuna by looking at the role of siblings in supporting pregnant adolescents in Zimbabwe. A study by Motsa, Morojele (2017) in Botswana looked at narratives of resilience of learners in a rural primary school in Swaziland. The findings showed that there were several factors that influenced resilience such as family support from parent, siblings and others. The study emphasized the role of positive relationships and how siblings can be important source of support to enhance resilience. But the research focused on the experiences young adults have as mothers, and a few studies specifically as a pregnant adolescent, as sister relationships of these younger siblings remain largely unexamined in the context of pregnancy. The current study aims to fill this gap by specifically considering the contribution of siblings in supporting pregnant adolescents. The research on adolescent pregnancy in South Africa has focussed on the implementation of re-entry policies as well as on the obstacles encountered by boy and/or girl students who become pregnant while they are in school. Chigona and Chetty (2008) undertook a seminal study on teen mothers and schooling which revealed lacunae and challenges in the education system faced by teen mothers. The study revealed that family support (sibling support as an example) was an important predictor of whether young mothers could resume their schooling. The study however looked at the family context in general and not specifically on the role of the siblings. This current research study strives to fill that void, exploring all the specific contributions of siblings towards the support of pregnant adolescents. Additionally, another crucial research is the re-entry policy and retention of expectant learners and adolescent mothers in public secondary schools in South Africa conducted by Imbosa et al. (2022). The study revealed that family support is key to whether or not a learner may be retained during pregnancy and that siblings also often supported both emotionally and practically. It was conducted in Kenya, however, and so might not completely reflect the lived experiences of rural people in Zimbabwe, who have less access to services. The current study fill this void by particularly looking at the role of siblings in supporting pregnant adolescents in the rural areas of Zimbabwe.

The research on adolescent pregnancy in Zimbabwe has focused on issues and opportunities of supporting school adolescent mothers. Marongedza et al. (2023) did a study on secondary school student performance under institutional constraints in the rural communities of Zimbabwe. The research identified family support, including sibling support as a key indicator for pregnant learners' continuing education. The research however, was mainly about institutional factors and they did not research the dynamics of the family, or the specific role of siblings. The present study attempts to fill the aforementioned gap by looking into role of siblings in supporting a pregnant adolescent. Saruchera and Chidarikire (2024) did a study on promoting inclusive policies for the support of adolescent learners of grade 6 in Zimbabwe when they are pregnant. The study revealed that significant barriers existed for pregnant learners in continued education and family support is important for interventions to address these barriers. The role of siblings in providing support, however, was not sufficiently explored in the study and only parents/teachers were approached to distinguish support. The current study aims at filling this gap by examining how siblings can contribute specifically to the support of pregnant

adolescents and draw implications to inform policy and practice. The literature search has identified that though there is a considerable amount of research conducted on adolescent pregnancy and family support, there is a wide gap in understanding the specific role of siblings in supporting a pregnant adolescent especially in Zimbabwe. Previous research has mainly concentrated on the role of parents and school environments, and there has been little research on siblings. The aim of this study is to fill this gap by making a contribution to the body of empirical evidence on the supportive role played by siblings of pregnant adolescent family members in rural Zimbabwe.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study has been oriented by the theory of social support, as mentioned by Sheldon Cohen and Thomas Ashby Wills (1985). This theory offers a framework to explain how social relations can buffer against the effects of stress and adversity. The theory suggests that social support has both direct and buffering effects on well-being and that social support must fit an individual's needs in order for it to have a positive impact. The first tenet is that social support can be distinguished in types such as emotional support, instrumental support, informational support and appraisal support. Emotional support includes empathy, love, and caring; instrumental support includes help with tasks and/or providing resources (Saruchera & Chidarikire, 2024). Informational support is about giving advice and guidance, and appraisal support is about giving feedback and affirmation. This tenet also applies to this study as it enables a nuanced approach to describing the diverse forms of support siblings offer to pregnant adolescents. The second tenet is that the quality of social support depends on the congruence of the person's needs. This incongruent support can sometimes fail them and can actually harm them (Dube, 2020). This tenet is applicable to the present study, which investigates how the support given by siblings is adequate for the specific needs of pregnant adolescents, such as comfort, facilitation and school encouragement.

The third case is that social supports can have direct effects on well-being, as well as buffering effects that shield people from harmful effects of stress. According to the direct effect hypothesis social support supports regardless of stress level, the buffering hypothesis suggests that social support is especially beneficial during a high level of stress (Hlalele, 2018). This tenet applies to this study which investigates the importance of sibling support in the well-being of pregnant adolescents especially during the stress of their early pregnancy. The fourth tenet is that social support is a dynamic process, both in terms of providing social support and receiving it. Relationships with individuals provide social support, which can vary in terms of reciprocity, trust, and communication (Chinyoka & Naidu, 2018). This tenet is pertinent to this study, which explores the nature and quality of sibling relationships and how this impacts on the support received by pregnant adolescents.

The Social Support Theory is useful for understanding the contribution of siblings to the social support of pregnant adolescents. This study indicates that the gravidity of a prepubescent girl is a stressor, which jeopardizes her educational and psychological health. The positive effects of siblings can counteract these negative influences if that sibling support is a type of protective factors. The theory will be examined with regard to types of support provided by siblings. The emotional support there can be a way of reducing feelings of shame, isolation and anxiety, as well as providing comfort and reassurance during this critical time (Saruchera & Chidarikire, 2024). Instrumental support, including as childcare and/or help with household duties can tackle practical barriers to ongoing learning. The youth may need informational supports – information on how to navigate school or health care systems for instance. Encouragement and affirmation can input positively the adult's self-esteem and drive (Chidhakwa & Lunga, 2023). The theory also emphasizes the need for fit between support offered and need in the adolescent. The study is interested to explore if the pregnancy adolescents feel that sibling support is

helpful and appropriate, as well as if there are cases when sibling support does not fit in with their needs. This is especially relevant in the context of the buffering hypothesis under which the study falls, which explores ways in which sibling support can buffer pregnant adolescents from experiencing the negative impacts of stigma and stress. The dynamic social support is also taken into account, through exploring the influence between quality of sibling relations on the support provided and received.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Paradigm

This study adopted an interpretivist paradigm, which recognises that social reality is constructed through the meanings and interpretations that individuals attach to their experiences (Mwapaura, 2024). The interpretivist paradigm is appropriate for this study as it seeks to understand the subjective experiences of pregnant adolescents and their siblings, rather than establishing objective causal relationships. This paradigm allows for a deep exploration of the meanings that participants attach to their experiences of sibling support, providing rich qualitative data that can inform policy and practice.

4.2 Research Approach

A qualitative research approach was employed in this study, consistent with the interpretivist paradigm. Qualitative research is particularly suited to exploring complex social phenomena and understanding the perspectives of participants in their own words (Chikoko & Mwapaura, 2023). This approach allows for the collection of detailed, contextually rich data that captures the nuances of participants' experiences and the meanings they attach to those experiences. The qualitative approach is appropriate for this study as it enables an in-depth exploration of sibling support dynamics within the specific socio-cultural context of rural Zimbabwe.

4.3 Research Design

This study utilised a case study research design, which focuses on an in-depth exploration of a particular phenomenon within its real-life context (Hassan et al., 2024). The case study design is appropriate for this research as it allows for a comprehensive examination of the role of siblings in supporting pregnant adolescents within the specific socio-cultural context of rural Zimbabwe. This design enables the researcher to capture the complexity of sibling relationships and the multiple factors that influence the support provided.

4.4 Data Collection Methods

Data were generated through focus group discussions, which are particularly effective for exploring shared experiences and generating rich qualitative data through group interaction (Agarwal et al., 2024). Two focus groups were conducted, each comprising approximately seven to eight participants. The focus group discussions were guided by a semi-structured interview schedule that explored participants' experiences of sibling support, the types of support provided, and the factors that influenced the quality and effectiveness of sibling support. The focus groups were conducted in the local language (Shona) to facilitate open communication and were audio-recorded with participants' consent.

4.5 Sampling Technique and Sample Size

To get participants that would give rich and relevant information on the research topic, purposive sampling was adopted (Akwero, 2023). 15 respondents were involved, including 6 learners (pregnant adolescents/those who had given birth, two of them were school-based and two were community-based counsellors, two teachers, four pregnant adolescents' parents and one official from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of Primary and Secondary Education. The choice of these participants was based on their specific perspectives and knowledge. The students gave their personal experiences of the support of siblings. The counsellors shared their perspectives on what psychosocial support is needed for pregnant adolescents, and the importance of the role of siblings. The teachers shared insights on the challenges in the education system and siblings' role in continuing education. Parents provided some input regarding family dynamics and sibling roles in the family. The Minister of Primary Education and Secondary Education gave policy-level inputs about supports that can be provided to pregnant learners and the role played by siblings.

4.6 Data Analysis

The generated data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first step involved familiarisation with the data, which required transcribing the audio recordings verbatim and reading the transcripts multiple times to gain an overall understanding of the content. The second step involved generating initial codes by systematically identifying interesting features of the data that were relevant to the research questions. The third step involved searching for themes by collating codes into potential themes that captured significant patterns in the data. The fourth step involved reviewing themes to ensure they were coherent and accurately represented the data. The fifth step involved defining and naming themes by identifying the essence of each theme and articulating its significance. The sixth step involved producing the report by selecting vivid examples and weaving them into a narrative that addressed the research questions.

4.7 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking, which involved presenting the findings to participants to verify the accuracy and credibility of the interpretations (Chikoko et al., 2022). Participants were given the opportunity to provide feedback on the findings and suggest corrections or clarifications. This process enhanced the credibility of the findings by ensuring that they accurately reflected participants' experiences and perspectives.

4.8 Ethical Considerations

The ethical issues were very carefully considered during the research process. The researchers ensured that informed consent was obtained from all the respondents in which complete details of the purpose of the study, how the respondents were going to be involved and the fact that they would be free to withdraw anytime without any penalty (Mwapaura, 2023). Parental consent was also acquired if the participant was under 18 years old. Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity and enable them to speak openly about their experiences as this ensured confidentiality. It was made clear to the researcher that the purpose of the study was not one of judgement or evaluation with regards to the participants, but one that was purely academic, and that findings would be used as a basis for informing policy and practice. Group participants were also informed that their responses would not be

released to school officials or anyone else who knew about the information who would not want them to use it against them.

5. Discussion and Findings

5.1 Theme 1: Causes of Unintended Pregnancies Among Adolescents

This theme explores the factors that contributed to unintended pregnancies among the adolescent participants in this study. Understanding the causes of these pregnancies is essential for developing effective prevention strategies and for understanding the context in which sibling support occurs. The following are participants' responses:

Participant Learner Tinashe, Age 16 observed that,

I got pregnant because I did not know about contraception. My boyfriend told me that nothing would happen, and I believed him. I did not have anyone to talk to about these things. My parents never talked to me about sex, and my siblings also did not talk about it. It was like a taboo in our family.

More so, Participant learner Nyasha, Age 15 held that,

I was pressured by my boyfriend. He said that if I did not sleep with him, he would find someone else. I was scared to lose him. I did not know about family planning. My older sister had a baby when she was young, and my parents were very angry with her. I did not want to tell anyone because I was scared of their reaction.

Lastly, Participant Parent Mrs. Ndlovu, Age 47 said,

I think the main cause is lack of information. Our children do not know about contraception because we are afraid to talk about it. We think that if we talk about sex, they will want to try it. But the result is that they learn from their friends, and they get wrong information. My daughter got pregnant because she did not know how to protect herself.

Based on the data above it can be seen that factors that cause unintended pregnancies among adolescent girls are due to limited sex education, peer pressure, and limited communication between parents and children. This aligns with past studies that have found that gaps in information and taboo are major challenges for adolescent sexual health (Umubyeyi, 2024). Both adults and young people noted that, in their view, abstinence-only curricula are lacking and that they do not impart enough skills and knowledge to adolescents to safeguard their health. This discovery resonates with the findings of Das and Das (2023) where distance to school and inaccessibility to information were important limitations to reproductive health of adolescents in rural settings. It can also be seen that peer pressure and imbalance of power can flow in adolescence relationships. There was evidence of gendered dynamics in adolescent relationships, with the participants reporting pressure to have sex from their partners. This is corroborated by a study by Jan and Bhat (2025) which identified gender dynamics and power relationships as significant factors in influencing adolescents' sexual behaviors. The study also underscores the need for family talk on sexuality as the participants indicated that their parents and siblings had not talked to them about sexual health related issues. This lack of communication is indicative of a wider culture which causes sexuality to be stigmatised. The results highlight that the factors associated with unintended pregnancies among adolescent girls and young women living in rural

communities in Zimbabwe are complex and include individual, relationship, and systemic factors (Kanyopa et al, 2026). Adolescents are also still not aware of the knowledge they need to make informed decisions regarding their sexual health, largely because of limited comprehensive sex education, especially in schools (Saruchera & Chidarikire, 2024). This vulnerability can be exacerbated by peer pressure, power imbalances and adolescent relationships. Low levels of open family talk about sexuality are a sign of cultural prohibitions on family communication.

5.2 Theme 2: Effects of Unintended Pregnancies on Adolescents

This theme explores the effects of unintended pregnancies on the adolescents' educational and psychological well-being. Understanding these effects is essential for comprehending the challenges that pregnant adolescents face and the importance of sibling support in mitigating these challenges. Below are the participants responses:

The Participant Learner Rudo, Age 17 expressed that,

When I found out I was pregnant, I was so scared. I thought my life was over. I stopped going to school because I was ashamed. My friends started talking about me, and I felt so alone. My sister was the only one who supported me. She talked to me and told me that everything would be okay.

Additionally, Participant Teacher Mr. Sibanda, Age 40 observed that,

I have seen many girls drop out of school because of pregnancy. They are often stigmatised by other learners and sometimes by teachers. They lose their confidence and feel that they have no future. Some of them try to come back after giving birth, but they find it very difficult to catch up with their studies. The ones who have supportive siblings often do better.

Lastly, Participant Counsellor Mrs. Ncube, Age 44 argued that,

The psychological effects of early pregnancy are often overlooked. These girls experience high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. They feel guilty and ashamed. Siblings can play a crucial role in providing emotional support and helping these girls to cope. I have seen cases where siblings were the main source of support for pregnant adolescents.

As explained above, these statistics show the negative consequences on education and psychological health for adolescents who become pregnant based on an unplanned pregnancy. The experiences of stigma, shame and social isolation reported by the participants resulted in school dropout and diminished educational aspirations. This result is similar to that of Marongedza et al. (2023) who also reported that pregnancy is one of the major factors influencing school dropouts among rural Zimbabwean girls. A negative attitude surrounds the issue of early pregnancy and hence this drives away girls pregnant to drop out of school. However, the psychological impact of early pregnancy also is important; the participants reported a significant level of stress, anxiety and depression. The findings are consistent with those of Echezarraga et al. (2024), who discovered psychological distress stemming from adolescent pregnancy. These negative influences are apparent in the findings as well as the role of siblings in helping to counteract these influences: siblings provided emotional comfort and encouragement. This aligns with a study by Brede et al. 2017 that identified seeking support with siblings as an important factor for emotional support and low levels of isolation. The results of this theme showed that pregnancy with an surprises impacts adolescents' psychological and educational

well-being. The stigma for early pregnancy also poses barriers for continued education giving rise to school dropouts and low educational aspirations (Saruchera & Chidarikire, 2024). The psychological impact involves stress, worry, lethargy and sadness. The siblings can be a very important factor in reducing such adverse effects by offering emotional support and encouragement.

5.3 Theme 3: Solutions for Supporting Pregnant Adolescents

This theme explores the solutions that can be implemented to support pregnant adolescents, with a particular focus on the role of siblings in providing support. The theme encompasses family-level, school-level, and policy-level interventions that address the challenges faced by pregnant adolescents. Following are the views of the participants:

Participant Learner Shingai, Age 16 narrated that,

My sister was the one who helped me the most. She talked to my parents and told them about my pregnancy. She helped me with my schoolwork when I was pregnant. After I gave birth, she helped me with childcare so that I could go back to school. She was always there for me, and I don't know what I would have done without her.

More so, Participant Parent Mr. Moyo, Age 52 noted that,

Siblings can play a very important role in supporting their pregnant sisters. In our family, my older daughter helped her younger sister a lot. She talked to her, encouraged her, and helped with childcare. This made a big difference. I think we should encourage siblings to support each other.

Lastly, Participant Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education Official Mrs. Mhlanga, Age 50 observed that,

The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education has policies that support the re-entry of pregnant girls into schools. However, implementation is a challenge. We need to involve families more, including siblings. Siblings can help to create a supportive environment for pregnant learners and can advocate for them in schools.

Data show that siblings are critical in giving support to pregnant young women in numerous ways, including emotional, practical childcare support, advocacy with parents, and encouragement to pursue education. This aligns with Imbosa et al (2022) who discovered that family support, in this case that of siblings is pivotal in maintaining the school retention of pregnant learners. Communication between the pregnant adolescent and parents is especially important – siblings can play a key role in helping to defuse conflict and help parents to understand. This data also indicates that a need to include siblings in interventions with pregnant adolescents. There were reported instances of siblings being first to know about the pregnancy and giving support prior to the parents being informed. This finding indicates that the Sibling-Inclusive Interventions would be effective to reach the adolescent learners early in their pregnancy and support those of them who need it (Saruchera & Chidarikire, 2024). The implications for policy are also clear, as the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MPSEC) official emphasized the need to engage families more in the implementation of re-entry policies. Our findings in this theme suggest that siblings are important in supporting a pregnant adolescent with emotional, practical and advocacy support. Siblings can help with communication with parents, minimize conflict and foster a positive family unit (Dube, 2020). Siblings should be included in the support network of

pregnant adolescents at the policy level, as they are in a particular situation and can play a specific role in that context.

6. Conclusion

This study was qualitative and aimed to gain insights into the role of siblings in supporting pregnant adolescent family members in rural Zimbabwe. The results indicate that siblings serve in many ways, including giving emotional support, helping out with childcare needs, talking up for their siblings, and helping them feel good about continuing to learn. The study also revealed that adolescent unintended pregnancy is related to insufficient sex education, peer pressure and improper communication between teenagers and their parents. Adolescents' issues caused by unintended pregnancies are tremendous such as stigma, school dropouts, stress, anxiety and poor self-esteem. But siblings can help buffer from these negative experiences and promote ongoing schooling. The Social Support Theory offers a helpful way of thinking about various types of support that siblings offer and what kind of support these may be for pregnant adolescents. The study adds to the existing literature on adolescent pregnancy in Zimbabwe and could inform policy and practice.

7. Recommendations

7.1 Recommendations for Learners

Pregnant adolescents should be encouraged to communicate openly with their siblings and seek support from them, recognising the potential role of siblings in providing emotional and practical assistance. More so, peer support groups that include siblings should be established in schools to provide emotional support and practical advice for pregnant and parenting learners. Lastly, adolescents should be encouraged to maintain open communication with their siblings about sexual health and relationships, creating a supportive family environment.

7.2 Recommendations for Teachers

Teachers should be trained to recognise the role of siblings in supporting pregnant learners and to involve siblings in interventions where appropriate. In addition, schools should develop programmes that engage families, including siblings, in supporting pregnant learners and creating inclusive learning environments. Lastly, teachers should be encouraged to serve as mentors and role models for pregnant learners, providing encouragement and guidance that complements sibling support.

7.3 Recommendations for Parents

Parents should be encouraged to recognise and support the role of siblings in providing support to pregnant adolescents, fostering a collaborative family environment. Furthermore, parents should maintain open communication with all their children about sexual health and relationships, creating a family culture that encourages discussion and support. Lastly, parents should be supported to respond to their children's pregnancies with empathy and acceptance, recognising that supportive family responses, including from siblings, can mitigate the negative effects of early pregnancy.

7.4 Recommendations for the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of Primary and Secondary Education

The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should develop policies that recognise and support the role of siblings in the education and well-being of pregnant learners. On the other hand, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should invest in family-based interventions that involve siblings in the support network for pregnant adolescents. Lastly, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should develop comprehensive sex education programmes that include information on the role of family support, including sibling support, in preventing and managing adolescent pregnancy.

7.5 Recommendations for Counsellors

Counsellors should provide family-based counselling that includes siblings, recognising their potential role in supporting pregnant adolescents. Moreover, counsellors should work with families to facilitate communication and support, including helping siblings to understand how they can best support their pregnant family members. Lastly, counsellors should advocate for the rights of pregnant learners within schools and communities, promoting inclusive policies that recognise the role of siblings and other family members.

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