

The Challenges Experienced by Teenage Mothers in Davao Occidental: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

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One of the prevalent dilemmas today is teenage pregnancy. Teen pregnancy continues to be a problem for families, educators, health care professionals, and the government. Adolescent motherhood is defined as giving birth before reaching the age of twenty, regardless of marital status or legal adulthood. This study aimed to determine the challenges experienced by teenage mothers in Davao Occidental. A qualitative design using a phenomenological approach was applied, and eight adolescent mothers were chosen as participants through purposive sampling. The findings indicated that physical, emotional, and social challenges are common among teen mothers. Difficulties frequently included reconciling the demands of caring for a baby, added responsibilities after childbirth, and a lack of expertise needed for self-care and childcare. Many realized, through experience, the importance of completing their studies and listening to their parents. The study contributes to increased awareness of the frequent challenges faced by teenage mothers.



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INTRODUCTION

According to the World Health Organization (2020), approximately 16 million teenage girls give birth annually. In developing regions, about 12 million girls aged 15–19 and at least 777,000 girls under 15 give birth each year. In Southeast Asia alone, at least 10 million unintended pregnancies occur annually among adolescent girls aged 15–19.

In the Philippines, childbearing among adolescents has generally increased over the last 20 years. Data from 2017 shows that roughly one in ten Filipinas in this age group was already a mother or pregnant with her first child (Morgan, 2021). The country has the second-highest rate of teenage pregnancy in Southeast Asia, at 5.99%, according to Save the Children's Global Childhood Report (2019). An estimated 538 babies are born to Filipino teenage mothers every day (Philippine Standard Authority, 2017; Tapang, 2019).

To address this concern, the Philippine government has implemented measures targeting the root causes of adolescent pregnancies. President Rodrigo Duterte declared the prevention of teenage pregnancies a national priority under Executive Order 141, issued on June 25, 2021, recognizing the increased health risks for both mother and child (Philippines News Agency, 2021).

The National Statistical Coordination Board (NCSB) noted a 3.6% increase in the number of young Dabawenyas aged 15–24 who became pregnant, from 25% in 2003 to 28.6% in 2008. The Davao region has the highest increase in teenage pregnancies, compared to other regions like Zamboanga Peninsula, Socsargen, and Caraga—some regions, such as Northern Mindanao, experienced declines. Legal and family planning authorities regard this trend as alarming (Carillo, 2017).

Given this context, the researchers pursued this qualitative study to determine the challenges teenage mothers experience, aiming to formulate effective plans for program implementation in Davao Occidental.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to determine the challenges experienced by teenage mothers in Davao Occidental. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following question: What are the challenges experienced by the participants as teenage mothers?

Significance of the Study

- Teenage Mothers: Gain insights into responsibilities and challenges, helping them prepare for parenthood and discouraging premature motherhood.
- Students: Develop a deeper understanding of the realities and consequences of teenage motherhood to make informed decisions.
- Parents: Gain awareness and strategies to guide their children

regarding teenage pregnancy effectively.

- Guidance Counselors: Access relevant data for counseling interventions.
- Administration and Faculty: Obtain information to support relevant student events and programs.
- School: Motivate relevant student agency and support for teenage moms.
- Municipal Social Welfare and Development Agencies: Assess current conditions, inform beneficial policies, and reduce teenage pregnancies in the community.
- Community: Promote interventions to raise awareness and prevent early pregnancies.
- Future Researchers: Broaden foundational knowledge and use the findings as a reference for similar studies.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research was conducted in Barangay Lawa, Municipality of Don Marcelino, Davao Occidental—one of the most populated barangays in the area, making participant access feasible for the researchers, who reside there. Informed consent and ethical considerations were observed, with interviews performed at locations chosen by participants.

A qualitative, phenomenological design was used to explore participants' experiences and perspectives in depth. Purposive sampling was employed to select eight teenage mothers aged 13–19 (both out-of-school and currently studying) as participants. Barangay Health Workers provided the list of candidates living in Barangay Lawa.

Initial interviews established demographic status, followed by open-ended, validated questionnaires for the final interviews. Pseudonyms protected participant identities. Interviews were conducted in Cebuano or Visayan for participant comfort, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Meaning units relevant to teenage mothers' challenges were extracted, coded, and categorized based on content similarities and differences.

Assistance from a registered social worker was solicited due to participant vulnerability. Informed consent was gathered from both participants and their parents, emphasizing confidentiality and voluntary participation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A presentation approach based on San Jose (2019) was used. Findings were organized into a table of themes, further categorized as “general” (≥50% of responses), “typical” (21–49%), or “variant” (≤20%). Participant verbatim responses with tags were included for context.

Profile of the Participants

All participants were residents of Barangay Lawa, Don Marcelino, Davao Occidental. Most had one child, with one participant having two. Their ages ranged from 16 to 19: three were 17, two were 16, two were 19, and one was 18. Some lived with partners; others with parents. All eight participants had firsthand experience with the challenges of being teenage mothers.

Major Themes	Core Ideas	Frequency of Response
Challenges as Young Mothers	- financial difficulties	Typical
	- body image	General
	- experience sickness	Typical
	- gossip and criticisms from the community	General
Lessons Learned from the Experience	- Getting pregnant is stressful	Variant
	- feeling mature	Variant
	- feared upon learning pregnant	General
	- stressful in caring for the baby	General
Experience Worth Sharing	- not to rush getting pregnant	Typical
	- to finish studies	Variant
	- to listen to parents' advice	Variant

Challenges as Young Mothers

The responses provided by the teenage mothers throughout this investigation highlight the many challenges faced by young mothers. The table above presents different themes and core ideas concerning the challenges experienced by teenage mothers. The first central theme is the challenges facing young mothers, which include financial difficulties, body image issues, experiences of sickness, and gossip and criticism from the community.

Financial Difficulties

Based on the answers given, it is very evident that teenage mothers experience numerous challenges. Five participants expressed that they face financial difficulties. Due to a poor source of income, they struggle to meet their basic needs.

“Lisud unya sige ra ug ka problema, unya sige ko ug hunahuna asa makapangita ug kwarta para kunsumo. Kay usabay akong bana panagsa ra ilang makuha sa panagat.”

(It was tough. I always felt overwhelmed and overthinking where to get money for our daily needs. Because sometimes my husband does not catch much from fishing. —Yeye)

There are many challenges surrounding young pregnancy and parenthood, including the lack of education, experience, and income compared to mothers in their twenties or older. Smithbattle (2009) argues that while early childbearing often leads to poverty, in many cases, motherhood makes sense of the limited life options these teens faced beforehand. Media portrayal and changing terminology also shift how society regards teenage pregnancy, no longer solely as a moral issue but as a social and scientific challenge (Arney & Bergen, 2014).

Body Image

Additionally, four participants mentioned that they experienced significant changes in their bodies after becoming mothers.

“Daghan kaayo nausab sa akong lawas sukad tung nabuntis ko. Karun ginatan aw ko sa uban maka ingon sila taas na daw akong edad tungod sa kadako sa akong lawas kay tung dalaga pako gamay kaayo akong lawas.”
(A lot of physical changes have occurred in me ever since I got pregnant. Many people will say that I have aged because of those changes. —Bian)

Motherhood can bring about stress regarding personal self-esteem and efficacy (Thompson, 2012). Al Ramahi and Saleh (2016) highlight that adolescence is a time of transition and growth, and pregnancy during this period can be riskier than in adulthood, both physically and emotionally.

Experience Sickness

Three participants stated that they frequently experienced illness during their transition into motherhood.

“Usabay gasakit akong likod tapos maluya ko then nagsakit jud komaong gilutas naku akong anak. Nag gamit ko ug pills nga lady wa ko kauyon. Namayat ko ug taman. Gipahilot ko kay akong matress kay tandugonon. Hangtud gasakit ko tapos di nako ga alsa ug bug-at.”
(Sometimes I feel back pains and fatigue, until I become completely ill. For that reason, I had to stop breastfeeding and I started using contraceptive pills like Lady pill, but it did not go well with my body, I lost so much weight. I had to undergo physical therapy since my uterus became unstable and I was advised not to lift heavy objects. —Arah)

Globally, adolescent pregnancy is a significant health issue and has been linked with higher rates of complicated, life-threatening conditions among young mothers (Mokgalabon, 2014; Mohammad, 2016).

Gossip and Criticisms from the Community

Another challenge noted was the experience of gossip and criticisms from the community because of early motherhood. Some teenage mothers felt ashamed due to the high expectations placed upon them by others.

“Hadlok ko ug judgment kay grabe ang expectation sa mga tao sa akong tapos kalit ko nabuntis didtoa ang mga istorya nigaawas.”

(I am afraid of judgment because many people are expecting so much from me, but then in the blink of an eye, I got pregnant and gossip spread out. —May)

“Ginalibak ko nila pero dili nako sila gina mind. Mas na pressure ko sa akong mga ka batch kay gina hunahuna nako if wala pako nabuntis ron sabay na unta mi ni graduate.”

(A lot of them talk behind my back, but I ignore them. Instead, I was pressured by my batch mates because I was thinking that if I did not get pregnant, I would have been able to graduate with them. —Aia)

Research suggests that the stereotype of teen mothers leading to long-term dependence is exaggerated, though some do face economic and educational challenges due to early childbearing (Chigona & Chetty, 2010; Caldwell, 2011).

Lessons Learned from the Experience

The second central theme that emerged is the “lesson learned from the experience,” which includes the core ideas: getting pregnant is stressful, feeling matured, fearing upon learning of pregnancy, and stress in caring for the baby.

Getting Pregnant is Stressful

Teenage mothers revealed that taking care of a baby is challenging and stressful, yet they also experienced happiness from motherhood.

“Kapoy jud kaayo tas dili kaayo ko makatulog kay naa kay anak atimanun. Pero makita nako ang smile sa akong anak marwala tanan kakapoy.”

(It was very tiring; I cannot get enough sleep because I have a child to take care of. However, every time I see my child smile, all the tiredness disappears. —Bali)

Transition to motherhood is a critical period, especially for adolescents who often lack the knowledge, skills, and resources for early motherhood (Mohammad, 2016; Vikat, 2017).

Feeling Matured

Some participants shared that becoming mothers made them feel more mature and responsible.

*“Mas ni matured kaysa una tapos dili na kaayo ko nagalaag.”
(I became more mature than before, and I stopped going out as much. —
Lapu)*

Motherhood may provide a sense of identity, maturity, and responsibility (Hanna, 2014). However, it can also force adolescents into adult roles before they are physically and emotionally prepared (Muyot, 2019).

Feared Upon Learning Pregnant

Another participant described being afraid upon learning she was pregnant, especially fearing her family’s reaction.

*“Nahadlok ko basin unsa ang mga reaction sa akong ginikanan. Wala ko kabalo unsa akong buhaton syempre bata pa kayo ko nabuntis nako, tapos dili pa ko ready.”
(I was afraid of my family’s reaction. I did not know what to do since I was too young to get pregnant, and I was not ready for this. —Aia)*

Teen mothers often depend on family for support during pregnancy and child-rearing due to a lack of experience and knowledge (Makiwane, 2010; Kaufman, 2011).

Stressful in Caring for the Baby

Another challenge shared was the stress associated with caring for a child at such a young age.

*“Lisud kay wa jud ko kabalo unsa akong buhaton kay sayo ko nanganak, sige ko ug pangutana unsa akong buhaton pag atiman sa bata.”
(It was tough because I did not know what to do since I was too young to be a mother; I always asked what I should do to take care of the baby. —Arah)*

Young mothers face increased responsibility during the transition to motherhood and may feel self-doubt about their competence (Mouli, 2016; Maxwell, 2011).

Experience Worth Sharing

The final central theme articulated by participants was “experience worth sharing,” which included the realizations: not to rush getting pregnant, the value of finishing studies, and listening to parents’ advice.

Not to Rush Getting Pregnant

One participant shared advice for young girls to avoid early relationships and not rush into marriage, encouraging them to enjoy their youth and focus on education.

“Akong mensahe sa mga batan-on karon kay dili dapat mag dali-dali og minyo. Dapat magpadayon jud og skwela kay dili jud lalim mahimong inahan. Dapat i-enjoy ang teenage life.”

(My message to the young ones is that they should not hurry to get married. They should continue to study hard because it is not easy to be a teen mother. Thus, they should enjoy their teenage life. —Bian)

Many young women drop out of school due to pregnancy, but continued education can help teenage mothers improve their lives (Shuger, 2016; Kirkman, 2011).

To Finish Studies

Youth are encouraged to prioritize education, pursue their dreams, and avoid marrying too early.

“Tumanon nila ilang pangandoy sa kinabuhi nga gusto nila makab.ot. Kailangan magpursigi sila ug skwela ug dili magminyo ug sayo.”

(They should reach their dreams in life. They should strive hard to finish their studies and not rush into marriage. —Karen)

Teenage mothers may work hard to overcome barriers and provide a better future for themselves and their children (Romi & Nadeem, 2014).

To Listen to Parents' Advice

Multiple participants emphasized the importance of listening to parental advice, recognizing its value after becoming mothers themselves.

“Daghan kaayo ko ug nakat-unan sama anang pag-atiman sa bata. Tapos akong mga desisyon sa kinabuhi kay para na sa akong anak dili na para sa akoo. Tapos nakat-unan pud nako tanan gi pang sulti sa akong ginikanan. Mas na appreciate nako akong mama ug papa.”

(I have learnt a lot, especially in taking care of a baby. All my decisions in life are for my child, not for myself. I value my parents more now. —Karen)

“Dapat diay maminaw sa mga tambag sa ginikanan. Dili dapat tumanon nato atong sarili.”

(We should listen to the advice of our parents. We should not make decisions on our own. —May)

Listening to teenagers' stories reveals that their perceptions and experiences of early motherhood are nuanced, and with support, some can break the cycle of poverty (Zondi, 2017; Sigh, 2008).

SUMMARY

The study identified the challenges experienced by eight teenage mothers in Barangay Lawa, Don Marcelino, Davao Occidental. Most had one child; one had two. Purposive sampling and in-depth interviews were used, with thematic analysis employed for data interpretation. Major themes included the challenges of young mothers (body image and community criticism), lessons learned from the experience (fear, stress, and feeling matured), and experiences worth sharing (not to rush into pregnancy or marriage, finishing studies, and listening to parents).

CONCLUSION

This study outlined the various difficulties faced by teen mothers, indicating that physical, emotional, and social challenges are common. Frequently cited difficulties included balancing the demanding responsibilities of caring for a baby and managing feelings of inadequacy. Many teenage mothers realized the importance of finishing their studies and listening to parental guidance. The findings aim to raise awareness of the numerous challenges faced by teenage mothers.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings confirm that adolescent mothers face many difficulties, from community judgment and health issues to the stress of childcare. Full support from healthcare experts, parents, and social workers is needed. This research is relevant for social workers, policymakers, and programs advocating prevention and support for young mothers. It also serves as a warning to teenagers about the realities of young motherhood.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

DECLARATION OF REGENERATIVE AI

AI was used as a tool for proofreading to enhance grammar and check for misspelled words only.

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