

# TEENAGE PREGNANCY: A THREAT TO SAFE MOTHERHOOD

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## ABSTRACT

*Teenage pregnancy poses threats to reproductive health. Many women have suffered and are still suffering from various reproductive health problems sequel to unwanted pregnancies. This explains why, WHO (1995) reported that hundreds of pregnant girls and women alive at sun set never saw the sun rise the following morning. Some died in labour and others suffered from pelvic inflammatory diseases, crude abortion from unskilled abortionist, hemorrhage, infertility and eclampsia. It is estimated that about 500,000 die from complications of pregnancy and child birth and many more suffer long term disability and pain for the rest of their lives. The purpose of this paper therefore, is to examine the consequences of pelvic inflammatory disease, obstructed labour, injury of the genital tract, bleeding or hemorrhage, infection, abortion, eclampsia, maternal mortality and infertility on the reproductive health of adolescent girls. Furthermore, the paper offers recommendations on how to prevent the problems of reproductive health that pose threats to the lives of adolescent girls.*

## INTRODUCTION

Many people have expressed concern over the increased rate of teenage pregnancy which poses threats to adolescent girls' reproductive health. Many women have suffered and are still suffering from various reproductive health problems sequel to unwanted pregnancies. This can jeopardize safe motherhood. Safe motherhood means saving the lives of millions of women each year, and improving the health of millions of others.

Unwanted pregnancy and abortion constitute problems of young adult age group 13 - 20 years old. Sexual attitudes outside wedlock seem to create a lot of reproductive health problems to the adolescent girls in this generation. Fakunle (1986) observed that teenage pregnancy has created and is still creating a problem of abortion and its resultant consequences such as death of our promising girls, damage of the cervix and bleeding. Attesting to this assertion, WHO (1995) reported that hundreds of pregnant girls and women alive at sun set last night in many parts of the world never saw the sun rise the following morning. Some died in labour their pelvic bones too small and distorted by malnutrition in childhood to allow the free passage of infant. Some died in the table of an unskilled abortionist trying to terminate an unwanted pregnancy, others died in hospitals lacking blood to control hemorrhage, and others died in painful convulsions of eclampsia, too young to bear children in the first place and never seen for antenatal care.

WHO (1991) further confirmed that <sup>every</sup> year more than 200 million women become pregnant and approximately 130 million bear children. Some 500,000 of these women die from

complications of pregnancy and childbirth, many more suffer long term disability and pain for the rest of their lives. Long term morbidity may adversely affect the reproductive health of most adolescent girls who engage in premarital sex

Today, many women have gone barren because of the problem of unwanted pregnancy may force them into an option of self induced or crude abortion performed by quacks. Abortions performed by quack doctors have bear led to many adolescent girls and women on the street without wombs. It is undoubtedly true that most reproductive health problems could be overcome if teenage pregnancies can be prevented.

The purpose of this paper therefore, is to examine the consequences of pelvic inflammatory diseases, obstructed labour, injury of the genital tract, bleeding, infection, abortion eclampsia, maternal mortality and infertility on the reproductive health of adolescent girls. Furthermore, the paper offers recommendation on how to prevent reproductive health problems that pose threats to the lives of adolescent girls.

### **PELVIC INFLAMMATORY DISEASES (PID)**

Having sex with people unknown (health wise) may lead to pelvic inflammatory diseases which seems to be one of the consequences of teenage pregnancy. Arkutu (1995) asserted that any infection of the genital organs whether following abortion or sexually transmitted diseases can spread to other pelvic organs unless it is treated promptly and affectivity. He further stated that pelvic inflammatory diseases often results in damage and scarring of fallopian tubes, and can lead to infertility or ectopic pregnancy.

### **Obstructed Labour**

One of the health complications associated with teenage pregnancy is prolonged obstructed labour. Studies in Nigeria by Adadevoh (1974), and Ngoka and Mati (1980) found that cephalo-pelvic disproportion which tends to give rise to obstructed labour is common in societies with very low average <sup>rate</sup> age at marriage. This may also apply to adolescent girls who become pregnant at tender age. Obstructed and prolonged labour can lead to untimely death of the mother or the foetus.

Adadevoh (1974) observed that prolonged and obstructed labour are serious obstetric problems which develop because the physical maturity particularly of the pelvic often lags behind the ability to conceive. As such, the pelvic and its outlet may not be mature enough for the delivery of the foetus when conception takes place. Arkutu (1995) asserted that prolonged labour usually lasts longer for teenagers than for older women for two reasons:

- (a) The contraction of the womb although strong and painful, may be quite irregular and therefore not effective in opening up the neck of the womb or pushing the baby down;
- (b) The mother's birth canal or pelvic may be too narrow for the baby to pass through. He further posited that whatever is the cause, prolonged labour carries risks for both the mother and the baby. These include infection, injury or even death. The complication of injury and infection may interfere with the reproductive organ of the victim thereby rendering her infertile throughout her life time. They may also lead to the growth of fibroid which is detrimental to safe motherhood.

### Injury of the Genital Tract

Injury of the genital tract and internal organs may be caused by abortion performed by quack abortionists. WHO (1995) posited that injury to the genital tract and internal organs is a life threatening complication as well as a cause of serious long term morbidity among abortion patients. Attesting to the effects of injury to the genital tract, CDC (1983) contended that damage to the vagina, cervix and uterus is a very important problem, especially after illegal abortion is self induced. WHO (1995) asserted that very often, most cervical injuries occur if the attempted abortion has been performed by an unqualified person or has been self induced. It further remarked that almost every internal organ can be damaged. Most of the common injuries are uterine perforation, cervical laceration, damage to the ovaries, fallopian tube, bladder bowel and rectum. These complications have serious adverse effects to female reproductive system. Any internal injury if not readily diagnosed and treated, can lead to serious complications such as bleeding, infection and ultimately death.

### Bleeding

Teenage pregnancy may be associated with bleeding. Bleeding may result due to illegal abortion of unwanted pregnancy or injury sustained in the tender and narrow birth canals during delivery. Population Report (1976) and Gyepi - Garbrah (1985) confirmed that the complication of teenage pregnancy for the mother include first and third trimester bleeding, severe anaemia, prolonged and obstructed labour, cephalopelvic disproportion, pre-eclampsia, still birth and maternal mortality. CDC (1983) further remarked that any internal injury if not readily diagnosed and treated can lead to serious complications such as bleeding, infection and untimely death. Even with treatment, the girl's reproductive status and future health fertility may be greatly jeopardised.

### Infection

Infection seems to be one of the complications that emanates from abortion performed by quack doctors who often use equipment that are unsterilised. CDC (1983) posited that infection due to abortion some times lead to the occurrence of septic shock which is a life threatening condition involving circulatory collapse caused by bacteria toxin. Bacteria toxin in a woman's womb may be detrimental to her reproductive health throughout her life time.

The possible effects of drugs and chemicals reactions caused by abortion are damage to the liver, kidneys, gastrointestinal upset, central nervous system, delirium and chemical burns. The long term effects of drugs and chemicals may tamper with the reproductive organ negatively.

### Abortion

Abortion may be one of the greatest complications of the reproductive system of adolescent girls. Majority of adolescent pregnancies are unplanned, unwanted, and come as a complete shock. Many teenagers attempt to terminate the pregnancy. Okpede (1994) opined that it is an attempt to avert the wrath of the school, and parent's dejection accompanying any premature delivery that many youngsters find ready made answers in aborting such pregnancies. He further remarked that while some of such abortions could be undertaken with the aid of qualified physicians, many adolescents go about it by resorting to taking herbs and other crude methods. When the latter option is adopted, the girl involved could die in the process or have their uterus permanently damaged. Arkutu (1995) contended that since the adolescent girls usually lack the funds and information to get a safe abortion, they

often resort to illegal, unskilled abortionists who operate with dirty instruments in unhygienic surroundings.

Commenting on the effects of abortion, Arkutu (1995) attested that the results of unsafe abortions can be tragic to reproductive health; they can include infection, injury to the reproductive organs, or even death. Infertility may result in the process. Okpede (1995) lamented that several teenage pregnant girls visit quack doctors, but that sad enough, the girls usually leave the quack doctors worse than before. Most of teenage girls who wanted to get rid of unwanted pregnancies in the hands of quack doctors, usually lost their lives in the process when they have lost their quantity of blood. WHO (1968) asserted that unsafe abortion, the termination of pregnancy performed by untrained or unskilled persons and its complication **is** a major direct cause of death among women of reproductive age. Attesting to his view, WHO (1995) reported that the major life threatening complications resulting from unsafe abortion are hemorrhage, injury to the genital tract and internal organs, pelvic inflammatory disease, infection and infertility. These complications are detrimental to the reproductive health of women which consequently lead to unsafe motherhood.

### Eclampsia

This is condition characterised by a severe manifestation of hypertension, convulsion, loss of consciousness, and swelling of legs during pregnancy, Eclampsia is associated with teenage pregnancy. Teenagers are more likely than older women to encounter the problem of eclampsia. Arkutu (1995) asserted that the risk of developing high blood pressure during pregnancy is greater for teenagers. He went further to say that so is the danger that the condition will progress to fits or coma. When the condition progress to fits or coma, it may lead to unsafe delivery or unsafe motherhood.

### Maternal Mortality

Unwanted pregnancy among adolescent girls may be one of the factors responsible for maternal mortality. WHO (1991) and population report (1994) reported that throughout the world, approximately 500,000 women die every year from pregnancy related causes or unsafe abortion. Out of the estimated 500,000 maternal deaths, population report (1994) attested that 6,000 of these deaths occur in the developing countries. Where there is the problems of poor health, and little good medical care are a way of life, an early death too it often a pregnant mother's fate.

- Population Report (1994) reported that maternal mortality ratio range widely from an estimated 12 maternal death per 1,000 live birth in North America to more than 700 per 100,000 in some parts of sub-Sahara Africa. For the developing world as a whole, maternal mortality is estimated at more than 400 deaths per 100,000 life births, while the ratio is below 30 per 100,000 in the developed world.

WHO(1979) reported that pregnancy related deaths are the main cause of deaths in 15 -19 year old females and that death rates from causes related to abortion are particularly high in girls below 15 years. In the same vein, population report (1994) stated that pregnancy related to mortality and morbidity complication world-wide tends to be very high for adolescents under age 20. Such complications world-wide tends to decline for those within the age of 20 - 29 and then rise again after age 30 or 35. Poor living conditions, low nutritional levels, insufficient antenatal care and inadequate health care may aggravate the problem (the problem) of maternal mortality among teenage mothers. Thus, the detrimental

effects of pelvic inflammatory disease, obstructed labour, injury of the genital tract, bleeding, infection, abortion and eclampsia all lead to untimely death of adolescent girls who become pregnant out of wedlock.

### Infertility

Infertility is one of the complications of early childbirth or abortion. Unwanted pregnancies among adolescent girls may tempt them into unsafe abortion in the hands of quack abortionists. The resultant effect of procuring abortion in the hands of quacks has rendered some adolescent girls infertile throughout their life time. This explains why, Dalrymple and Dieh (1973) contended that when the surrounding for abortion is not entirely sterile (free from harmful bacteria), the chances of introducing infection into the uterus is great. This infection can be purely local, or it may spread to the fallopian tube causing sterility later.

Potts and Selmon (1979) remarked that abortion leaves the aborted with scarred womb (a fact to be taken into account at any future delivery), a scarred abdomen is a reminder of the episode "Girl 18 loses womb in abortion bid". The report revealed that an attempt by an 18 year old girl to terminate five months pregnancy brought her the fate that she would never live to be a mother as her womb had to be removed in an attempt to save her life. Some of these girls have a permanent injury when they are capable of bringing forth children. Such injuries are detrimental to safe motherhood.

Today, many women walk on the street without wombs which are the pride of women. They have because of repeated abortions spoilt their future happiness in their matrimonial homes. Okpede (1994) observed that one of the most frustrating and threatening issues is the inability of the couple to raise a child. He went further to say that a lot of bitterness sets in and other complications follow. Infertility can create a serious mental agony. Nothing more vividly demonstrates the importance of fertility to the individual than the reaction by, and to those who do not have children. For example, Rachael's desperate appeal to Jacob in the book of Genesis 30: 1-23 saying "Give me children or else I die" is often counted as an indication of the agony of the childless wife. When she eventually conceived, her cry was "God had taken away my reproach" sums up the stigma of infertility in old testament time.

Potts and Selmon (1979) posited that the barren woman is subject to derision, condemnation, or pity according to the society's view of the reasons for her condition. Worthless to her family and husband, she can become totally devalued in her own eyes. Childlessness may be a reason for may be driven to suicide.

If the pregnant adolescent girl survives the complications of pelvic inflammatory disease, obstructed labour, injury of the genital tract, bleeding, infection, abortion, eclampsia and untimely death, there is the likelihood that she may be infertile or childless. The cumulating of such complications ultimately leads to bareness which may lead to a serious mental agony.

### **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

The problem of teenage pregnancies leading to unsafe motherhood has become a serious crisis. It is a problematic situation which becomes critically disturbing and enervating. Adolescent girls who become pregnant too early are vulnerable to reproductive health problems such as: pelvic inflammatory diseases, obstructed and prolonged labour, injury of the genital tract, bleeding, infection or sepsis, pre-eclampsia and eclampsia, maternal

mortality and infertility. These reproductive health complications arising from pregnancy are detrimental to safe motherhood.

If the present trend of teenage pregnancies continued unabated, the problem of unsafe motherhood continues and Nigeria stands the risk of not having future leaders that would help realise the dream of the nation.

### **SUGGESTIONS**

Safe motherhood aimed at preventing maternal mortality and morbidity. The health of a mother is a critical element in the health of families. Improving the health of the mother through better care helps break a cycle of ill health. Therefore, Government, Communities or Societies that do not take teenage pregnancy as a serious threat to safe motherhood, or shy away from acting decisively because of cultural or religious sensitivities will pay the price later.

Because the reproductive health of adolescent girls who engage in premarital jeopardy, the following steps are recommended:

1. Every State and Local Government should provide special health care centres meant for pregnant adolescent girls as well as single teenage mothers where treatment can be given to those with reproductive health problems at a low cost so as to curtail the health complications that can jeopardise their safe motherhood;
2. There should be expansion of services for emergency treatment of complications of abortion through decentralise health delivery system;
3. There should be public education and dialogue on complications of teenage pregnancies and childbearing among adolescent girls.
4. Adolescent girls should avoid indulging in premarital sex at tender age so as to avoid unexpected pregnancy that may lead to complications that are detrimental to safe motherhood.
5. Adolescent girls who become pregnant out of wedlock, should avoid patronising quack doctors or unskilled abortionists to abort the pregnancy as it may endanger the life of the mother or the reproductive of the mother
6. There should be provision for acceptable and accessible counselling on reproductive health care. This should be targeted to adolescent girls.

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