Preparing adolescents for adulthood
Family life education and pregnancy-related school expulsion in Kenya

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Abstract. Pregnancy-related school dropouts have become a matter of public concern throughout sub-Saharan Africa. In most cases, schoolgirls who become pregnant either have to resort to unsafe illegal abortions, or they face official school expulsion. Because girls who drop out of school due to pregnancy usually do not return to school to complete their education after the birth of their child, their opportunities for socioeconomic advancement are limited. Many African governments have included family life education programs in the school curriculum in an attempt to educate adolescents about the consequences and responsibilities associated with sexual activity. The high rates of schoolgirl pregnancies suggest that these programs have their shortcomings, and indicate that educational policies should attempt not only to reduce the incidence of schoolgirl pregnancies, but also to assist pregnant schoolgirls to complete their education. In this paper, we use data from a sample of 154 Kenyan primary and secondary schools to study differentials in the extent to which various types of schools are affected by pregnancy-related school dropouts, and to examine the opinions of the head teachers regarding teaching about contraceptive methods and readmittance of pregnancy-related dropouts.

Key words: Adolescent pregnancy, Family life education, Kenya, School dropout

Introduction

All societies have institutions that serve to train youths about the responsibilities associated with adult life. In traditional African societies the extended family and kinship systems took the responsibility for transmitting important information to adolescents, usually by means of initiation ceremonies. The traditional initiation ceremonies varied across ethnic groups but their general purpose was to train adolescents for adulthood, and to inform them of important issues such as the traditional norms for premarital sexual behavior, mate selection, and marital duties. The example of the Kikuyu people of Kenya serves well to illustrate their function. Upon initiation, Kikuyu girls were instructed by girls of the next older initiation cohort on how to sleep with a man without getting pregnant, a practice called Ngweko (Kenyatta 1939: 152–154; Whiting, Burbank & Ratner 1986: 281). Ngweko was an institutionalized and socially accepted form of fondling without sexual intercourse, which served to teach adolescents to exercise self-control, and to allow youths to have a certain amount of intimacy while avoiding premarital pregnancy and the severe punishments associated with it.
In many African societies, these traditional means of socialization have been deregulated by urbanization, Westernization, and by the introduction of Western education (Adeokun 1990; Agounké et al. 1990: 38; Worthman & Whiting 1987). Among the Kikuyu, Christianity also played a significant role in the deritualization of initiation ceremonies (Worthman 1986: 98). While initiation ceremonies still existed in the 1980s, they were performed in secret and individual, with no attendant ritual. Initiation cohorts are no longer formed and the female age grade system has broken down.

Nowadays, adolescents obtain information from their parents, their peers, the media, and from school. In many cases, adolescents are insufficiently or incorrectly informed about their changing sexuality, and about the consequences and responsibilities associated with sexual activity. Consequently, premarital pregnancy, a rare occurrence in traditional society, is becoming an increasingly common phenomenon (Whiting, Burbank & Ratner 1986: 282), especially in urban communities, and throughout sub-Saharan Africa there is a growing public concern about adolescent childbearing. While early childbearing has been common in many societies in sub-Saharan Africa, in the past, it occurred mainly to married women and generally did not interfere with the life course of young women because relatively few attended school. Today, however, the high rates of pregnancy-related school dropouts (Gachuhi 1986; Rogo 1987) have become a matter of social concern and there is a general agreement that there is an urgent need for family life education to substitute for the function previously fulfilled by the initiation ceremonies.

Pregnancy has severe implications for schoolgirls. Pregnant schoolgirls may have no other choice but to drop out of school, since motherhood may not be compatible with formal education. Even though child fostering is common in many African societies, a young mother may need to share her time and resources between her educational career and her new family. More decisive is the fact that official school policies usually require that pregnant girls are expelled from school (Barker & Rich 1990; Bogue 1987: 38–40; Division of Family Health/GTZ Support Unit 1988; Gyepi–Garbrah 1985a, 1985c; Ferguson, Gitonga & Kabira 1988; Kiragu 1988; Mwateba, Paxman & Weil 1988; République du Mali 1988: 34; Senderowitz & Paxman 1985: 26). In many countries, school authorities usually oppose readmitting schoolgirls who dropped out because of pregnancy, on account that these girls would be a bad role model for the other students, and there are few, if any, policies that facilitate dropouts to complete their education:

The plight of pregnant school girls in Africa is particularly wrenching. They must either terminate their pregnancy by taking recourse in abortion in order to continue their education, or drop out of school either on their own volition or on pain of threatened official expulsion [. . .]. When girls drop out of school because of pregnancy, their future socio-economic prospects are significantly reduced (Gyepi–Garbrah 1985a: 22–23).