

Exploring the perception of teen mothers on re-dropping from secondary school: A case of Matai Open School at Kalambo District, Tanzania

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doi: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/aa.v23i1.5>

Abstract

Globally, teenage pregnancies continued to halt the efforts of numerous states in achieving equal accessibility to primary education among girls and boys. The current study, entitled "*Exploring the Perception of Teen Mothers on Re-Dropping from Secondary School: A Case of Matai Open School at Kalambo District, Tanzania*", intends to interrogate the lived experiences among teen mothers who have rejoined Matai Open Secondary School. Employing a case study design, the study utilised interviews to collect qualitative data from teen mothers, using the lens of the Mama Mkubwa Model. Using Atlas.ti, the qualitative findings were analysed. The findings reveal interconnected and interrelated factors leading teen mothers to re-drop after re-entry. Compounded with single parenthood, the teen mothers indicated financial and emotional support as the key factors, which increased their vulnerability. Further, social stigma, rejection and the community's negative attitude were noted to demean their self-esteem. The study concludes that the identified causes of re-dropping can be addressed using holistic interventions, which leave no one behind. The Mama Mkubwa Model is seen as an ideal to combat the ongoing threat of challenges facing teen mothers and effectively promote their retention and ensure they succeed in their education.

Keywords: Teen Mothers, Re-dropping, Secondary School Education

Introduction

The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2022) noted that education is a basic human right; it fosters gender equality, empowers the young generation, and propels social and economic advancement. Because it delays marriage, lowers maternal and infant mortality, improves family health, and fosters economic independence, education is especially transformative for girls. Further, Article 26 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms that everyone has the right to an education. Tanzania is a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989), which obligates states to guarantee equal access to education. With a particular emphasis on eradicating gender inequities in education by 2030, Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) encourages inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for everyone (UN, 2015). Still, in Article 11(3) of the United Republic of Tanzania's 1977 Constitution, everyone has the right to an education. The 2014 Education and Training Policy also pledge to guarantee all children, regardless of gender, fair access to high-quality education. Despite these international commitments, many countries, including Tanzania, still struggle with implementing effective re-entry policies, as some of the returned-to-school teen mothers still re-drop out of school.

Globally, it is well known that early pregnancy is a hindrance to the completion of primary education among girls. It is from this view that the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2023) revealed that nearly 16 million teenagers aged 15–19 years old and 2 million girls under the age of 15 years old give birth every year. More than 90% of these births occur in low and middle-income countries, including the Saharan region. On the same note, UNICEF (2023) revealed that the phenomenon tends to be higher among families or households with less education or low economic status, which is the reality in the Sub-Saharan region, where more than half of all births in the region were from teen mothers. Drawing attention to the situation of secondary school dropout in Tanzania, the President's Office, Regional Administration, and

Local Government (PO-RALG, 2023) noted that in 2022, approximately 2,823,588 students were enrolled in secondary schools. From this number, 134,690, dropped out (where 68,964 were boys, and 65,726 were girls. The number of school dropouts in Tanzania still shows it as a problem of concern.

The adolescent phase is an important stage of any human development, during which young people must be supported to access quality information related to their health and their prospective future. The study by Buhori (2025) on "The Relevance of Mama Mkubwa Model in the Completion of Secondary School Education among Teen Mothers in Kalambo District – Rukwa Region, Tanzania" the findings noted that friendly information provided to teen mothers is vital in empowering them to make informed decisions. Yet, due to inaccessible reproductive health education, unfriendly sexual and reproductive services, compounded with sociocultural norms, adolescents are left on their own to deal with peer pressure and uninformed decisions on their reproductive health. These shortcomings facing adolescents have persistently increased their vulnerability to teen pregnancies, which ultimately leads to school dropout and other health-related challenges (UNFPA, 2022).

In recognition of these challenges in developing countries, Tanzania in particular, the United Nations (UN, 2023), pointing to Sustainable Development Goals, reminded all its member states to spearhead the efforts of ending all forms of discrimination and exclusion, which should be implemented alongside addressing inequalities holding other members of the society behind. The intention is to ensure that by 2030, no one is left behind. The Tanzania National Census (NBS, 2022) noted that 22% of adolescent females aged 13-19 have ever been pregnant, while 16% have had childbirth, 6% were pregnant at the time of the survey, and 2% have ever had a pregnancy loss. In response to the increasing number of teen pregnancies, the government has strengthened accessibility and education to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services, and through the re-entry policy, teen mothers are allowed to return to school. Further,

using a national campaign and school-based intervention on teen pregnancy, on October 11, 2017, the government instructed all primary and secondary schools to establish a "Help Desk" for providing psychosocial support and care, reproductive health information, linking and referral, and to frequently report teen pregnancies and early marriages. These interventions are in line with the 2030 Millennium Sustainable Goals, which focus on "*no one is left behind*". Thus, the incidences of pregnancies among adolescents in Tanzania continued to deny them access to fundamental education. The reason for the current study is to explore the lived experiences of teen mothers on the re-dropping out from secondary schools in Tanzania.

Pointing to the statistical data at Rukwa region, Tanzania, where NBS (2022) revealed that Rukwa region recorded a 30% rate of teen pregnancy and expectant mothers. The increasing rate of early pregnancies among teenagers is closely linked to poverty among households and low education level among community members in the Rukwa region, Kalabo district. Further, the teenage pregnancy is reported at 53% among girls with no formal education, compared to just 9% among those with secondary schooling or beyond. On the same note, limited accessibility to youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services was pointed out as one of the fundamental reasons accelerating the increasing cases of teenage pregnancies, which ultimately lead to school dropout.

Further, the government intervention towards inclusive primary and secondary education, among teen pregnant, and school dropouts, can be witnessed through the Education Circular number 2 of 2021. The Circular emphasized the government's commitment to promoting inclusive accessibility to quality education for all. The re-entry policy is a step towards leaving no one behind. To affirm on the Circular, further, the government of Tanzania, in 2022, issued Guidelines to reinstate students who dropped out of primary and secondary education for various reasons, teen pregnancies being one of them. Before the policy change, an estimated 6550-15000

Tanzanian girls and adolescents were forced out of school each year due to pregnancy, while thousands more were subjected to coercive pregnancy testing (URT, 2022).

Studies conducted in Tanzania were focused on the perceptions of teen mothers on re-dropping or re-entry into secondary schools, their challenges impacting educational completion. At the same time, others prioritise the sociocultural factors and the systematic and structural barriers towards school completion for teen mothers in secondary schools. These studies are not limited to Nyaisa & Njowe (2022), which was entitled *"Assessing the Experiences of Teen Mothers under the Re-entry Policy in Secondary Schools: A Case of Uyui District Council, Tabora, Tanzania"*, Amiri (2019), entitled *"Re-entry of Adolescent Mothers into Secondary Education in a Context of Social Exclusion: The Case of Igunga, Tanzania"*, Nkata et al., (2021), entitled *"Perceptions of Secondary School Teachers Towards School Expulsion of Pregnant Adolescents in Igunga District, Tanzania"*. Further, other social science studies includes, Juma (2023), entitled *"Perceptions and Challenges of Teenage Mothers Returning to School after Pregnancy in Zanzibar"*, Mwanjisi, & Kalinga (2024), entitled *"Understanding Teachers' and Students' Perceptions on the Re-entry of Teen Mother Students in Public Secondary Schools of Dodoma City"*, and Hussein (2023) entitled *"Exploration of Teenage Mother Students' Challenges in Secondary Schools in Ifakara Town Council, Morogoro"*. The listed studies focused on sociocultural-related stigma, economic challenges, the systematic barriers, and the community attitudes as a significant factors watering down the retention of teen mothers in Tanzania secondary schools.

On the other hand, these studies have shown the desire of teen mothers to complete their education; however, due to the identified challenges, they are ultimately forced out of school. None of the listed studies looked at re-dropping among community-based schools, which have a shelter for teen mothers. Further, none of the listed studies used an African model. Thus, the gap has been filled in with this study.

Pointing to the impact of teen pregnancies, in Sub-Saharan Africa, Tanzania, particularly, UNFPA (2022) revealed that at the personal level, adolescent mothers are at higher risk of complications during childbirth and increased chances of maternal mortality. Noting the consequences related to education, it was pointed out that early pregnancy typically forces girls out of school, curtailing their prospects and contributing to the cycle of poverty. These effects ripple out to families and communities, increasing financial burdens and social stigma, while also impacting national development through strained healthcare and education systems. It is these setbacks which has informed the current study to explore the perception of teen mothers on the re-dropping out of secondary school at Kalambo district- Rukwa region, in Tanzania.

To ensure inclusive education for all adolescents, the global states, through the Sustainable Development Goals, specifically Goal, which pinpoint the increased accessibility and inclusive education for all, Africa We Want by 63, which, among declarations, has prioritised education for girls and teen mothers. At the local level, the Tanzania Child Development Policy of 2004 and the Child Act recognise the role and obligation of the parents and community members to support the accessibility of all children to fundamental education. Despite these international, regional and local commitments, Tanzania has increasingly witnessed an alarming number of school dropouts among adolescents due to teen pregnancies. For instance, in secondary schools, roughly 2,338,457 students were registered in 2019. Of the enrolled students, 98,949, or 4.2%, dropped out (URT, 2020).

Further, the Tanzania Demographic and Health Survey (TDHS, 2022) noted that 27% of girls aged 15–19 in Tanzania have begun childbearing, where cultural and religious norms significantly shape community attitudes. Early pregnancies, as pointed out by UNESCO (2021), contribute heavily to school dropouts among girls, with an estimated 6,500 girls dropping out of school annually due to pregnancy in Tanzania. From this

point, in 2022, 393 girls in the Rukwa region dropped out of secondary school, while in the Kalambo district, 92 dropped out due to teen pregnancies (URT, 2021). Further, URT (2022) noted that in 2023, 414 girls in the Rukwa region dropped out, while 105 girls were from the Kalambo district. On the same note, URT (2023) revealed that in 2024, 391 girls dropped out, while 97 girls were from Kalambo district. Guided by the Mama Mkubwa Model (MMM), the current study intends to uncover the perception of teen mothers about re-dropping among their peers in the Kalambo district, Rukwa region in Tanzania.

To reduce teen pregnancies, the government of Tanzania passed the re-entry policy in 2021. The policy allows teen mothers, after two years of breastfeeding, to come back to school (URT, 2021). However, as noted by UNICEF (2023), effective implementation remains a challenge as the available infrastructure is inadequate to support the learning of teen mothers. The impact of the limited sources to support the policy is witnessed in rural and remote areas of Tanzania, such as the Kalambo district in the Rukwa region of Tanzania.

It is important to note that a significant number of teen mothers still drop out of school before completion, despite Tanzania's re-entry policy, which allows them to return to secondary school after giving birth. The government of Tanzania's efforts to alleviate poverty, advance gender equality, and educate teen mothers have been devastated by the continuous failure. Numerous studies have highlighted the socioeconomic, psychological, and institutional factors that lead to early school dropouts, including UNICEF (2023) and Human Rights Watch (2022). Policy and practice continue to fall short in addressing the causes of secondary school dropouts and re-dropouts. When the reasons for re-dropping are fully understood, acknowledged, and addressed, the current re-entry policy alone runs the risk of being ineffective and unsustainable.

Furthermore, there is a dearth of empirical research on how teen mothers perceive the factors that lead to re-dropping. The causes of teen pregnancy and the barriers to first

re-entry into secondary school education have been the subject of a great deal of research (Plan International, 2022). Most of the material is top-down and usually focuses on policy evaluations or the opinions of teachers and parents, ignoring the lived experiences and voices of the affected teen mothers. Some studies, such as Nyaisa & Njowe (2024) focused the Experiences of Teen Mothers under the Re-entry Policy in Secondary Schools: A Case of Uyui District Council-Tabora, Tanzania and Makuu (2024) who focused on the Perception of Adolescent Pregnancy among Secondary School Educators and Students in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. None of these studies, employed the Mama Mkubwa Model, or dealt with teen mothers staying a community-based shelter, as it is the case at Matai Open School shelter, which is under the supervision and guidance of elder women.

Additionally, by undertaking localised, perception-based studies among teen mothers, this vacuum can be filled, and important insights can be added to academic debate and policymaking. By adjusting support systems like counselling, financial aid, and childcare to the real needs of recipients, the re-entry policy would be more effective and relevant when viewed from the perspective of teen mothers. On the same view, it provides a bottom-up viewpoint that enhances current macro-level policy assessments and is consistent with the SDGs, especially Goal 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education, and the global education goals set forth by UNESCO (2021). It is for these reasons that the current study aims to explore the lived experiences of teen mothers at *Matai Open School* in Kalambo district who have re-dropped out of secondary school. It is for these reasons that the current study intends to explore the perception of teen mothers about re-dropping out of secondary school despite the implementation of the re-entry policy in Tanzanian schools.

The Mama Mkubwa Model and its relevancy to prevent redropping among teen mothers

The *Mama Mkubwa* Model is rooted in African indigenous knowledge, which recognises the position and role of elders, particularly elderly women, in support community members who are vulnerable. These members include the discriminated, stigmatised, isolated, or those without relatives (Kapinga and Hyera, 2015). In the context of this study, the vulnerable members of the community are teen mothers who have dropped out of secondary school due to early pregnancies. The history and practicability of the *Mama Mkubwa* model, according to Hyera et al. (2014), can be linked to the times of HIV/AIDS in Tanzania, where parents and caregivers passed on as a result of the scourge. Many villages and households were left with orphaned children and elders. It was during this time that old women had to care for the orphan and vulnerable children in the community. Generally, the phrase "*Mama Mkubwa*" means an elderly lady, which is directly translated from the Kiswahili language, widely spoken in East and Central Africa.

With the current study entitled "Exploring the Perception of Teen Mothers on Redropping from Secondary School: A Case of Matai Open School at Kalambo District – Tanzania", the *Mama Mkubwa* model, as revealed by Nankunda et al. (2021) that is a cornerstone in providing maternal care and support, life skills, and emotion support to teen mothers. The loss of self-efficacy, confidence, and giving up on secondary school education, among teen mothers, is addressed by senior ladies through coaching and psychosocial support and care. Support the role of senior ladies in the secondary school education for teen mothers. Chigona & Chetty (2007) pointed out that, since they struggle with stigma, without any support, in places where senior elders are available, their retention and completion of secondary school education rates have remained remarkable. From this viewpoint, the model can be useful in providing psychosocial support and care, and life skills among teen mothers when in schools. With the increasing number of teen pregnancies and dropping out of secondary

schools, UNICEF (2019) emphasized that mentorship and experiences of senior ladies are highly needed to restore the disempowered identity and emotional instability among teen mothers rejoining secondary school education, particularly at *Matai Open Secondary School*.

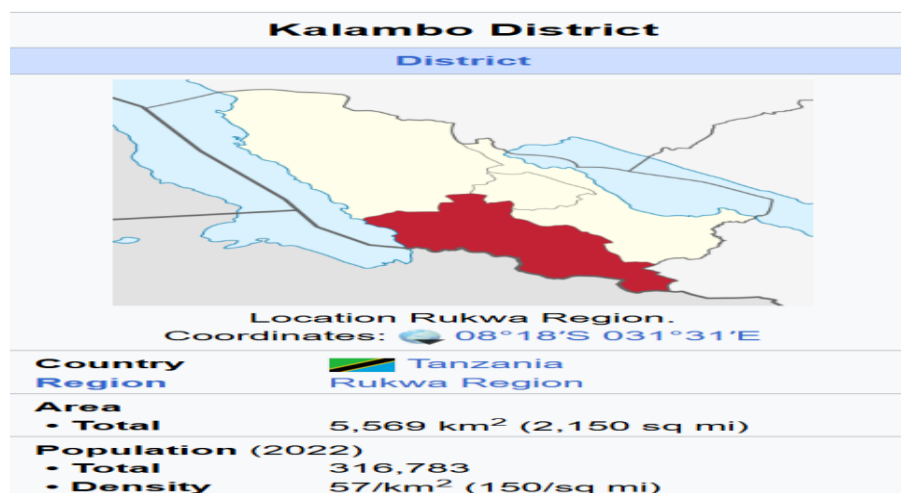
Pointing to the critical role of senior ladies around teen mothers who have rejoined secondary schools, Save the Children (2020) revealed that the provided psychosocial support helps to reduce stress and address depression. Also, it is ultimately useful in combating a lack of school concentration and enhancing resilience. On the same note, senior ladies working in schools due to their life experiences support teen mothers by imparting financial and entrepreneurial skills, and household livelihood skills, which are essential in attaining self-reliance among teen mothers.

The scholarly studies on the MMM Model by Nankunda et al. (2021) in Uganda, Kapinga & Hyera (2015), and Chigona & Chetty (2007), both citing the experience in South Africa, noted that it provides a community-driven, culturally appropriate answer to the ongoing problem of teen mothers dropping out of secondary schools. Addressing the psychological, financial, and cultural obstacles that teen mothers encounter enhances the official re-entry policy. It gives them the tools they need to continue with their education and create better futures through hands-on support and mentorship. Its accomplishments highlight how crucial localised models like MMM can be utilised to address educational disparities and enhance the well-being of teen mothers and their children.

Methods and Materials

Pointing to the Kalambo District Council Socioeconomic Profile, the URT (2016) notes that it is one of the four districts of the Rukwa Region in southwest Tanzania. The district shares its border with Zambia on the western and southern sides, and the

Kalambo River serves as a portion of the border. One of Africa's Great Lakes, Lake Tanganyika, borders the district to the west. Matai is the administrative town of Kalambo District. Further, the Ufipa Plateau, which is home to open grasslands and miombo woods, is one of the district's many landscapes. The district is traversed by the Kalambo River, which is famous for the Kalambo Falls, one of Africa's tallest continuous waterfalls and an important topographical feature. On December 23, 2012, Kalambo District was formally created after splitting from the Sumbawanga District Council. The Population of the district as of the NBS (2022) was about 316,783.



It is important to note that 14,375 girls left secondary school in 2023 because of teen pregnancy; 8,418 of these were from the study area, Kalambo district (URT, 2023). On the same note, in 2024, a total of 55,711 girls from the Rukwa region's Kalambo district dropped out of school, 10,956 of whom were teen pregnancy-related cases (URT, 2024). This study chose Kalambo District as its case study because of the community members' initiative to employ indigenous knowledge of MMM to prevent teen pregnancies despite the ongoing challenges. In addition, the "*Matai Open School*", with an established shelter accommodating the teen mothers, was used as a catch point to access the thirty-nine teen mothers. Further, the school and the community-constructed shelter were considered for this study due to their utilisation of MMM at the shelter.

It is important to note that the Matai Open School is the only educational facility, which was constructed under the guidance of indigenous knowledge, of MMM in the Rukwa region, and Kalambo district. Further, it is the only school in the Rukwa region, Tanzania, which is the reason for using it as a case study, in the study entitled *"Exploring the Perception of Teen Mothers on Re-Dropping from Secondary School: A Case of Matai Open School at Kalambo District – Tanzania, "* a Case Study Design aimed to allow the exploration of the lived experiences and perceptions of teen mothers in the school setting. Yin (2018) noted that a Case Study Design is ideal when a qualitative study intends to understand the truth and reality of the context under study. Additionally, Matai Open School has a unique setting as it accommodates not only girls but also teen mothers who are benefiting from the re-entry policy. It is this reason which makes it ideal to look for the interrelated sociocultural factors contributing to dropping out of school. Further, Creswell & Poth (2018) revealed that a case study design allows the researcher to freely interact with the participants, which provides an opportunity to observe the nonverbal communication, which can be used to support the yielding of rich data, enabling the understanding of the topic under study.

The Case study design, which allows the qualitative collection of data using an interview guide, was administered to ten teen mothers who were still accessing secondary school education at the Matai Open School. Given the fact that the school was still having 24 teen mothers, it was important to set an inclusion and exclusion criterion for purposefully selecting ten teen mothers to inform the current study. Worth noting, the study included teen mothers who have been at the school for at least two years, regardless of the level of study. Some students were in the form three of four, however, they have spent only a year at school and were excluded from allowing those with enough experience at the school to have their insightful experiences.

The Matai Open School had a total of 24 teen mothers during the time of data collection for this study. Principally, when qualitative data are collected using an

interview guide, such as *"Would you please tell me about the reactions of your father, mother, and other family members when they become aware that you are pregnant, and you can continue with your school?"* As was the case in this study, the saturation point had to be reached. Using the in-depth interviews, participants were free to express their experiences openly. As pointed out by Guest et al (2006), the saturation point is achieved when no new idea comes out from the participants or when it is repetitive information coming from participants. Given the design of the study, the set-up of the school where the teen mothers are homogeneous and familiar with each other (Hennink et al, 2017), ten interviews were enough for this study to reach the thematic saturation point. Each of the interviews took twenty to twenty-five minutes to complete.

After the collection of qualitative data, which included the recorded voices and field data, the transcription was given enough time, as observed by Braun & Clarke (2006). Further, the systematic analysis using Atlas. it was done immediately after data familiarisation and the generating of initial codes. Atlas. TI software was very useful during the searching of themes, suggesting the pattern and best quotation based on each identified theme (Nowell et al., 2017).

Adherence to ethical considerations such as do not harm, voluntary participation, confidentiality, consent and assent (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018), and data were collected from ten teen mothers in March 2025. The socio-demographic data was collected using a structured questionnaire, and the qualitative data were collected using interviews.

Results

The qualitative findings on the perception of re-dropping among teen mothers in Kalambo district, Tanzania. The teen mothers' ages ranged between 14 and 16; they

were in forms two and three, and neither of them had both parents (had a single parent). The ten teen mothers (TM) narrated their perception of re-dropping as captured from the following thematic areas, "families' reconciliation", "death of one parent of the teen mother", "peer pressure", "Prioritising marriage over teen mother's education", "prioritising bride prize over teen mother's education", "lack of employment opportunity", and "poverty at family level".

Summary of the findings

The qualitative findings were captured from the narration of teen mothers during key informants' interviews. The TM5 & TM10 interview sessions began pointing out the disputes and misunderstandings with their parents, fathers in particular, which came along with the pregnancy and later dropping out of secondary school.

"My parents were very angry when they became aware that I was pregnant. We cannot live and share the house with this share; she should leave so that she does not see this shame every day he advised." The interview was held with TM5 in March 2025

Adding on, TM10, narrated,

"Seeing the situation at home, my mothers had to talk to the grandparents, who then agreed to stay with me. This act of being sent off made me feel alienated from the family. When it was time, my mother began to talk to me about the possibility of going back to school. Despite going to school, my father was not interested in supporting my education needs; as a result, I dropped out again." Interview with TM10 in March 2025

In agreement with the presented narrations, TM5 and TM10 revealed,

"Due to social stigma and beliefs among many parents, teen pregnancy is still perceived as a shame to many families; as a result, it ends up causing family conflicts. Some parents, especially fathers, think that sending off the pregnant teen is a way to deal with

the shame and get approve of society for not tolerating the mistakes committed by the pregnant teen. Then they are away, the teen pregnant is cut off from the family support and cannot continue with schooling" Interview with TM5 and TM10 in March 2025

The qualitative findings, as narrated by TM5 and TM10, demonstrate the strong cultural norms among parents, particularly fathers, of sending pregnant teens away. Despite the possibility of going back to school, however, without emotional and financial support, they cannot complete school, even after returning. Further, many families encounter domestic violence, as mothers are blamed for not being responsible enough to protect their daughters, and the reasons for the pregnant teen to be sent to the grandparents of their mother's side. Further, TM1 & TM4 narrated that when one parent who was providing emotional and financial support dies,

Despite my father refusing any financial support, my mother stood up, through her own efforts, she was buying some scholastic materials and some of my children. However, everything fell apart after my mother died, as she was the only person who provided both material and emotional support, which made me go back to school." Interview with TM1 in March 2025

The presented narrations were further supported by TM4, who revealed,

"My grandparents couldn't support me financially, and my mother was the only person who encouraged me to go back to school after giving birth. No one else gave a damn when she died. I should stay at home and look after my own child and my sibling, my father advised. I lost hope without her, and returning to school seemed pointless." Interview with TM4 in March 2025

Narrations presented from TM1 and TM4 were further cemented,

"My mother was everything despite the blame from my father and other family members, she provided all the support at her best level. Since she has passed on, I must admit to this reality that education for me is no longer possible". Interview with TM1 and TM4 in March 2025

The loss of a supportive parent, particularly the mother, can cause emotional pain, demotivation, and the removal of support networks that are essential for teen mothers to pursue and complete secondary school education, as the TM1 & TM4 quote illustrates. It uncovered the relationship between dropping out of school and the impact of losing parents. The emotional position of any parent to a child cannot be overstated, as the guidance of a parent helps in dealing with peer pressure; this narration was revealed by TM2 & TM8 as follows,

"Teen pregnancies are still unacceptable in a school setting, despite the government's position. Upon returning to school, my classmates began to make funny of me, you are supposed to be at home breastfeeding your child," Interview with TM2 in March 2025

TM8 narrating on the mockeries among peers further revealed,

"Schools are not for a mother and a parent like you; it is for boys and girls. It was not possible to play with them, and the school environment was like another captive place for me. At home, it was not an easy place for me, the same was the situation at school, I had nowhere to turn to for support and help". Interview with TM8 in March 2025

Additionally, TM2 and TM8 narrated,

"When I returned to school, I was never taken seriously as a peer student; the school setting was very hostile and unbearable. My peers couldn't accept me and were excluded from all the interactions at school. I felt humiliated, had to stop going to school, as I could no longer handle the situation anymore" Interview with TM8 in March 2025

The presented narrations from TM2 and TM8 illustrate the emotional effects related to Peer pressure by emphasizing the way mothers' sense of self-worth and belonging can be significantly impacted by social rejection, mockery, and exclusion by their peers. It further demonstrates the way they encounter challenges when attempting to re-enroll; peer-induced stigma becomes a significant contributing factor to re-dropping out of school. As a mechanism to deal with peer exclusion and buy into social acceptability, teen mothers must accept early marriage at the expense of their education. This was narrated by TM3 & TM10,

"When I was sent off to my grandparents, my father continued with the negotiation with the family of the man who fathered the pregnancy. My mother told me that for my father to forgive me, I must accept the proposal of being married to the father of my child." Interview with TM3 in March 2025

Moreover, TM10 narrated,

"Since you have started the sexual relationship, and the man is serious about marrying you, the family feel strong that you must get married, as it is pointless for you to go to school, my father advised. He further noted, your future lays in starting a family, soonest possible." Interview with TM10 in March 2025

Cementing on the narrations, TM3 & TM10 revealed,

"With the pressure of two families, neither of them cared for my education, even though I had returned to school. They all stopped talking about it and were happy with the marriage arrangement. Thus, the way the dream of completing secondary school education vanished." Interview with TM3 and TM10 in March 2025

This quote demonstrates the way teen mothers wish to complete their secondary school education; however, the family, particularly the father, sabotages their efforts by exposing them to family pressure and cultural expectations to get married,

particularly after giving birth. In this view, marriage is still viewed as a more practical or acceptable route, which can result in coerced or early marriage and ultimately dropping out of school. Further, the marriage of teen mothers is prioritised due to bride price, as narrated by TM6 & TM7, as shown,

"The arrangement and agreement between the two families had reached a decision, and the bride price was paid. My father advised, you should be happy with this man, who has covered for the shame of all of us; marriage would restore your lost dignity and respect". Interview with TM6 in March 2025

On the same view, TM 7 narrated,

"Seeing all these arrangements, I requested them to let me finish the secondary school education; however, none of them was interested in my request. Had to drop out of school for marriage to show respect to my parents despite my position, which was not a priority to any of them". Interview with TM7 in March 2025

Additionally, TM6 and TM7 narrated,

"When someone was prepared to marry me and pay a respectable bride price, my father said there was no use in my going back to school. He informed me that marriage would provide for my family's needs, but schooling would not. I pleaded with him to let me finish my education, but he stated that the money from my marriage would be more useful to the family. I came to the realisation that I could no longer attend school."
Interview with TM6 and TM7 in March 2025

The qualitative finding illustrates the way families prioritise the bride price, compromising the education of teen mothers due to financial gain and cultural expectations surrounding bride prices. Due to a lack of external financial support, the teen mother cannot decide otherwise against the will of her parents. In favor of early marriage due to the bride price and social cultural expectations, some advised that it

is very hard to get employed in the formal sector as there are no employment opportunities; it is, therefore, better to get married early as paying school fees and other expenses related to, is the wastage of limited resources. The qualitative narrative was revealed by TM1 & TM9 as follows.

"My grandmother was very old, could not help with even look at a child as she was getting blind. had to spend most of the time at home caring for the child, and the few hours of work at home could be done when the child was asleep". An interview was conducted with TM1 in March 2025

TM9 further narrated,

"Due to social stigma at the community level, it is not easy to find small jobs, especially in businesses which as supervised by women. They think you may spoil your own children and others; you may begin going out with their boys or husbands. So, there are very limited job opportunities for teen mothers". An interview was conducted with TM9 in March 2025

Moreover, TM1 and TM9 narrated,

"I wanted to return to school after giving birth, but I had no one to help me care for my child." I considered getting a menial job to help, but my hamlet had no openings. A young mother with no skills is not someone anyone wants to hire. I spent more time at home than I had intended to, and by the time I remembered school, it seemed too late to go back." An interview was conducted with TM1 and TM9 in March 2025

These quotes demonstrate the challenges facing teen mothers in supporting and taking care of their child and education due to a lack of work options, family support and the community's negative attitudes, which can trap them in a cycle of financial dependence. It further demonstrates how re-entry becomes increasingly impractical

in the absence of a job or cash source, which results in re-dropping. In agreement with the presented narration, TM1, TM3, TM7, & TM8, revealed,

"At the family level, we depend on farm work. It is dry season, and we struggle to find the means to end the day. My parents must work with other people, so that they can find food for the family." An interview was conducted with TM1 in March 2025

Adding on, TM3, narrated,

"In a family where getting food is a struggle, it is not easy to prioritise secondary school education for a teen mother." An interview was conducted with TM3 in March 2025

Further, TM7 narrated,

"With a child who has their own demands, I should concentrate on supporting my sibling and other core activities at home. Since I was given the opportunity and wasted it." An interview was conducted with TM7 in March 2025

Moreover, TM8 narrated,

"It was impossible for my parents to pay for my education expenses because they could hardly afford to buy food for the family. They advised me that rather than returning to school, I should concentrate on helping at home now that I have a child. There was not enough money for books, uniforms or even transportation, but I still wanted to go. That choice was made for me by poverty." An interview was conducted with TM8 in March 2025

This quote demonstrates the direct impact that family financial difficulties have on a teen mother's capacity to pursue further education. It illustrates how fundamental financial obstacles can lead to re-dropping, even in cases where the mother is driven to go back.

Discussion

The qualitative results from Tanzania's Kalambo District provide an insightful look at the intricate sociocultural and economic factors influencing the teen mother re-dropping phenomenon. All the study participants, who were primarily in Form Two and Three and ranged in age from 14 to 16, came from single-parent households, which may indicate instability and weakened support networks. Pointing to the emotional and psychological impact of losing parents, Bosomworth & Wilkinson (2021) noted that it interferes with the teen mother's ability to concentrate and continue with their education. Many of them, due to a lack of support, do not return to school, as some of them, not only are mothers to their children, but also the lost of their parents, increases the burden to shoulder the responsibility of their siblings. Thus, the presence of both parents increases the resilience of teen mothers seeking re-entry into educational systems,

Moreover, the economic constraints facing teen mothers may include poverty, lack of livelihood opportunities, the cultural practice of seeing bride price as a source of household income over education, and other issues, which contribute to school dropout among teen mothers. In these circumstances, the education of teen mothers becomes less prioritised, as the family must handle and deal with more financially valued aspects. It is from this point that Timothy & Juhudi (2023) revealed that poverty and gender-based norms are major causes of school re-dropout among teen mothers in Sub-Saharan Africa. The persistence of re-dropping undermines re-entry efforts unless they are addressed through community-based interventions.

Additionally, Kinya & Daniel (2025) pointed to various reactions among families, where some families may focus on supporting their daughter to deal with the pregnancy, while other families may deal with it by focusing on arranging for marriage as a way to overcome shame, which comes along with teen pregnancies. It is from these contrasting family reactions which significantly influence the likelihood

of a teen mother remaining in school or re-drop. The findings therefore recognise the role of parents in standing by teen mothers as a starting point for the effectiveness of re-entry policy.

The study findings echoed peer pressure and the lack of access to reproductive health services as the two important themes. Due to inaccessibility to youth-friendly reproductive health care services, many teen mothers stated that they were at risk of re-dropping out. According to them, they noted the possibility of becoming pregnant again. In line with these findings, Nanda et al. (2020) showed that teen mothers have a lower likelihood of continuing their education after giving birth when they do not have access to reliable reproductive information and a conducive learning environment.

Additionally, the findings pointed to sociocultural customs and practices which prioritise marriage over education as another setback towards the realisation of the re-entry policy. Further, the findings have revealed that some teen mothers are re-dropping out so that they can get married. Still, on the other hand, when this happens, their parents, particularly fathers, use the situation as a financial resource to marry them off. These findings were cemented with Lhamon & Miguel's (2022) study, who noted that patriarchal superiority and dominance are central in perpetuating the right of teen mothers to secondary education as it prioritises sociocultural norms.

The Mama Mkubwa Model is relevant as a community-based support mechanism because of the findings from Kalambo District, which emphasize the various risks teen mothers experience, including lack of parental support, cultural pressures, and economic difficulty. This model directly addresses important issues like family reconciliation, providing emotional support after a parent passes away, and shielding teen mothers from peer pressure and social stigma by designating a respected guardian figure (*Mama Mkubwa*) to mentor, support, and advocate for them. To help teen mothers stay focused on their studies, *Mama Mkubwa* can act as a surrogate parent,

bridging the emotional and guidance gap created by absent parents. To protect teen mothers' rights to finish their education, the model is also essential in negotiating with families and communities to de-prioritise early marriage and bride prices (Hassan & Temu, 2023).

Additionally, Mama Mkubwa mentors can connect teen mothers with chances for economic empowerment, which are crucial in tackling unemployment and poverty, two major factors contributing to re-dropping. Research indicates that among vulnerable teen mothers, mentorship and community involvement improve psychosocial well-being and school retention (Save the Children, 2020). Incorporating the Mama Mkubwa Model into re-entry policy is, therefore, a strategic and culturally grounded way to lower re-dropping rates in rural Tanzania, as it not only provides teen mothers with emotional and physical help but also fosters community accountability and resilience.

Conclusion

The findings from this study have shown that the loss of one parent plays a significant role towards the re-dropping out of teen mothers in secondary schools in Kalambo, Rukwa region. The loss of parents is further accelerated with financial constraints and a lack of opportunity for livelihoods, which denies teen mothers an opportunity to complete their education. On the same note, due to the patriarchal system, fathers were accused of perpetuating their return to school, as they prioritise financial gains by receiving bride price over education. It is important to note that the study findings have revealed the usefulness of the Mama Mkubwa Model in handling emotionally related stress among teen mothers; hence, it has been utilised to help them concentrate on their studies.

Recommendations

Given the findings as revealed above, the following were recommended

- i) The findings have shown the emotional stress which comes along with the loss of parents among teen mothers. The senior ladies must be capacitated on handling grieving and provision of psychosocial support and care to teen mothers who have lost their parents.
- ii) Comprehensive research should be conducted on other Open Schools to find out the challenges facing teen mothers.
- iii) Community intervention should be initiated to support fathers to repeal from the sociocultural norms which prioritise financial gains over teen mothers' education.

Disclose Conflicts of Interest

This paper is free of conflict of interest.

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