

Student Pregnancy and Maternity: Implications for Teacher Training Colleges

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Abstract

Available research indicates that the number of college students becoming pregnant during their studies is likely to increase given the rising age profile of students joining institutions of higher learning. Provision of healthcare for such students is therefore imperative. A substantive number of higher learning institutions give pregnant students a mandatory maternity leave, for about a year. The student mother may be required to commence the year-long leave immediately after one tests pregnant or one can stay on to the end of a given term. Maternity leave in itself is important because it enables the expectant mother to have sufficient rest and to prepare for the coming baby and after birth, provides bonding time for mother and the baby. However, research has shown that a very long maternity leave can interfere with the academic and career goals of the affected women while a very short one is often associated with postpartum depression. To avoid the long leave many college students resort to abortion, which affect their psychological and physical health; eventually affecting their ability to acquire quality education. It is therefore necessary to develop policies that will allow pregnant students complete their studies within the stipulated time while at the same time not encouraging untimely and unplanned pregnancies among college students.

Key words: Maternity leave, Unplanned Pregnancy, Student Mother

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Introduction

Pregnancy among students is a common phenomenon in the society today.

Traditionally such students, and especially those at lower levels of learning, have been expelled from school thereby curtailing their educational goals. In institutions of higher

learning various approaches are used and in teacher training colleges the affected student is usually sent on a year-long maternity leave. This paper has analyzed relevant literature on pregnancy among students and in particular that of maternity leave for student mothers with the aim of articulating their implications on the students' academic goals. The discussion includes challenges faced by affected students, examples of policies addressing this issues and recommendations on suitable interventions at the teacher training level.

College Students and Maternity Leave

The issue of pregnancy among teacher trainees in Kenyan teacher training colleges is a thorny one. In many countries, pregnancy is not tolerated among college students and more so in teacher training institutions (Dwamena, 2013; Newlon, 2013). This may be because it is often perceived to be inappropriate for a teacher trainee to be pregnant ostensibly due to the rigours of the training course. In reality, in many African cultures women are expected to subordinate their needs and desires to those of their children and families and thus motherhood is seen to take precedence over academic pursuits. Thus they are expected to be at home taking care of their families and if they choose to go to college, then they have to grapple with the roles of motherhood and being a student without much support from society.

Never-the-less, college students are often mature students at their prime childbearing age of 20s to 30s. Some of them are married and would like to have children and at the same time pursue their academic goals. The fact that some of the pregnancies are often

unplanned cannot be wholly ignored. In a study to examine contraceptive attitudes and demographic characteristics among female college students, Bryant (2009), found that college women aged between 20-24 have one of the highest rates of unintended pregnancies due to lack of contraceptive use and unsafe sexual practices. This is despite the assumption that college students have sufficient knowledge of the risks of unprotected sex (Tswane University of Technology, 2011).

In another study by the National Union of Students (NUS) in the UK, it was found that 29% of students in institutions of higher learning, who had children, became pregnant during their studies (NUS, as cited in Pugh, 2010). It is argued that this figure is likely to increase due to the increasing age profile of students joining institutions of higher learning. For instance, in the UK in 2008/09, 35% of all female first-year students were aged 30 or above (Pugh, 2010). Data from Scotland and other European countries show a positive correlation between the increasing age profile of students and the likelihood of their having a child (Orr et al as cited in Pugh, 2010).

Since the likelihood of students having a child while at college is no longer in doubt, the question we need to answer is how pregnant students or those with babies can be accommodated by their respective institutions of higher learning. In many other countries, especially in the developing world, there is no official maternity leave for pregnant college students nor is there any policy guiding how they should be treated. In most cases, the student is sent away for one year or any period of time as determined by the individual institution. In such situations, some students opt to drop out all-

together and thereby let go of their academic goals. In countries or in specific colleges with pregnancy policies in place, maternity leave is often granted for the duration of one year (Rajeev, 2013), meaning that the student resume their course at the same time they break off in the subsequent year.

In the absence of suitable policies, pregnant students and student mothers face all sorts of discriminative practices. Discrimination occurs if a student is being treated unfavourably because of her pregnancy or because she has given birth or if she is breastfeeding a child of less than twenty-six weeks (Pugh, 2010). Discrimination can occur in relation to admissions, provision of education, access to any benefit, facility or service and in disciplinary proceedings. Since many higher education institutions (HEIs) globally do not have specific policies in place to support students during pregnancy and maternity, the student experience will therefore depend on the arrangement made by a student department and individual staff members they encounter. This results in inconsistencies which lead to pregnant students facing discriminations (Pugh, 2010).

A case in point is at the St Monica's College of Education in Ghana, where pregnant students were denied a chance to sit examinations because the rules and regulations of the Ghana Education Service (GES) do not approve of pregnancy among students (Dwamena, 2013). The requirement of the GES is that a student withdraws for one year after which they apply for readmission. This raises the fear that she may end up losing her place at the college if for one reason or another she is not readmitted. In the Ghanaian situation, the Africa Public Policy Institute (APPI) came to the rescue of the

girls and threatened to take the GES to the Supreme Court citing their policy as a gross injustice being perpetrated against pregnant students of the nation's Colleges of Education. The affected students on their part also reported the matter to the Commission for Human Rights and Administrative Justice. This action together with the intended suit by the APPI caused the GES to instruct the Principal to allow the affected students sit their final examinations (Dwamena, 2013).

Another case occurred in India, where the Delhi High Court imposed a fine of Rs 25,000 on the Principal of Delhi Institute of Pharmaceutical Science and Research (DIPSR) for refusing to allow a student to sit for her master degree examinations on the grounds that she had insufficient attendance hours (High Court Fines Principal, 2008). This was despite the fact that she had applied for a 3-months maternity leave as stipulated in the Delhi University Ordinance and which required that her case be treated as special. The conduct of the Principal of DIPSR was thus seen as illegal and the court directed the college to strictly comply with the Delhi University Ordinance (High Court Fines Principal, 2008).

A study among college students in Zimbabwe (van den Berg&Mamhute, 2013), showed that lecturers often intimidated, ridiculed and belittled pregnant and lactating students through their comments and actions. This did not contribute to creating a positive self-concept in the students which according to Crous et al. (as cited in van den Berg& Mamhute, 2013), is crucial to a student actualizing his or her potential. The researchers in the above study therefore believe that the participants' chances of success could be

enhanced if lecturers showed care and concern for them. Positive comments could assist the development of self-confidence, self-respect and feelings of adequacy (van den Berg & Mamhute, 2013).

Van den Berg and Mamhute (2013), also articulate the fact that pregnant students experience lack of support from college administration in terms of provision of accommodation. In the sampled college in the study by van den Berg and Mamhute (2013), all adult students were provided with hostel accommodation which had electricity and water paid for from the students' college fees. Pregnant students and students with infants were not catered for although they paid fees like the rest of the students. Although the authorities were aware that these students were not allowed in college hostels, they made them pay fees that were equal to those of other students. The participants in the study felt that if their needs in terms of shelter were met, they would have more time to concentrate and remain focused on their main goal, which was academic success.

A number of students with infants were offered free accommodation in vacant college workers' houses while others were forced to rent rooms outside the institution. Since they expected no assistance from their college administration, the participants had to be resourceful. The participants admitted that they would sneak into the female hostels for group discussions with their fellow students while a number of pregnant students stayed in the hostels without the knowledge and consent of the authorities (van den Berg & Mamhute, 2013).

The NUS study (as cited in Pugh, 2010), also found that 59% of respondents who were pregnant while studying did not feel supported by their college or university. Instead they faced issues including being forced to withdraw from their course, taking longer to complete the course after giving birth, and being prevented from sitting examinations. Philip (2011) similarly found that pregnant girls in colleges under Calicut University who take a break from their course and return later for a supplementary are considered ineligible for ranks. This ineligibility makes many brilliant girls miss the chance to make it to the top of the rankings. Students from the Muslim-dominated Malappuram district of North Kerala, where many girls are married young and struggle to balance family compulsions with career hopes are most affected (Philip, 2011). In the USA, while pregnancy discrimination is prohibited under the Title IX (a legal manual of the US Justice Department) regulations, the system works well for lower levels of learners who are assisted to finish school and go on to college compared to college students, graduate students and postdoctoral fellows and yet these are students in their prime childbearing years who also need similar consideration (Mason & Younger (2014). The foregoing scenarios indicate the need to develop pregnancy and maternity policies for college level students to enable them attain their academic goals without undue strain.

Importance of Maternity Leave

Maternity leave is beneficial to any pregnant mother since it allows her to take time off her regular occupation in order to prepare for and look after the baby for a given period

before resuming these activities, be it work or schooling. Studies have shown that this is an important transitioning period for a mother-to-be and which is vital to the health of mother and child (Women Law Project, 2011). The key, therefore, to a healthy mother and child is giving the mother enough time to transition into the parent role.

For a college student this transitional period is critical given that the college environment may not be very conducive for a pregnant mother with its rigorous training programme and inflexible time schedules. The institution may also not have suitable accommodation for an expectant mother which may jeopardize her health and that of her unborn baby. Further, when a student is pregnant and in college, they may lack peace of mind knowing that it is not approved of and thus wanting to keep it hidden so as to remain in the college programme. This fear often causes the students to opt for abortion so as to continue with their academic programme. Abortion may also be due to societal or peer pressure (Hawkins, 2013). This often places the mother at great risk to her life especially in countries where abortion is illegal; forcing women to resort to back street clinics.

Given this scenario, should the pregnant student be sent away on a mandatory maternity leave of one-year or should she deliver the baby and continue with her programme with only a short break? How much time is enough for a student-mother to transition into the parent role? To answer these questions, it is necessary to look at the effects of both a short leave and a long one and compare their impacts on a student.

A study by the National Bureau of Economic Research in the USA (Women Law Project, 2011) showed that a short maternity leave has negative health outcomes for both mother and child. It found that mothers of 3-month old infants who worked full time reported feeling greater rates of depression, stress, poor health and overall family stress than mothers who stayed at home or were on leave. Such depression in mothers is considered a risk factor for adverse emotional and cognitive outcomes in their children in the first few years of life (Women Law Project, 2011). Although these findings pertain to women at the workplace, academic programmes can also be just as strenuous and may lead to similar outcomes as the new mother juggles the two roles of mother and student.

On the other hand, Smith (2013) observes that top career women often wonder whether a long maternity leave is a poisoned chalice for working women. She brings out the fact that at times women can pay quite a high price for a long maternity leave. They can end up losing their positions at work due to restructuring that may occur while they are away or they may lose contact with their clients. A research in the USA by Hewlett, S. A. for her book 'Off-Ramps and On Ramps: Keeping Women on the Road to Success' (Smith (2013), showed that women who took more than 2 years lost 18 per cent of their earning power. If the period taken was three years, then the figure rose to 38%. However, taking two maternity leaves of six months each had little or no effect on a woman's future earnings. Do college students also pay a heavy toll? A study to find out the impact of a long break from college would be important to find out if this is the case.

A longer maternity leave although cited for interfering with a woman's academic and career goals, has many benefits for the expectant mother. The longer period the mother spends with the newborn baby usually leads to increased breastfeeding and reduced infant mortality rates (AmberS, 2009). The reduced mortality rates are attributed to the longer period of breastfeeding since breast milk is rich with nutrients required by the baby in a balanced form. This is in agreement with the findings of the study by the National Bureau of Economic Research in the USA on the health status of pregnant mothers cited above. This therefore means that the one-year long maternity leave given to college students is actually beneficial to their health and that of their newborn babies. What may be needed to encourage them to take leave is support by their colleges so that they do not lag behind in their studies or miss any important examinations while they are on leave.

In many colleges in the developed world, maternity leave duration depends on the course being pursued by the student. At the Imperial College London, undergraduate students are expected to break their studies for one year and resume at the same point the following year, which is similar to the Kenyan situation. Post-graduate students doing course work can break off for one year like the undergraduates do or opt for the part-time version of their course. Post graduate students doing research work can have leave as short as four weeks (Imperial College London, 2014).

Pregnancy and school attendance

Although research shows that pregnancy is the leading factor limiting a teenage mother's educational attainment, (Zachary in Duncan, 2011), noted that findings from other studies acknowledged that reasons for leaving school have more to do with school policies and previous school experiences than with being pregnant. According to studies in the USA (Duncan, 2011), teenage parents often cited school-related reasons for dropping out of school.

One of the specific issues that was identified as hindering their educational attainment was a rigidity by school administrators concerning the schools' attendance policies. This included the inability to provide adequate leave for teen parents to complete their general child care responsibilities. Also voiced was the limited credit that is often received from home study. Another school-related reason for teenage parents dropping out was the lack of transportation between their homes, daycare, and the school for both the teen mothers and their children (Mangino, as cited in Duncan, 2011). The gap between teenage mothers' aspirations and the support they receive suggests that educators are missing an opportunity to facilitate teenage mothers' school progress and their long-term educational attainment (SmithBattle, as cited in Duncan, 2011).

Policy on student pregnancy is therefore important to ensure that pregnant students and students who are parents are able to achieve their potential in their chosen higher education institution. This ensures that they are not discriminated against and also that they receive appropriate information on the support provided by their institution in relation to pregnancy, maternity, paternity and adoption. Such a policy would also

encourage early notification of pregnancy by the affected students and discourage unwarranted abortions not to mention forcible pregnancy examinations.

Gender responsive schooling

In a study to investigate the gender perspectives in teacher training at Igoji Teachers Training College in Kenya, Kuri (2010) mentions a lack of maternity leave policy as one of the challenges impeding the institutionalization of a gender responsive teacher training. She further recommends the implementation of a National Gender Policy and the establishment of an institutional gender policy to remedy this situation.

Unfortunately, the National Gender Policy in Kenya (Republic of Kenya, 2007) does not specifically address the issue of pregnancies and more so that of maternity leave at college level. This is unlike the practice in other countries where issues of learner pregnancy are captured in the legislation. In South Africa for instance, The Schools Act (1996) stipulates a variety of measures to implement gender transformation, among them it protects pregnant learners and safeguards them from expulsion (Mashishi&Makoelle, 2014).

The scenario in Kenya is replicated across other African countries as well. According to Hubbard (2009), prior to 1994 there was no written national policy on learner pregnancy in Namibia and schoolgirls were normally expelled as soon as the school authorities learned about the pregnancies. In this case the decision on whether or not to readmit them after delivery was left entirely to the individual school. In 2001, the Forum for

African Women Educationalists in Namibia (FAWENA) commissioned a study to review the implementation of the policy on teenage pregnancy (Hubbard, 2009). This study showed that the policy was being implemented inconsistently in different places – with one girl astonishingly being forced to stay out of school for one year after giving birth even though the baby died immediately after delivery.

The study recommended the adoption of a policy which focused on support rather than punishment. It proposed that pregnant girls should be readmitted into the school system after delivery and as soon as the baby was weaned. The study also recommended the establishment of “bridging centres” where young mothers could continue with their education while breastfeeding, counseling services for the girl and her parents, and the introduction of flexible models of attendance to provide additional opportunities for pregnant schoolgirls and young mothers to carry on with their classes (Hubbard, 2009).

Policies in Developed Nations

In developed countries on the other hand, a good number of institutions of higher learning have policies that guide the handling of pregnancy among university students and in particular among graduate students (Pena, 2006; University of Birmingham, 2014; Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2014). Such policies cover aspects such as who is eligible, how long the leave takes and what benefits and services the student on leave has access to. For instance, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has a policy that applies to any full-time, registered women graduate students and which allows them to choose the length of leave they are comfortable with (MIT, 2013).

However, it is limited to women who anticipate giving birth and does not apply to adoption or to men in support of their spouses or partners during childbirth (MIT, 2013).

Cornell University in the US (Cornell University Policy Library, 2014), has in place a policy in which the University 'provides accommodation for childbirth, newborn care, adoption, foster care, and acute child health care to enrolled students who are in good academic standing. The policy allows students to balance scholarly and parental responsibilities while successfully pursuing their academic and research goals. In the case at Cornell, students who are eligible for accommodation retain access to certain university services; these include library privileges (borrowing rights, carrel, and electronic collections), Cornell NetID and e-mail, meeting with advisors, graduate student housing, health services, physical facilities, as well as eligibility for student loans (Cornell University Policy Library, 2014). At MIT they can remain in college halls of residence and use the facilities therein (MIT, 2013).

Paradigm Shift in Africa

A number of countries in the developing world have developed policies granting maternity leave to pregnant students at various levels of schooling. In Zimbabwe, a new policy has been developed that gives maternity leave to school girls who get pregnant (Maternity Leave for Girls, 2010). This has come about as a result of reforms in the disciplinary code by the Ministry of Education in Zimbabwe. This is a departure from the previous automatic expulsion for a schoolgirl who got pregnant.

The maternity leave is for a period of three months and apart from school girls, the policy also affects students in higher education and those taking nursing courses. In cases where a male student is responsible for the pregnancy, he too would be granted paternity leave of a similar period. This move has been hailed by educationists and child protection activists as progressive and long overdue. The advent of this new policy therefore ushers in an era of hope for pregnant and lactating adult students in Zimbabwe (Murape, as cited in van den Berg & Mamhute, 2013).

Apart from giving maternity leave, many countries now also practice the policy of re-entry or readmission. Pregnant girls who leave school to deliver are allowed back to school after the delivery. The readmission can be in the same school or in another depending on the vacancies available.

The Kenyan Case

In the Kenyan situation, pregnancy is handled differently depending on the level of learning. At the university level, there is provision for a twenty one day leave. In the event that the student's delivery time falls within examination time, then she can apply for special examinations. In this arrangement, the student is able to complete a programme within the stipulated time. However, this comes at a high cost to her as she struggles to juggle between the two very demanding roles.

At the teacher training level, pregnant trainees are usually sent home for a mandatory year-long break. A major argument against this practice is that the affected students lose a whole year of learning. Although they resume their studies the following year, the environment is definitely going to be different. They will be expected to join a different cohort as their original classmates will have continued to their second or third year of study or will have graduated altogether. The whole arrangement is fraught with uncertainties as the rule states that the student will resume when the course next becomes available. In the event that the course requirements change for any reason, the student will not be able to continue with it. Such a scenario was experienced in P1 teacher training when there was no college intake in 1996. Thus, if a student had been on maternity leave, they would have had to stay at home for two years thus delaying their career goals.

The implementation of this requirement is also not uniform across the teacher training colleges as each college makes independent decisions. In most instances, testing for pregnancy is done at the beginning of every term after which the student proceeds on leave. In some instances, they may be allowed to stay on at the end of a given term. In other middle level colleges, there doesn't appear to be a structured leave or maternity programme for pregnant students. In most of them the pregnant students stay on until the last possible moment before leaving to deliver their baby after which they come right back to class

Girls at secondary and primary school levels who become pregnant are covered by the re-entry or re-admission policy which allows them back to school after the delivery of the baby. However, there is no specified duration for this break for delivery, nor is it specifically called maternity leave. Different schools handle the situation differently both before and after the girl delivers her baby. In a certain high school in Isiolo County in Kenya, students with babies are allowed to go home and feed their babies at break time or have their mothers bring the children to school (Otieno, 2014). The head teacher of the school justifies this through his explanation that the Samburu marry young and many mothers are still of school-going age. According to him, one third of female students in the school are mothers; thus, he needed to create an atmosphere that allowed them to balance family and school work.

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed various research findings and policies on learner pregnancy with emphasis on college level students. The following are conclusions drawn from the findings in the literature that was reviewed.

The findings show that the reason for teenage mothers dropping out of school has more to do with school attendance policies than with being pregnant or with having a baby. Most learning institutions have provided only limited support for them. And so due to lack of specific policy, students suffer myriad discriminatory practices that interfere with their academic progress.

Lack of a maternity leave policy is seen as one of the challenges of institutionalizing a gender responsive teacher training and indeed education at all levels of schooling. In most African countries learner pregnancy is not captured in legislation that protects the pregnant girls and safeguards them from expulsion. Thus expulsion of these girls has been the norm with the decision to readmit the girls being left to the individual school. Even in countries where policies on pregnancy exist, their implementation is inconsistent in terms of leave duration among other factors.

Unlike the situation in developing countries, in developed nations most institutions of higher learning have policies that guide the provision of maternity leave. Aspects covered include eligibility, duration, as well as benefits and services that students on leave have access to. In some institutions accommodation may be provided after the baby is born as well as critical health care services.

Due to reforms in the education sector in many African countries, a shift is taking place whereby the previous practice of expelling pregnant girls is now slowly being replaced by more humane approaches. These new approaches include that of maternity leave and of re-entry which ensure that affected girls can accomplish their educational goals and do so within the stipulated time.

In the Kenyan situation, the handling of pregnant students varies with each level of schooling and by individual learning institutions. Pregnant students are granted

maternity leave ranging from a couple of weeks to one year. Those in primary and secondary schools are now covered by the re-entry policy that protects them from arbitrary expulsion.

Recommendations

This study gives the following recommendations for the Kenyan situation based on the conclusions drawn.

- Learning institutions need to develop flexible school attendance policies that would make it easier for pregnant students and those with babies to go to school and also attend to their parental duties.
- MOEST lawmakers should entrench issues of student pregnancy in legislation to enable enforcement and to ensure consistent practice across all levels of learning. This should be done in consultation with relevant stakeholders for ownership and acceptance of the policies. A student who is on leave for instance, should be able to receive assignments and study materials so as to keep abreast with college programmes. The leave duration should be such that a student is not out of college for too long thus interrupting their academic goals. If such a student has access to college programmes in the interim, a period of three months would be sufficient. On returning to college, the new mother should be received by the relevant student

department such as that of the Dean of Students and the academic advisor to ensure a smooth transition.

- Administrators of learning institutions should benchmark for best practice in other institutions where policies to do with student pregnancy have been in place for long to enhance implementation of such policies in their own institutions.

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