

SCHOOL POLICY ON LEARNER PREGNANCY IN NAMIBIA: SUMMARY OF BACKGROUND INFORMATION

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1. INTRODUCTION

A school girl makes an unwise decision. Or she is coerced into have sex against her will by means of physical force, economic pressure or peer pressure. She becomes pregnant. The father may be a schoolboy, a teacher, a “sugar daddy” or even a relative. What will this mean for her future?

The problem of teenage pregnancy among school girls is a major concern in many countries. Teenage pregnancy has been cited as a constraint in the elimination of gender disparities in education, and in the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals of universal primary education and gender equality in education by 2015.

In a continent where the adage “*when you educate a woman you educate a nation*” holds so true, the repercussions of girls dropping out of school due to pregnancy cannot be underestimated.

The social benefits of educating women include improved agricultural productivity, improved health, reductions in fertility and reductions in infant and child mortality rates. Children born to educated mothers have a higher chance of enrolling and completing school. Conversely, children of less educated mothers are unlikely to complete school themselves, meaning that they have fewer opportunities to better their lives since they lack the level of education that would allow them to compete successfully for jobs. Thus, the concern about improving the educational rights of girls who become pregnant is based in part on the knowledge that this will affect the fate of their children and future generations.

The last decade or so has seen an introduction of more liberal teenage pregnancy policies in many African countries, including Namibia, as a way of encouraging teenage mothers to stay in school. There is now a need to revisit Namibia's policy on pregnancy amongst learners, to consider clarifications and improvements which could enhance girls' ability to exercise their right to education.

2. THE EXTENT OF THE PROBLEM

Official statistics on pregnancy-related school drop-outs in Namibia for 2007 show that a total of 1465 learners dropped out for this reason – with 96% of them being girls. There are large regional disparities, with pregnancy-related drop-outs being highest by far in Kavango and Ohangwena, followed by the regions of Omusati, Oshikoto, Oshana and Caprivi. Information from other sources indicates that the official figures may be an underestimate.

Other sources tell us that Namibian women continue to give birth at fairly young ages, although there is some improvement on this point in the post-independence era.

PERCENTAGE OF TEENAGERS WHO HAVE BEGUN CHILDBEARING includes both mothers and those pregnant with first child at time of survey			
Age at time of DHS survey	1992 survey	2000 survey	2006 survey (unofficial preliminary results)
15	1.3	2.2	2.7
16	6.3	5.8	5.5
17	18.7	16.0	13.9
18	36.0	27.6	21.6
19	45.4	39.3	34.7
Total	21.5	17.6	15.4

Source: Namibia Demographic and Health Surveys 1992, 2000, 2006

A good overview of the situation appeared in the first draft of Namibia's *Third National Development Plan*:

Despite limited research, it is clear that teenage pregnancy and family demands impact female learners. Indeed, if not for this, the percentage of female learners at Grade 10 (16 year olds) and above could be 2 percent to 3 percent higher. Although the incidence of teenage pregnancies has stabilized, there is still a lack of support and negative attitudes towards girls who fall pregnant. Pregnant teenagers are required to leave school, with few returning. A girl who becomes pregnant is by law

supposed to be allowed back to the same public school after one year's absence. However, the girls will have to give proof that they have someone responsible looking after their baby, criteria many cannot meet. Although the one-year absent rule is supposed to also apply to schoolboys who impregnate girls, schoolboys are rarely identified and older men seldom face any consequences, although a few schools have taken action.

The discussion of this topic concluded by stating that a new policy on teenage pregnancy would "contribute significantly to the goal of gender equality".

3. CURRENT NAMIBIAN POLICY

A draft policy on learner pregnancy was circulated for discussion during 1995 and 1997. The relevant portions of the 1997 version of the draft policy are reproduced in the box below.

"Policy on Pregnancy among Learners in Schools" draft dated 25 May 1997

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Ministry of Basic Education and Culture is alarmed at the number of learners who have been forced to terminate or suspend their education because of pregnancy. Namibia needs skilled and well educated women and men to take part in the development of the country and cannot afford that many young Namibian women must give up their education because of pregnancy. The Ministry is concerned that the community at large appears to accept little responsibility for the circumstances which make this state of affairs possible.
- 1.2 It must be accepted that the school is only one among the players which share in the role of shaping the behaviour of our youth. The parents in the home should have the first and foremost responsibility of providing the child with the values and example which will guide him or her through childhood and the youthful years. To this the religious community and school add their influence. Family, religious community and school should be supported in these efforts by the wider community.
- 1.3 Only if this support is provided by the other educational agencies and the society at large can the schools hope to play a successful role in preventing unwanted pregnancies through provision of population and family life education, and in creating an atmosphere in which young people are protected from exploitation.
- 1.4 In the hope that such support will be forthcoming, the Ministry provides this policy on pregnancy among learners.

- 1.5 The Ministry believes that sexual activity should be delayed until after a learner has completed formal schooling, so as to allow him/her to pay maximum attention to and derive maximum benefit from the educational programme, and so as to allow sexuality to be practised within a safe and emotionally mature relationship, and would urge parents, church, community and traditional leaders to join forces with the school in providing guidance along these lines as a matter of course. However, it recognises that young people may be pressured into making unwise decisions, in which case the educational system should as far as possibly support them in their efforts to make the most of their lives.
- 1.6 The Ministry further believe that learners in formal education should not contemplate marriage until completion of their secondary schooling.

[The following sections contain a Code of Conduct for Teachers, a Code of Conduct for Learners and Sanctions for Sexual Misdemeanors. These do not concern pregnancy specifically.]

5. PREGNANCIES AMONG LEARNERS

Pregnancies among learners threaten their health and social welfare and the health and welfare of the children born to them. Pregnancies often cause learners to terminate their education, leaving them with very few options of establishing a good life for themselves and their children.

Schools must confront this situation by rendering support to rather than punishing the learners who are to become parents. The learners will need support to continue with their education until the time of confinement and subsequently, while still ensuring the welfare and health of the newborn child.

Schools should also provide information to assist female learners who have become pregnant in obtaining financial support for the child from the male responsible for the pregnancy or his family.

Therefore the following measures will be needed.

5.1 With respect to the girl who becomes pregnant:

5.1.1 There should be at least one member of staff with whom the girl can discuss her situation. It should be known who the teacher is that will be prepared to discuss the matter sympathetically and non-judgmentally, and provide counselling or direct the girl to someone who will be able to provide counselling. Counselling should include developing an understanding of the need for ante-natal care and of the options that are open to her once the infant is born, and also of the sort of support to which she is entitled from the father of the child or his family. Referral to a social worker should be made where this service is available.

5.1.2 The girl should be obliged to reveal the identity of the responsible male. She should be made aware of the consequences both of providing this information and of withholding it, and of the possible consequences of providing false information.

- 5.1.3 The girl may continue with her education at school, until the time of her confinement or an earlier date on the advice of a medical practitioner or clinic sister. After giving birth, and provided that a social worker is satisfied that the infant will be cared for by a responsible adult the girl shall have the right of readmission to the same school within twelve months of date on which she left school, irrespective of her age. She shall have the option, within the same period, to return to another school, provided that space is available. Should the girl decide not to return to full-time schooling, she should be counselled about the options available to her for continuing her education.
- 5.1.4 A girl who has left school because of pregnancy may write her end-of-year examinations provided that she can satisfy the School board that her work is up to standard. In effect this will apply to girls who have been attending school for at least the first half of the school year. She may write her examinations along with the other learners, unless the School Board decides to make other arrangements. If she herself is reluctant to write in the same room as other candidates, the school may try to arrange for a separate venue and invigilator, but she or her family will have to carry any additional costs which the school incurs.
- 5.1.5 These provisions are not intended as a form of punishment. They recognise that by becoming pregnant the girl has taken on other responsibilities which must be given due attention.
- 5.1.6 If she is a boarder in a government school hostel, she shall be entitled to continue in the hostel for the period that she is attending school under the same conditions as would have applied had she not fallen pregnant. She shall not, however, be permitted to continue in the hostel if she is in need of specialised medical care which cannot be provided in the hostel.
- 5.2 With respect to the boy responsible for the pregnancy, if he is a learner in school (either the same school as the girl, or another school), and provided that rape is not involved:
- 5.2.1 There should be at least one member of staff with whom he can discuss his situation. It should be known who the teacher is that will be prepared to discuss the matter sympathetically and non-judgmentally, and provide counselling or direct the boy to someone who will be able to provide counselling. Counselling should include developing an understanding of the need for supporting the girl morally, emotionally and financially, of her need for ante-natal care and of the options that are open to them once the infant is born. Referral to a social worker should be made where this service is available.
- 5.2.2 The boy should be made aware of the consequences of accepting or denying paternity, and of the possible consequences of providing false information.
- 5.2.3 The boy may continue with his education at school, until the girl leaves school for her confinement. After she has given birth, and provided that there is clear evidence that the infant will be cared for by a responsible adult other than the mother of the infant, the boy shall have the right of readmission to the same school within twelve months of date on which she left school, irrespective of his age. He shall have the option, within the same period, to return to another school, provided that space is

available. Should the boy decide not to return to full-time schooling, he should be counselled about the options available to him for continuing his education.

5.2.4 A boy who has left school for impregnating a schoolgirl may write his end-of-year examinations provided that he can satisfy the School board that his work is up to standard. In effect this will apply to boys who have been attending school for at least the first half of the school year. He may write his examinations along with the other learners, unless the School Board decides to make other arrangements. If the girl elects to write in a different venue, the boy may elect to write with her, provided that satisfactory arrangements are made for invigilation, in which case he will have to share the costs of invigilation with the girl or her family.

5.2.5 These provisions are not intended as a form of punishment. They recognise that by impregnating a girl, the boy has taken on other responsibilities which must be given due attention.

5.2.6 If he is a boarder in a government school hostel, he shall be entitled to continue in the hostel for the period that he is attending school under the same conditions as would have applied had he not impregnated a girl or woman.

5.3 With respect to a teacher or other staff member responsible for the pregnancy:

5.3.1 If the male is a teacher or other member of staff of a school, he shall be suspended and charged with misconduct, as described in paragraph 4.1, provided that the girl makes a sworn declaration that he has had sexual relations with her. If blood tests confirm the paternity of the teacher or other staff member, he shall be suspended from teaching immediately without pay and charged with misconduct. The school or social worker should counsel and support the girl in obtaining maintenance for the child from the father.

5.4 With respect to an outside member of the community responsible for the pregnancy:

5.4.1 The school or social worker should counsel and support the girl in obtaining maintenance for the child from the father.

[The remaining sections cover Population and Family Life Education, Pre-Service Teacher Education, In-Service Training of Practising Teachers and Related Matters. These sections state that all inspectors of education, principals, and teachers should be familiarised with the policy on pregnancy, and that copies of the policy should be given to all school board members. It is also suggested that student representative councils should receive guidance on the policy on pregnancy]

Cabinet approved “temporary guidelines” on teenage pregnancy in 1999. In 2001, the Ministry of Basic Education published a summary of the policy approved by Cabinet in a circular entitled “Implementation of the Policy on Pregnancy amongst Learners” (Formal Education Circular 5/2001) – see the following box. The “temporary guidelines” circulated in 2001 are still being described as temporary in 2008 and have not yet been replaced by any final guidelines or permanent policy.

Circular Formal Education 5/2001

To: Regional Directors
Head Office Directors
Principals of Primary and Secondary Schools
Inspectors
School Councillors

SUBJECT: IMPLEMENTATION OF THE POLICY ON PREGNANCY AMONGST LEARNERS

1.0 Introduction

Pregnancy amongst learners is one of the social problems which prevent girls from continuing with their education. The need to address this matter came to the fore in 1994 when a Study Group was set up to investigate this issue and recommend measures to address it. After consultation with stakeholders the Study Group drafted the Policy on Pregnancy amongst learners that was submitted to the Cabinet for approval.

The need to address this problem is still being experienced. From time to time parents approach the Ministry and concerned community members requesting that pregnant learners and those who have delivered should be allowed to continue with their studies. Such requests are in line with the recommendations of the Study Group on Policy on Pregnancy among learners.

The purpose of this circular is to encourage the implementation of those measures Cabinet has approved for implementation.

2.0 Cabinet Resolutions regarding Teenage Pregnancy

Cabinet has resolved:

- 2.1 That while the report is awaited from the ad hoc Cabinet Committee on the above issue, as a temporary guideline, pregnant schoolgirls be allowed to attend special afternoon/evening classes and they should also be allowed to sit for examinations.
- 2.2 That a pregnant girl should be allowed to attend regular classes at least until her pregnancy is visibly clear.
- 2.3 That as a temporary guideline, girls who fall pregnant should be allowed to return to normal schooling after spending at least a year with the baby.
- 2.4 That the same conditions should apply to the schoolboy who is held responsible for the pregnancy.

3.0 An Advice with the Implementation of the Policy

- 3.1 Pregnancy is a sensitive matter. There are certain cultural values that might not be comfortable with the spirit, which appears to characterize this new approach toward teenage pregnancy in schools. As we find ourselves in a modern society with all its evils, we have to adapt ourselves to the reality of a changing world.

- 3.2 The implementation of these measures should be done with care. Regional Directors should involve local stakeholders such as NANTU, TUN, NANSO, NASEM etc to help them sensitize parents and members of the communities to the new way in which we are advised to approach this delicate issue.
- 3.3 School Board members should also take full responsibility for explaining this policy to parents and other community members.
- 3.4 Finally it should be stressed that school councillors have a vital role to play to enhance the implementation of Cabinet resolutions regarding teenage pregnancy. They are the professionals whose expertise should be tapped in this respect. Obviously, in those regions where these posts are not filled this responsibility falls squarely on inspectors of education.

There are fundamental differences between the draft policy which was the subject of widespread consultations and the 1999 Cabinet decision summarised in the 2001 circular. The main points of difference are (1) how long a girl is allowed to continue with her schooling after becoming pregnant and (2) when the new mother may return to school. Furthermore, the draft policy emphasised support for both the girl and the boy involved, as well as providing detailed and sensitively-worded provisions which made comparable rules for both parties. These nuanced and supportive provisions are absent from the 2001 circular.

A 2001 study by FAWENA showed that the current policy is 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 had died. This study recommended the adoption of a policy which focuses on support rather than punishment. It proposed that pregnant girls should be re-admitted into the school system after delivery, as soon as the baby is weaned. The study also recommended the establishment of “bridging centres” where young mothers can continue with their education while breast-feeding, counselling services for the affected 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.

A 2002 assessment of girls’ education in the Rundu Educational Region also found inconsistencies in how the current guidelines are being understood and implemented, particularly with respect to the amount of time a schoolgirl was allowed to remain in class after it becomes known that she was pregnant. In some schools, girls were allowed to stay on until they were due for delivery, while in others they were suspended as soon as the pregnancy became visible. There were also inconsistent practices in respect of the provision of counselling to pregnant schoolgirls.

In 2005 the debate on the teenage pregnancy policy was revived when a teenage mother, Utjiua Karuaihe, sought to be readmitted to school immediately after the birth of her child, without waiting for one year as stipulated in the guidelines. The case, which the Legal Assistance Centre took up as a matter of public interest, illustrates some of the problems with the current approach to schoolgirl pregnancy. However, despite a series of court applications, the new mother was unable to gain re-admission to her school in the academic year after she gave birth.

School ordered to reconsider young mother's application

In a ruling that could have far-reaching consequences because of the pregnancy rate among schoolgirls, the High Court has ruled that schools cannot shut out teenage mothers who have a support system to look after their babies while they are in the classroom.

The ruling came after the mother of an 18-year-old Windhoek High School student took the education authorities to court for refusing to readmit her to the school this year because she had given birth to a baby in December.

The school based its decision on a policy that requires teenage mothers to take a year off schooling to care for their babies.

Acting Judge John Manyarara ruled yesterday that the policy was not correctly interpreted, as it recommends great caution in accepting applications. He said it was not "reasonably possibly" the intention of the Cabinet policy to prohibit the enrolment of teenage mothers if they have a support system, like Utjiua Karuaihe, whose mother Seuaa Karuaihe-Samupofu was willing and able to take care of her daughter's baby during school hours.

Manyarara compared the situation to that of an employed mother who is entitled to three months' maternity leave and is expected to return to work after such a period.

"In practice too, women invariably do what this applicant (Karuaihe-Samupofu) has done for Utjiua; they make arrangements for a relative or nanny to take care of the baby while the mother is at work and the relative or nanny assumes full responsibility or the baby during that time," said Manyarara.

He said if the Cabinet policy aimed to facilitate the return to school of pupils who have given birth, there could be no reason why a pupil who has the necessary support system for the care of a baby should be prevented from taking advantage of the system.

"Much as society may abhor teenage pregnancies (with sound reason, I may add), it is not the intention of the Cabinet policy to punish learners who happen to find themselves in the position of Utjiua," he continued.

Manyarara set aside the decision by the principal of WHS to refuse Utjiua's application for admission. He ordered the principal to exercise his discretion in considering Utjiua's application and to inform her mother in writing of his decision within seven days.

In the event that Utjiua is refused admission on grounds other than that the school is full or her preferred subjects are not offered at WHS, Manyarara ordered the principal to notify the Basic Education Minister of the reasons. He told Seuaa Karuaihe-Samupofu that she could approach the court again if not satisfied...

Christof Maletsky, The Namibian, 11 February 2005

4. NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK

4.1 Non-discrimination and the right to education

The starting point for the right to education is Article 20(1) of the Namibian Constitution, which states that “All persons shall have the right to education”.

The right to education has been interpreted at the international level as including the right of a learner not to be discriminated against or “disciplined” because of pregnancy, and the United Nations Commission on Human Rights has called upon all UN members to eliminate obstacles which limit access to education by pregnant girls. The UN Committee which monitors the Convention on the Rights of the Child has stated that the exclusion from school of pregnant schoolgirls “is not only discriminatory against girls but also a violation of the right to education”.

Courts in some other countries (including Colombia and South Africa) have found that even a temporary suspension on the basis of pregnancy is impermissible discrimination in respect of the right to education.

The current Namibian policy purports to apply precisely the same rules to pregnant schoolgirls and to male learners who father children during the course of their education. However, the policy is seldom applied to male learners, who can easily father children without this being noticed by school authorities. Thus, the policy arguably constitutes indirect discrimination since the number of girls who are adversely affected by it is far higher than the number of boys, even though it is framed in gender-neutral fashion.

4.2 The newborn child’s right to be cared for by both parents

Article 15 of the Namibian Constitution says that “Children shall have the right... subject to legislation enacted in the best interests of children, as far as possible the right to know and be cared for by their parents”. This Constitutional provision has been cited by the Ministry of Education as a justification for requiring new mothers (and fathers) to remain out of school for a year. However, reliance on this right to justify the current Policy on Pregnancy amongst Learners is misplaced.

This constitutional protection applies to all children, throughout their childhoods. If this Constitutional provision did support a policy forbidding new parents to continue their

schooling for the first year of their child's life, then working mothers and fathers would also have to be given a full year's maternity and paternity leave from work. By the same token, the Constitutional right of the child to be cared for by his or her parents does not come to an end at age one. If the Constitution could be applied in the way that has been suggested, then parents would be forbidden from working or attending school altogether. The "care" envisaged in the Constitution logically cannot not refer to full-time daily care of children of all ages, but must rather relate to ongoing parental contact, involvement and responsibility.

The UN Committee on the Right of the Child has recognised that a diversity of family and caregiving relationships can be in the best interests of a young child, noting the role of "some combination of mother, father, siblings, grandparents and other members of the extended family, along with professional caregivers specialised in childcare and education".

4.3 Other relevant international and regional commitments

Namibia has other international and regional commitments which give more specific attention to the issue of teenage pregnancy and education. Article 144 of the Namibian Constitution states that "unless otherwise provided by this Constitution or Act of Parliament, the general rules of public international law and international agreements binding upon Namibia under this Constitution shall form part of the law of Namibia." Therefore the commitments below, which have been signed by the Namibian government, are legally binding in Namibia.

Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

This Convention requires the government to take all appropriate measures for "the reduction of female student drop-out rates and the organization of programmes for girls and women who have left school prematurely".

In 1997, in response to Namibia's first report under CEDAW, the Committee which monitors CEDAW cited teenage pregnancy as "the biggest challenge to female educational advancement" and expressed its concern that "pregnant teenage women were punished by expulsion from school".

In 2007, the same Committee gave a more detailed response on this issue in response to Namibia's combined second and third CEDAW report, expressing its concern "that the provision contained in the Policy on Pregnancy among Learners requiring that girls who

become pregnant should be allowed to return to normal schooling only after spending at least one year with the baby could act as a deterrent for girls to resume their studies after childbirth.” The Committee recommended that Namibia “implement measures to retain girls in school”.

Convention on the Rights of the Child

The Committee which monitors this Convention has emphasised the need to provide support for adolescent parents, noting that if support is lacking, young mothers may be prone to depression and anxiety, compromising their ability to care for their child. It has urged governments which are party to the Convention “to develop policies that will allow adolescent mothers to continue their education”.

Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the African Child

This Charter requires governments to “take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of drop-out rates”. Governments must also ensure that “children who become pregnant before completing their education shall have an opportunity to continue with their education on the basis of their individual ability”. Commenting on this provision, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education stated:

Translating this obligation into practice often requires overcoming the denials of access to school for pregnant girls and very young mothers (when pregnancy is a disciplinary offence, for example), while overcoming this obstacle requires a well designed strategy for changing social norms through the mobilization of teachers, parents, community leaders, and pupils themselves.

Protocol to the African Charter on the Rights of Women in Africa

This Protocol commits states to the elimination of a range of barriers to girls’ education and requires governments to “promote the enrolment and retention of girls in schools and other training institutions and the organisation of programmes for women who leave school prematurely”.

Education for All (EFA)

“Education for All” refers to an international commitment adopted at a World Conference held in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 which includes the goal of “eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education”. In Namibia, one of the national strategic objectives to

advance this EFA goal is to decrease the rate of dropouts due to pregnancy and motherhood among schoolgirls. Namibia's National Plan of Action (2002-2015) for Education for All identifies several activities which could contribute to achieving this objective:

- Publicise and implement the policy on teenage pregnancy and encourage girls to **continue with their studies for as long as possible.**
- Sensitise teachers, Principals, school boards, community leaders, inspectors in order to **reduce the stigma of pregnancy and motherhood.**
- **Explore options which would allow pregnant girls to complete their education,** and increase access to reproductive health services.

The four principles of the Namibian Plan of Action for Education for All are equality, access, quality and democracy

5. APPROACHES IN OTHER COUNTRIES

The debate on policies on teenage pregnancies in schools in Sub-Saharan Africa has been ongoing for some time. The trend in most countries in the region – such as Botswana, Malawi, Zambia and Swaziland – in recent years is to move towards policies which make it easier for young mothers to continue their education. Botswana has instituted an innovative pilot project to support teen mothers in continuing their education, described in the next box.

In Madagascar, new mothers can return to school immediately after delivery if they wish. In Cameroon, girls have the right to negotiate the duration of their maternity leave with their school, and can arrange for extra classes so that they do not lag behind in their school work during the agreed period of absence from school.

Some of the most progressive policies on schoolgirl pregnancy are found in developing countries in the Spanish-speaking world, where there appears to be an increased trend to enshrine the rights of pregnant students and young mothers in legislation rather than merely in policy.

Further information on approaches in other countries can be found in the attached documents.

Botswana: Diphhalana

The Diphhalana initiative in Botswana is an example of a flexible learning programme that caters for a particular type of vulnerable learners – girls who get pregnant during their course of learning. Pregnant schoolgirls at Pekenene School are allowed to return to school after giving birth, for as long as they wish. Previously Botswana law only allowed re-entry by such girls in certain circumstances, and where this happened, girls had to wait for a year after birth. During maternity leave, schoolwork and other resources are sent to girls' homes and the school has developed a curriculum with some distance education modules that learners can attend from home, without attending formal school. This makes it possible for pregnant girls to continue learning from home instead of being marginalised as is normally the norm in most systems within the region. When they are certified fit to return to school by a doctor, they return with their babies. The school has crèche facilities, which can take babies as young as 4 months, and nappies and milk are provided. At break and lunchtimes the young mothers breast-feed their children. The Diphhalana project requires that the father, if he is at school, shares the responsibility of looking after the baby at break and lunchtimes, so that he can develop a sense of responsibility (Unterhalter et al., 2004).

Through the Diphhalana intervention, the double frustration brought about by getting pregnant prematurely and being rejected by the school system is greatly alleviated; hope is restored and a sense of being accepted by the society is instilled into the beneficiary learners. Such learners are likely to apply themselves conscientiously after the experience of childbearing and may realise great academic achievements in their lifetime. The benefits of providing such safety nets to the individual girl and her baby and to the wider society are immense. By making use of distance education support materials, keeping communication links with pregnant learners from their homes and giving them support, and providing extra facilities like crèches at school, the Diphhalana initiative shows how flexibility in delivery modes and adopting a different conception of school from the traditional one can cater for some of the vulnerable children in developing societies. In most of the sub-Saharan countries, many girls terminate their education prematurely due to pregnancy and the Diphhalana initiative is an example of good practice in terms of mitigating the effects of this problem on these vulnerable learners.

This initiative is also unique in that it demonstrates how concerns across a range of social sectors – health, education and social welfare – can be integrated to provide an imaginative response to the issue of schoolgirl pregnancy, one of the prevalent causes for dropping out of school amongst school girls, particularly those who live without adult care givers and who come from poor families.

www.ioe.ac.uk/SOFIE/publications/MhlangaReviewPaper.pdf

6. THE CHALLENGE OF PREVENTION

Prevention is an important component of any approach to adolescent pregnancy, but prevention is also a complex task.

Sexual activity begins early for most Namibian teens. National health statistics indicate that about half of girls aged 15-19 are sexually active, as well as about two-thirds of the boys in that age group. Factors which can lead to early pregnancy include peer pressure, “sugar daddy” relationships, lack of parental love and guidance, failure of parents to discuss sex with their children, lack of recreational activities for youth and alcohol abuse.

6.1 The influence of the school environment

One contributing factor is that girls in some parts of Africa do not start school at the appropriate age, meaning that they are older in their secondary school years and thus more likely to become sexually active. Even where girls do start school at the appropriate age, the necessity of repeating grades because of unsatisfactory progress may still result in higher age for grade than expected.

The quality of the school environment and the success of the education programme are also relevant. A 2001 study in Kenya found that girls who attended schools where they felt that they received equal treatment with boys were less likely to engage in sex than those who attended schools with less gender equality. Other studies have found that girls with poor school performance are significantly more likely than better students to become pregnant. It would also seem that girls who feel valued and hopeful about their futures are more likely to delay child-bearing.

Another area of focus in respect of pregnancy prevention should be the school hostel environment. A 2002 study of girls’ education in the Rundu area found that “most government-run hostels were seen as unsafe for girls”, lacking in sufficient measure for physical security (such as working locks on door) as well as suffering from inadequate disciplinary supervision and an absence of organised leisure activities, In order to play a positive role in preventing pregnancy, schools must be safe and secure environments where students feel protected against sexual harassment and coercion.

Namibia’s National Policy on Reproductive Health (2001) gives particular attention to adolescent-friendly reproductive health services. However, there is not yet full realisation of this ideal on the ground. There is a role for teachers and school guidance counsellors to

play in bridging the gap, to provide an alternate and possibly more accessible source of information and advice on reproductive health and contraception for adolescents.

6.2 Pregnancy as a result of unwanted sex

One factor which must not be underestimated is the effect of gender violence on schoolgirls – many pregnancies may be the result of forced sex rather than free choice or risky sexual behaviour. Recent police statistics indicate that just over one-third of all victims of rape and attempted rape are under age 18. A 2006 UNICEF study found that 19% of the girls aged 15-24 in the study had already been pregnant – *with a shocking 40% of these pregnancies resulting from forced sex.*

Another form of pressure can come from teachers. Between 1995 and 2002, the Ministry of Basic Education expelled 114 male teachers for impregnating schoolgirls. The full extent of this problem may never be known, as it is hard for a learner to point fingers at a teacher. While some people blame the school girls in such situations for “seducing” the teachers, it must be recognised that this is an unequal power relationship in which the teacher is in a position of trust and responsibility with respect to the learners.

Even where there is no overt coercion, girls may still feel powerless to negotiate sexual behaviour or contraceptive use if they do not feel they are equal partners in a sexual relationship. This inequality is obvious in relationships with richer, older men or men in positions of authority, such as teachers, but it can also be present in relationships with boys of their own age because of persisting gender inequalities in society. For example, a study of adolescent sexual behaviour in the Ohangwena Region noted that “the notion that a girl or a woman cannot refuse sex develops at an early age”

These concerns re-enforce other arguments against applying a punitive policy to pregnancy learners, since many schoolgirls are coerced or pressured into risking pregnancy against their will. The individual right to sexual autonomy needs to be highlighted in life skills programmes, as well as mutual respect for sexual partners. Girls need to be shown how to avoid placing themselves in situations of sexual vulnerability, such as by accepting gifts from older men, and boys need to be taught that “no means no”, and that girls have an absolute right to say no. These seemingly simple messages will not be easy to impart, given the fact that they go against some persisting cultural norms which continue to view women as being subordinate to men in sexual matters

6.3 Alcohol abuse

The UNICEF study highlighted the connection between alcohol and risky sexual behaviour. The study found that 15-24 year olds consume alcohol on a regular basis, and start drinking fairly early (at the age of 15). One-fifth of this age group uses alcohol daily or up to six times week. Furthermore, almost 27% had participated in sexual activities while under the influence of alcohol. Alcohol increases the probability of having taken one or more sexual risks which could lead to HIV (and thus also to pregnancy) more than threefold.

The connection between alcohol and risky sexual behaviour is already part of HIV education programmes and interventions such as 'My Future My Choice'. This could be bolstered by school-sponsored evening activities which provide entertainment options for students in an alcohol-free environment.

Interestingly, a 2002 study of girls' education in the Rundu area noted that parents, students and school officials interviewed all cited alcohol abuse by *teachers* as a problematic issue, in that intoxicated teachers not only neglected their teaching duties, but were also more prone to also solicit sex from female learners.

6.4 Relationships with teachers

Teachers are a potential source of positive information and influence. After parents and grandparents, teachers are often the most important adults in any school going child's life. Many children say that they would go to a teacher if they had a problem.

On the other hand, although children turn to teachers for help in situations of abuse, it is particularly disturbing to note that school teachers may be the culprits in some of the situations of forced sex. The Code of Conduct for the Teaching Service makes no particular reference to learner pregnancy, but stipulates that a teacher "may not become involved in any form of romance or sexual relations with a learner or sexual harassment or abuse of a learner". Teachers are also tasked to promote gender equality. Failure to comply with the Code of Conduct constitutes misconduct and must be dealt with in terms of Namibia's Public Service Act. This means that the misconduct could lead to suspension followed by an enquiry, with the ultimate result being reprimand, a fine, transfer to another post, a reduction in salary or rank, and possible dismissal, depending on the recommendation of the disciplinary committee which considers the case. Depending on the seriousness of the infringement of the Code of Conduct, the teacher in question

may also “be given the necessary counselling and advice and opportunity to correct his or her behaviour”.

The implementation of sanctions against teachers who violate this provision should be strictly implemented. There are reports that some teachers who have caused pregnancies have compromised the parents of the girl by offering settlements in form of cash or foodstuffs to discourage the parents from pursuing the matter with the Ministry of Education.

It is a very serious breach of trust and responsibility for a teacher to be intimately involved with a student. It should be noted that if the school girl is under the age of 16 and the teacher more than three years older, the teacher has committed a crime in terms of the Combating of Immoral Practices Act and should be prosecuted; if the school girl is under the age of 14, the crime is rape.

Ideally, the culprit teacher, in addition to being charged with a criminal offence if the girl is under the age of 16, ought to be barred from having any further direct contact with students. Simply put, the teacher should be barred from teaching. Further, the Ministry of Education should have a registry for teachers who have been found guilty of such behaviour for reference purposes, to prevent accidental re-hiring of such teachers for any post involving direct contact with children.

6.5 School programmes on sexuality

There are two programmes on enhancing children’s life skills in relation to relationships and sexuality: the “Window of Hope” programme aimed at 10 to 14 year olds, and the “My Future My Choice” (MFMC) programme aimed at youth aged 15 to 24 years. Both are structured as after-school activities, with out-of-school youth being able to participate in the MFMC programme along with school-going youth.

‘Window of Hope’ is designed to help children in the targeted grades to develop life skills such as communicating, decision-making, care-giving, identifying and managing emotions, building self-esteem, resisting peer pressure and building healthy relationships. ‘My Future My Choice’ makes use of peer educators and covers similar topics adapted for older audiences. It includes segments on contraception and on the consequences of early pregnancy.

The 2006 UNICEF study found that MFMC participants on average have been sexually active for a slightly shorter time than non-participants, and consumed alcohol slightly

less frequently. One drawback however is that the intended approach is not necessarily consistent with what is happening on the ground. For example, the 2002 Rundu study found that the aspects of the life skills education which were supposed to be incorporated into the formal curriculum were being neglected because these were non-promotional subjects.

Commitment to the continuation of such initiatives is already incorporated into the National Policy on HIV-AIDS for the Education Sector. These programmes are an obvious avenue for intensified attention to the problem of teen pregnancy, as well as the dissemination of information about a new school policy on pregnancy among learners.

There is also scope for cooperation with non-governmental groups on this topic. For example, learner pregnancy has been one of the topics focused on by the Ombetja Yehinga Organisation (OYO), which works with youth in Khomas, Erongo and Kunene regions and produces a bi-monthly magazine on issues of youth and sexuality. OYO has also worked with local youth to produce a film on learner pregnancy entitled "5 Minutes of Pleasure". Childline/Lifeline also gives school presentations in some schools which combine factual information about reproduction with information about gender equality and good relationships. As another example, the Otjituuuo Youth Association joined forces with the Red Cross to hold reproductive health training sessions in their village near Grootfontein during 2007, after several reports of teen pregnancy amongst local girls.

7. PROVIDING EFFECTIVE SUPPORT

Key factors which will be likely to influence the decision on whether or not to return to school are the availability of child care, the socioeconomic status of the household and the attitude of the learner's parents.

7.1 Change in status and stigma

A 2002 FAWENA study found shame and stigma to be a problem. For example, a primary school girl in Kunene Region who became pregnant felt that everyone was "talking about her" and that her teachers refused to accept her after her return. The 2002 Rundu study found that male learners and teachers teased new mothers, such as by mockingly referring to them as "mother".

A 2006 study in the Rundu area noted that girls who have given birth become adults in the eyes of some cultures. Such a change is normally a matter of pride, but it can also

be a basis for high expectation or for mockery when the young mother returns to school. Examples of comments which might be made were: *“A mother cannot behave like this”*; *“How can a mother give an incorrect answer?”*; *“Some of you are adult people and have children. You are not supposed to make noise”*; *“Why should a mother allow such behaviour to happen in the class?”*.

This change in status is also perceived by some learners as meaning that teenage parents do not belong in the school environment any more, and some learners reportedly use negative words and names when referring to young mothers. One teen mother reported that fellow students might say things such as: *“We do not want to see an old woman in our class”*. The result of such attitudes can be feelings of isolation and rejection.

One idea which could assist here is arranging regular meetings in which pregnant learners and learner parents can share and discuss the problems they experience and help each other to identify solutions. Another suggestion put forward is to set up special rooms at hostels where pregnant boarders can study together in private.

It should be noted in respect of this issue that the Code of Conduct for the Teaching Service states that a teacher “may not in any form humiliate or abuse a learner (i.e. physically, emotionally or psychologically)” and “must respect the dignity and constitutional rights of every learner without prejudice, including the right to education, equality of culture and the right to privacy”. Teachers must further more “refrain from any form of discrimination” including discrimination on the basis of “health reasons”. Similarly, the General Rules of Conduct for Learners state that a learner “must respect the dignity, person and property of teachers, learners and members of the public”.

7.2 The burden of extra responsibilities

The 2006 Rundu study noted that young mothers who return to school shoulder the “double responsibility” of schooling combined with parenting. This was cited as a contributing factor to poor attendance by young mothers, especially with respect to afternoon study, extra classes after school and extra-curricular activities.

One suggestion offered for easing the burden on learner mothers is to excuse them from extra-curricular activities (unless they are staying the school hostel apart from their babies). Another suggestion is to try to schedule extra classes at times which can accommodate new mothers. It has been noted that parents should also be involved in assisting schoolgirl mothers with their burden of responsibility. Where they seem unwilling to help, schools could attempt to discuss the situation with them and try to convince them to be more supportive.

7.3 Teacher counselling

Both the 2002 and the 2006 Rundu studies found that while many schools had a specific female teacher who counselled girls on issues pertaining to sexuality – either a teacher formally assigned to play this role by school management or someone who had taken the task on out of her own initiative. However, none of the teachers had specific training in counselling skills, although some had attended workshops on this topic. Techniques for counselling and supporting pregnant learners and learner parents could be a topic of in-service training for school guidance counsellors and selected teachers.

8. ABORTION, “BABY-DUMPING” AND INFANTICIDE

In several other African countries, fear that a pregnancy would disrupt education is one of the main reasons young women cite for seeking abortions. There may be a link between educational policies and abortion in Namibia as well. Many learners have said that they would consider abortion if they became pregnant, while several reported that they had actually resorted to this option themselves. In discussing motivations for abortion, learners cited not only fears of having to leave school, but also shame, embarrassment, stigma, worries about not being able to support the child financially, not knowing how to look after a baby, and lack of emotional support from their parents or the baby's father. While no data exists on the number of Namibian school girls who have procured abortions in order to remain in school, some have certainly done so. Abortion in Namibia is illegal except in very narrowly defined circumstances and the possibility of girls in such situations resorting to backstreet abortions with dire health consequences or even fatalities is very real.

Restrictive school policies may also lead to baby-dumping or infanticide, although there are as yet no studies which document the extent of this connection.

Thus, assertions that a long enforced leave of absence for learner parents is in the interests of the newborn child are mistaken, as extremely restrictive policies may simply mean that there will be no newborn child to care for.

9. THE DIFFICULTY OF BEING GENDER-NEUTRAL

Simply applying the same rules to pregnant school schoolgirls as to schoolboys is not very effective, as practice shows in Namibia and other countries. For one thing, the schoolgirl's pregnancy will eventually become obvious while the father's involvement

will usually not be evident. Another issue is that the father is more likely to be an older man who is out of school than a fellow learner. Furthermore, girls are often reluctant to identify the father, whether he is a fellow learner or someone outside the school.

Simply stating that the same rules will be applicable to pregnant learners and the boys responsible for those pregnancies is not a sufficient method to achieve gender equality on this topic. Even if the fathers are schoolboys, there will not be symmetry in the consequences of the pregnancy for both social and biological reasons. In order to achieve gender equality with respect to learner pregnancies, the only option is to provide support to the female learner so as to minimise the negative consequences of the pregnancy.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

Against this background, the Ministry of Education has recognised the need for a further revision of Namibia's policy on teenage pregnancy, to place greater emphasis on positive steps to prevent learner pregnancy, and to ensure that young parents are encouraged to complete their education for the benefit of themselves, their infants and the developing Namibian nation.