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The Impact of Patriarchy on the Education of Mother-learners: A Phenomenological Study of Three Rural Schools in Namibia

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Abstract

This article investigates some of the constraining factors experienced by 16 school-going mothers in the Okalongo circuit, Namibia. This was a qualitative phenomenological study, conducted through in-depth individual interviews, focus group discussions, and reflective journals with 16 school-going mothers between the ages of 17 and 20, purposively selected from three different public rural schools. This qualitative, phenomenological study analyses, through feminist and intersectionality theory, the lived experiences of these young mothers as they encounter the traditional, patriarchal attitudes and practices of the Ovambadja community because these girls fell pregnant before their formal, cultural initiation. The article documents, through the voices of the young women themselves, the numerous constraints they experienced and overcame in their determination to complete their schooling. The findings show that, aside from the deeply held destructive patriarchal beliefs that significantly constrain and harm the mother-learners, the Namibian Learners Pregnancy Policy, which is intended to protect and ensure pregnant learners and mother-learners complete their schooling, is not being properly or effectively implemented. The study recommends an increase in efforts at the national level in Namibia to raise awareness among members of parliament, school administrators and principals, and all policymakers to develop better monitoring systems that will improve policy implementation in schools.

Keywords: *Feminism, Intersectionality, School-going mothers, Education, Patriarchy, Namibia, Learner Pregnancy Policy*

Introduction

This article emerged from a wider study conducted in the Okalongo circuit in the Omusati Region, Namibia. It was conducted among the Ovambadja, a community situated in northern rural Namibia. The Ovambadja belong to one of the eight Ovawambo tribes under the Ovambadja traditional authorities in Namibia. The Ovambadja are very traditional, adhering closely to their cultural values and norms. One such value is a strict taboo concerning the pregnancy of unwed women and teenagers, particularly if these women are not yet initiated through ‘*Olufuko*’. ‘*Olufuko*’ is an important initiation ceremony among the Ovambadja community, where girls aged between 10 and 18 are introduced to womanhood. Those who undergo this ceremony uphold honour and respect for themselves and their parents (Kautondokwa, 2014). Thus, if an initiated girl becomes pregnant, she cannot be socially

rebuked, and her child is not regarded as illegitimate, even if she is not married. This is because she is considered a mature, initiated woman. But if a girl becomes pregnant before going through this ritual, she is considered promiscuous and an embarrassment to her family and community. Uninitiated pregnant girls, like some of the participants in this study, are humiliated, abused, and forced to drop out of school because they do not follow the traditional values and norms of their community. It is against this background that this article presents some of the constraints experienced by school-going mothers in three rural schools in the Okalongo circuit. The mother-learners' experiences are shaped by the social and cultural attitudes of the Ovambadja community towards motherhood and education. The article further shows that deeply ingrained patriarchy within Namibian society significantly influences the beliefs and perspectives on how teenage motherhood is viewed and positioned. To begin the discussion, literature is reviewed on teenage motherhood and schooling in the African context. From here, the theoretical framework, grounded in feminist and intersectionality theory, is presented, based on the idea that our reality and knowledge are socially constructed. The aims and research questions that guide the study are then articulated, and the methodology of how the study was carried out is clearly explained. Lastly, the article presents the research findings, followed by discussions of these findings and a conclusion.

Literature review

This study is informed by the rapid increase in teenage pregnancies over the past decades, not only in the Okalongo but also in both developed and developing countries. Cases of teenage pregnancy are particularly high in Africa, and according to the World Health Organisation (2022), 16 million teenage girls become mothers each year. The majority come from poor families (Kassa, Arowojolu, Odukogbe, & Yalew, 2018). A survey conducted in South Africa in 2011 found that nearly 11% of girls under the age of 19 were likely to become pregnant, and “approximately 4.5 per cent of all females in the age group of 13-19 years were reported to be pregnant during the survey period” (Statistics South Africa, 2012, p. 18). Furthermore, data from 2009 and 2010 show that slightly more than 2% of girls aged 17 to 24 were not enrolled in any educational institution, blaming pregnancy for their absence (Statistics South Africa, 2012). Both Nigeria and Zimbabwe also report having high birth rates among teenagers, with more than 100 per 1000 girls aged between 15 and 19

becoming pregnant annually (Chauke, 2013). This overall pattern suggests that an average of 7.8 million teenage girls in developing countries will give birth every year from 2011 to 2020. The issue of teenagers becoming mothers at a young age has serious educational, social, and economic consequences. There is consensus among researchers, policymakers, and the general public that teenage pregnancy and childbearing are social problems because teenage pregnancy is associated with social issues such as poverty, poor education, risky behaviours that lead to poor health, and child welfare.

In Namibia, before the introduction of the Learner Pregnancy Policy (Ministry of Education) [MoE], 2012), pregnant girls were not allowed to attend school and were expelled. Many girls suffered the consequences of being uneducated, unlike the boys who impregnated them. This discrimination is a clear example of gender inequality and the oppression of teenage mothers. However, the situation changed after Namibia joined other international communities that pledged and signed the conventions that promote gender equality. These conventions are the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (MoE, 2012; UN, 2000) and the Protocol to the African Charter on the Rights of Women in Africa (African Union, 2003). Any country committed to these international instruments is obliged to ensure equal educational rights for children, including girls, who could become pregnant before completing their schooling.

In 1990, as a fulfilment of the commitments made in Jomtien, Thailand, during the World Conference on Education for All and with the ratification of international conventions that call for gender equity in education, the Namibian government developed the Learner Pregnancy Policy, which allows teenage mothers to remain in school (MoE, 2012; Hubbard, 2008). The policy is part of a wider strategy to improve the education of teenage mothers and is a key step towards the attainment of basic education for all school-going mothers in Namibia. This policy protects school-going mothers' right to complete their primary and secondary education. Furthermore, the policy outlines the roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders in both the prevention and management of learner pregnancy. These stakeholders include school principals, teachers, and parents. The main objective of the policy is to "improve the prevention and management of learner pregnancy in Namibia, with the ultimate aim of decreasing the number of learner pregnancies and increasing the number of mother-learners who complete their education" (MoE, 2012, p. 3). Schools are also expected to provide

pregnant learners with psychological support, which includes encouraging teenage mothers to continue their education before and after the baby's birth. The policy also makes provision for a safe school environment where all teaching and non-teaching staff are expected to ensure a non-discriminatory attitude towards pregnant learners, expectant fathers, and their respective parents. Furthermore, schools are expected to have trained life skills teachers to ensure that learners receive sex education.

However, according to Iimene (2015), the policy also created misunderstanding and miscommunication among Namibian stakeholders in education. Some parents, teachers, non-governmental organisations, and individuals supported the policy, but others felt that the policy made it acceptable for girls to fall pregnant. The policy also challenged cultural expectations towards motherhood because it encouraged teenage mothers to remain in school, which conflicts with the traditional belief that once you became a mother, you were expected not to go to school (Hacking, 1999). Even with the implementation of the policy, the teenage pregnancy rate in schools is increasing, and many young mothers continue to drop out of school. According to the Ministry of Education, 3927 schoolgirls between the ages of 12 and 20 dropped out of school between 2019 and 2020 due to pregnancy (Ndeyanale, 2022). Table 1 below shows that in almost every region of Namibia, the numbers have increased. In Omusati, where this study took place, 235 mother-learners dropped out in 2019 and 286 in 2020.

Table 1: Statistics of mother-learners who dropped out of school per region in 2019 and 2020

Region	2019	2020
Ohangwena	341	480
Kavango East	197	369
Kavango West	150	241
Omusati (study context)	235	286
Oshikoto	152	266
Otjozondjupa	67	127
Khomas	61	84
Omaheke	46	57
Zambezi	78	124
Oshana	86	111
Kunene	102	94
Kharas	18	5
Hardap	19	57

Erongo	35	39
Total	1587	2340

(Source: Ndeyanale, 2022)

This ongoing increase in mother-learners dropping out of school suggests a lack of awareness by teachers, parents, and community members on how to implement the provisions of the policy, or a reluctance to do so. Evidence suggests that re-entry policies are often not consistently applied because of a lack of knowledge at the regional or school level, or because of arbitrary and context-specific decisions made about their application (UNESCO, 2014). Indeed, a UNESCO report singles out Namibia in this respect, with regard to its Learner Pregnancy Policy, stating that while “the general policy and legislation in the country is strong, the main challenge highlighted is the lack of proper implementation of the policy in Namibia, and [the] need for more training and awareness, comprehensive inspections, increased human resources, enhanced accountability, and coordination” (UNESCO, 2018, p. 40). Contributing to, and supporting the UNESCO claims, this article conducts the first study ever undertaken among the Ovambadja community on the lived experiences of teenage mothers. The voices of the 16 teenage mothers increase our knowledge of some of the Ovambadja community’s cultural beliefs, and the expectations and difficulties of the teenage mothers.

Theoretical framework

Feminist theory was used to analyse and explain the discrimination, patriarchy, and oppression experienced by the pregnant girls and mother-learners in the Namibian Ovambadja community. Feminist theory provides an analysis of social relations and investigates the reasons for gender inequality (Griffiths, 2022). Furthermore, it argues for the advancement of women’s rights and interests (Rosser, 2005). The wider study upon which this article is based shows that societal institutions in the Ovambadja community (such as the school, church, family, and economic sectors) oppress girls and young women, rendering them invisible and denying them a voice in private and public spheres (Haiping, 2022). Feminist theory provides a means to critique these power relations and replace them with a different and substantive agenda of empowerment, voice, emancipation, equality, and representation for oppressed women and girls (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). In doing

so, feminism foregrounds issues of power, silencing, and voicing. Furthermore, feminist theory supports social justice and social transformation in order to both critique and offer redress for the inequities and injustices that continue to undermine and even destroy the lives of mother-learners and their families (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007). This article intends to show and challenge the ongoing cultural injustice towards mother-learners in Namibian society, and also give them a voice, encouraging them to speak about the difficulties and discrimination they have experienced. It is also a testimony to their resilience and determination to complete their schooling. Radical feminist and intersectionality theories are used specifically because of their relevance to this article.

Radical feminism is awareness of patriarchal control, exploitation, and oppression at the material and ideological level of women's labour, fertility, and sexuality in the workplace, and in society in general (Bhasin & Khan, 1999). The hypothesis for radical feminism is that women are subordinated, oppressed, disadvantaged, and treated unequally in comparison to men (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007). Radical feminists argue for the abolishment of patriarchy by opposing traditional gender roles that are responsible for women's oppression and instead emphasise radical social restructuring (Thompson, 2001). Though Sesay (2010) cautions that using radical feminist theory exposes the vulnerability of teenage school-going mothers by bringing something considered private into the public realm, Ellis-Sloan (2014) argues instead that radical feminist theory advocates that sex, which is generally confined to the private sphere, become public, particularly in countries with high rates of teenage pregnancy. Furthermore, radical feminism investigates what, in social and cultural discursive spaces, makes teenage school-going mothers more vulnerable to social injustice (Karim-Sesay, 2006). The theory contends that women are manipulated not only in the public spheres of politics and employment but also in the private sphere of the family (Chiponda, 2014). Radical feminism identifies oppression and inequality in sexuality discourse as contributing factors in teenage pregnancy and schooling (Ngabaza, 2010; Ellis-Sloan, 2014).

One weakness of radical feminism is its overemphasis on patriarchy as the primary source of women's dominance. This conflates and obscures other forms of oppression, such as capitalism and racism (Mannathoko, 1992). In this respect, intersectionality theory is useful because it recognises that women suffer not only because of patriarchy but also because of other overlapping identities and experiences.

Intersectionality theory extends beyond the boundaries of gender to include numerous other social categories, such as religion, culture, age, sexual orientation, class, educational attainment, and economic situation (Crenshaw, 1996). The list of identity overlaps associated with teenage motherhood is wide-ranging and includes categories of race, gender, and class (Crenshaw, 1991). Certain aspects of their identities may be more important than others, but no one is ever without multiple identities (Grewal & Caren, 2001). These identity categories are intersectional, influencing the experiences of teenage school-going mothers (McClellan, 2012).

Aims

This study investigates the impact that patriarchy has on the lived experiences of school-going mothers in primary and junior secondary school (Grades 4-9), between the ages of 17 and 20, in northern Namibia.

Research questions

Main question:

What impact does patriarchy have on the education of mother-learners in the Okalongo circuit, Omusati region, Namibia?

Sub-questions:

1. What are some of the constraining, intersectional factors experienced by teenage school-going mothers?
2. What support do schools provide to teenage mothers who drop out and re-enter school after they have given birth?

Methodology

Research approach

This study uses a qualitative, feminist research approach. It adopts the interpretive paradigm which claims that social reality is not singular or objective, but rather shaped by human experience and social context. This paradigm is best studied for socio-historic work because it can

reconcile an individual's own subjective interpretation of the phenomenon with their situational context (Wand & Weber, 1993). Apart from interpretive paradigm the study also draws on the phenomenology tradition. This derives from the work of Edmund Husserl and is used to describe the lived and conscious experiences of an identified phenomenon, in this case, the lived experiences of teenage school-going mothers (Moustakas, 1994).

Sampling

The study used narrow purposive and convenience sampling of mother-learners who have experienced motherhood and schooling within the Okalongo circuit in Namibia. Purposive sampling is appropriate for qualitative research because it is used to gain access to “knowledgeable people”, who have in-depth knowledge or experience of the specific issues under investigation (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 157). Three schools from the Okalongo circuit were selected as research sites. The sites were selected for a variety of reasons. First, the sites were convenient, making it easier to contact the participants. Second, the study focused on schools in rural areas because the majority of Okalongo's schools are rural. Third, in comparison to other schools, some schools in the Okalongo circuit reported a high rate of teenage pregnancies in 2016 (Okalongo termly report, March 12, 2016). The sample size across the three selected combined¹ schools comprised 16 mother-learners. Because of the sensitive nature of the study, Life Skills teachers initially assisted in identifying the participants and establishing a trusting relationship with them. The 16 school-going mothers completed a questionnaire, which formed part of their demographic profile. The participants ranged in age from 17 to 20 when interviewed. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used throughout the research process, as per Table 1 below.

¹ The term ‘combined’ refers to schools that include more than one schooling phase, such as a school which combines Junior Primary (pre-primary to grade 3), Senior Primary (grades 4-7), and Junior Secondary (grade 8-9).

Table 1: Participants' profiles

Pseudonyms	Age when they became a mother	Age at the time of the interview	Grade when they became a mother	Grade at the time of the interview	Child/ren age	Period out of school	Child caretaker while going to school
Kangobe	17	18	9	10	5 months	0	aunt
Kakuki	16, 18	20	8 9	10	4 years and 1 year	0	aunt
Kaupu	18	20	9	10	1 year, 6 months	0	aunt
Ndumboksha	16	17	8	9	1 year	0	mother
Kambwa	15	18	9	10	1 year	2 years	mother
Denea	18	20	9	9	2 years	1 year and 8 months	mother
Betty	15	17	9	9	1 year	8 months	mother
Dollar	18	20	8	8	1 year	2 years	grand-mother
Rusia	17	18	9	9	11 months	11 months	mother
Lorence	19	20	9	9	10 months	1 month	mother
Trezzy	18	19	9	9	10 months	8 months	mother
Ndaudako	19	20	7	8	9 months	0	mother
Dulika	18	19	9	10	1 year and 5 months	0	grand-mother
Mweulenga	18	20	9	10	1 year and 7 months	3 months	mother
Namalimbo	19	20	9	10	2 months and 2 weeks	3 months	mother
Ndawanapo	17	19	8	9	1 year and 6 months	0	mother

Data Collection

Data were gathered from a variety of sources and carried out in a specific order, beginning with reflective journals distributed to each participant, followed up by three focus group discussions, and concluded with 16 one-on-one interviews, with each process informing the other. This means that all 16 participants from three different schools were given a journal, and all took part in the focus group discussions and one-on-one interviews. The questions in all three sources were not the same, as each instrument served a different data-gathering purpose. The data from the reflective journals focused on the daily experiences of motherhood and

schooling and aided in the formulation of the questions for the focus group discussions. These were based on the lived experiences at school, home, and in the community and informed the questions for the one-on-one interviews, which looked at mother-learners' life stories and their lived experiences of motherhood and schooling. The discussions and interviews ranged in length from 30 to 45 minutes each. The rationale behind asking the same questions to the same set of participants was for validity purposes, as the participants produced results that corresponded to the lived experiences of mother-learners from different schools. The individual interviews and focus-group discussions were recorded after assent (permission granted by their parents due to the participants still being minors) and consent (for the participants over 18 years at the time of the interviews) were obtained from each individual participant. A digital recording device was used, which made data collection more efficient as no dialogue was missed and allowed for reliable transcription and comparison of contributions. In addition, the participants were unable to express themselves well in English; therefore, all data were collected in Oshiwambo, the participants' first language, and translated into English by the lead researcher, who is knowledgeable and fluent in Oshiwambo.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct the study was obtained from the University of the Witwatersrand Research Office Human Research Ethics Committee and from the Omusati Education Directorate, as well as from the school principals, the interviewed mother-learners, and the parents of the minor teenage mothers. Permission was also obtained to record the interviews, and the participants and location names have been kept anonymous throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the significance of the research so that they could make an informed, voluntary decision about whether or not to participate. Participants were assured that the information they provided was solely for research purposes, and they were given the opportunity to review the transcripts during the analysis and to remove any information they were dissatisfied with. They were also given the option to withdraw at any point during the research process if they so desired. However, none of the participants withdrew, partly because the lead researcher encouraged them to share their experience, as it would be of great benefit to other teenage school-going mothers and that the information they shared could

lead to positive change among other teenage mothers and policymakers in the future.

Data analysis

This study adopted thematic content analysis as an analytic strategy. The analysis consisted of both an inductive and deductive process that began with the identification of words and phrases in the data. The deductive process was aided by the research questions, and the inductive process was aided by establishing trends in the data. The inductive process aligns well with feminist research because interviewing gives the participants the opportunity to share their stories while the researcher is required to listen. Allowing the participants to speak gave rise to themes in the data that were not initially expected. Moreover, this analysis strategy helped to identify codes from the data elicited from the focus group interviews, the one-on-one interviews, and the reflective journals. The identified codes were compared to form categories that were organised into themes (Clarke & Braun, 2013). The findings generated from the themes are discussed in relation to the impact of patriarchy experienced by the teenage school-going mother participants in the study and the constraints they experience because of it.

Findings

The key findings relate to the constraining factors experienced by teenage school-going mothers that prevent them from continuing with their education, and that obstruct the proper implementation of the Learner Pregnancy Policy in Namibia. Five specific constraining factors are identified and discussed: bullying, humiliation, and harassment; stigmatisation and discrimination; cultural influences; societal gender expectations; and a lack of educational support. While the focus of this article is on the constraining factors, the autonomy and agency of these young women are also briefly considered.

Constraining factor 1: bullying, humiliation, and harassment

A striking finding from this study's data analysis is that all 16 participants experienced some form of humiliation and harassment at school, at home, and in the community. These include gender bullying, name-calling and insults from other learners (especially boys), parents, and community members. Harassment and humiliation practices were not experienced by teenage school-going fathers, despite the fact that some also attended the same school as the teenage mothers. The teenage mothers were harassed, not only in school but in the community as well. They were constantly reminded of how irresponsible they were to fall pregnant while still in school. Trezzy affirms this finding. She said,

On my way to the clinic one day, I met a woman from our community. She mocked me and remind(ed) me of how foolish it is for me to become pregnant at my age (IIT², 26 September, 2018).

Ndawanapo experienced the following:

I was once told by the boys in my class that I am dirty and stink... that I should tell the father of my child to buy me soap to wash myself... this type of bullying and humiliation has had a significant impact on my academic performance (FGDE³, 11 October, 2018).

Kambwa also experienced bullying, which included name calling. As a result, she dropped out of school soon after her pregnancy became visible. This was what she said:

There were days when a boy in my class cried like a baby while others laughed and stared at me... I had no choice but to drop out of school as soon as the pregnancy became visible because I was tired of being bullied every day. They referred to me as '*ehengu*' [an offensive way of referring to a woman, particularly those who have given birth outside of wedlock and are uninitiated. The nearest equivalent in English would be 'bitch'] because '*ondamita*' [this offensive term literally means to become pregnant before initiation] (FGDT⁴, 12 September, 2018).

² Individual Interview Tango Combined School. Abbreviated coding is used in the study.

³ Focus Group Discussion from Etale Combined School

⁴ Focus Group Discussion from Tango Combined School.

These responses show how school-going mothers are harassed, through offensive labelling, or name calling, such as ‘*ebengu*’ and ‘*ondamita*’. Such name-calling is only applied to girls who became pregnant before being initiated in *Olufuko*. Other humiliating phrases such as ‘go bath, you are smelling’ were also used. The expression of being called ‘dirty’ has two implications: one refers to physical cleanliness, and the other refers to morality (Kautondokwa, 2014). To this community, the initiation ritual, *Olufuko*, is a powerful practice that can be used to judge and humiliate teenage mothers. Because other learners are aware that some mother-learners are not initiated, it makes it possible for boys and adults to make such derogatory comments without fear of reprisal, reinforcing patriarchal prejudice in order to subordinate and humiliate teenage mothers. According to Kautondokwa (2014), young girls are considered ‘clean’ if they have been initiated through *Olufuko*, which is regarded as a process of ritual purification. This practise transforms them into adults by cleansing them from sexual taboos so that they can be socially accepted and thus give birth to legitimate children, even if they are still single. The verbal abuse mother-learners who have not been initiated receive, perpetuates gender stereotypes and emotional abuse, underpinned by deeply held patriarchal community beliefs and practices.

Constraining factor 2: stigmatisation and discrimination

It is also evident that some mother-learners lost friends because of the stigma associated with teenage pregnancy and motherhood. Due to the fear of being condemned and stigmatised, some of the mother-learners opted for isolation. Kambwa, illustrates this finding in that she decided to isolate herself to avoid being abused. She said,

When I returned to school after giving birth, I isolated myself from other girls because the boys once told me that walking with other girls without babies is inappropriate; what am I telling or teaching them? (III, 26 September 2018).

Ndaudako recalled how she experienced fear of going to school because of stigma. She said,

You always have to wake up with fear, because there is no single day that passes by without being laughed at. The fear of being pregnant and

the one after giving birth is not the same. Everyone looks at you in a strange way when you are pregnant.

She further explained how she lost friends because of her pregnancy. She said,

Because of my pregnancy, I lost friends. They have stated it clearly that they do not want to associate with me because I am now a mother... we don't have anything to talk about or discuss. Even though it is painful, I let it go (FGDE, 11 October 2018).

Womanhood and motherhood for African women are constructed within various patriarchal discourses, which are defined by African traditional culture (Rubaya, 2022). The reaction of other learners towards mother-learners is an indication of the deeply held patriarchal beliefs in this community. To be isolated and separated from other girls who do not have babies ensures the subordination of and discrimination against these girls because they have transgressed patriarchal and gender social taboos. The ongoing stigma attached to teenage mothers remains prevalent in Namibia and is negatively affecting and constraining the education of teenage mothers. According to SmithBattle (2012), teenage mothers are stereotyped as 'bad influencers', 'unmotivated', 'irresponsible', 'incompetent parents', and 'immoral'. These stereotypes are confirmed by the reactions of the Ovambadja community in its treatment of these girls. This patriarchal community expects girls to behave according to gender boundaries, which are determined by whether they are initiated or not. For the Ovambadja, a woman should be initiated, get married, bear children, and submit to her husband, who is the head of the household, at all times. Whether or not she completes her education is irrelevant. These mother-learners, who defy societal and patriarchal expectations and return to school to complete their education, are subject to further labelling and stigmatisation by their families and society (Siwila, 2012). The stigma experienced by the mother-learners in this study had a profound effect on their lives and their children because it led to fear, shame, resentment, anger, distress, and loss of confidence, much in line with the outcomes of previous studies (Yardley, 2008; Fulford & Ford-Gilboe, 2004). Similarly, Whitehead (2001) points out that isolation and social exclusion (as experienced by the 16 teenage mothers in this study) have a negative impact on the mental and physical health of young mothers. Furthermore, stigma takes away teenage mothers' confidence and reduces trust and help seeking, which can lead

to missed lessons or dropping out of school entirely to avoid stigma, bullying, and discrimination (Fessler, 2008).

Constraining factor 3: Cultural influences

Another key finding is how the *Olufuko* cultural initiation reinforces the dominance of patriarchy around the issue of teenage motherhood and means that teenage school-going mothers will be exposed to discrimination and subordination while at school. As explained, *Olufuko* is an important cultural initiation ritual that is believed to introduce girls to womanhood, and those who undergo it are considered to uphold honour and respect for themselves and their parents. Traditional belief means that teenage mothers who have already undergone the initiation ceremony are not subjected to blame, bullying, or insults because their parents and community regard them as ethical and decent. Dollar, a 20-year-old woman, was rejected, blamed, and insulted by her father as a result of her pregnancy before the *Olufuko* initiation. Dollar said,

My father felt humiliated and angry with me because I became pregnant before my *Olufuko* initiation (IIT, 26 September 2018).

As a consequence, Dollar's father withdrew his support for his daughter because he was embarrassed by her pregnancy and because he believed he was entitled to do so. Dollar's father's reaction is an indication of how strongly held these patriarchal beliefs are, over women's bodies. Mother-learners, already incredibly vulnerable because of their pregnancy are further victimised, punished, and rejected by their own families. Rusia was also insulted by her aunt (her father's sister), and her father chased her out of the house because she did not undergo *Olufuko*:

[I] was insulted by my aunt for not being initiated in Olufuko; she always called me '*shibengu ove*,' and my father chased me out of the house (IIT, 26 September 2018).

The literal English translation of '*shibengu ove*' is bitch, whore, or slut (Kleinman, Ezzell, & Frost, 2009). It is another derogatory term that suggests a useless or worthless person in the context of the Ovambadja. It also has a sexually promiscuous connotation in that a woman who is referred to as a '*shibengu ove*' is considered someone risky to be associated with, especially around other girls. Traditional men are discouraged from

marrying teenage mothers who become pregnant before initiation (Anyolo, 2008).

Constraining factor 4: Societal gender expectations and schooling

Another key finding that predisposes mother-learners to social rebuke is societal gender expectations. The Ovambadja community values motherhood as an important part of a woman's identity. To this community, becoming a mother is more than just a matter of giving birth. It is also linked to a natural destiny and the fulfilment of the female role at home and in the community (McMahon, 1995). Thus, because of the belief that it is the 'natural destiny' of women to stay home, cook for the family, and bear children, teenage mothers are not expected to attend school, but to remain home and take care of their children. Feminists argue that women are frequently confined to the family home, where their activities are restricted to reproduction and household chores (Williams, 2019). Affirming this, Kakuki said,

Some 'meme' (referring to women in their vernacular) in my community used to question why I had a baby at my age... Was I not ashamed of myself? I was told that I needed to stay at home to feed my baby... Why should I waste my time to go to school? (IIO, 19 September 2018)

This finding illustrates the reality of the social and cultural expectations in this community concerning motherhood and schooling. In addition, all 16 teenage school-going mothers indicated that they are assigned many more responsibilities at home and, in most cases, do not have time to fulfil their educational responsibilities. Kangobe confirms this in her explanation of how the responsibilities at home interfere with her studies. She said,

As a mother, I am responsible for feeding my child, washing her clothes, fetching water and wood, cooking, and studying at night because I do not have time to study during the day (FGDO, 6 September 2018).

Expected responsibilities at home mean that teenage mothers face educational deprivation because of societal and gender expectations. Gupta (2000) argues that these expectations stem from the belief that certain characteristics and behaviours are natural roles for women. As a

result, girls who become pregnant and mothers prematurely are silenced by cultural values and norms and often face discrimination and marginalisation. Furthermore, teenage mothers are mocked as irresponsible parents and incompetent mother-learners for wasting their time by trying to go back to school.

Constraining factor 5: Lack of educational and moral support

As stipulated in the Learner Pregnancy Policy, teenage mothers require educational assistance, and the school time lost must be compensated for. For example, it states that “the school shall support, and guide the parents/primary caregivers and the pregnant learner/learner-parents in the investigation of options for additional tutoring if necessary to complete the curriculum of the year in which the learner takes leave of absence” (MoE, 2012, p. 22). However, a lack of educational and moral support is one of the key findings of the study. Namalimbo verified this lack of support, saying,

[I] returned to school today, and no teachers approached me during my absence; I always have to ask my classmates what they've learned, or I'll miss out (IIE, 24 October 2018).

Kapu experienced the same lack of support. She said,

In the event of my absence, I never received any learning or psychological support from my teachers... It is always my responsibility to find out what my classmates have learned while I have been absent. It is my responsibility to stay up to date (IIO, 19 September 2018).

Denea agreed that her situation was the same as at the other two schools. She said,

The teachers never gave me any extra lessons on their own, unless you specifically request it, if you remain silent, you will receive nothing and will have missed out (III, 26 September 2018).

Despite the clear directives in the policy, this study shows that no educational support was provided to any of the 16 participants during their pregnancy or afterwards. All indicated that they had to request teaching and learning material themselves. This suggests that the

policymakers failed to set up proper strategies for the implementation of the policy.

Autonomy and Agency

According to African feminism, rejecting subservience and inferiority can help teenage mothers develop a sense of self-worth and self-determination (Chukwuma, 1994). This was also evident in their responses because, despite the constraints discussed above, the 16 teenage school-going mothers in this study all made the decision to continue with their education after childbearing. They did not perceive themselves as deviant or promiscuous, as Namibian society does. Instead, they demonstrated a sense of self-respect and agency and also distanced themselves from those who abused and stereotyped them (Gordon-Rouse, 2001). While this article has largely focused on the constraints they experienced, the teenage mothers also showed self-determination. Dollar from Tango Combined School, for example, stated that,

Because of the name calling and being accused of being a bad influencer, I have decided to walk alone to and from school (FGDT, 12 September 2018).

Dulika from Etale Combined School said,

Most of my classmates are not serious about their studies. They have no idea what real life is... They may discourage you from participating in and concentrating on your studies at times. I used to do the same thing before I became a mother... now I am not so sure. I have decided to make my own decisions, to work alone and to stay alone because this is my life and my child's life (IIE⁵, 24 October 2018).

The findings of the larger study (Haipinge, 2022), from which this article is derived, found that the mother-learners who took part were extremely brave to stand up to, and endure the labelling and discrimination they experienced. These young women wanted their voices to be heard because people in their community had judged and silenced them (hooks, 2000). These mother-learners also confronted the fear of social exclusion by society, as well as being labelled as bad influencers by other learners,

⁵ Individual Interview from Etale Combined School

teachers, and members of the community, in their determination to complete their education.

Discussion of the findings

The article identifies numerous constraints mother-learners face, which points to a failure to implement the Namibian Learner Pregnancy Policy effectively during and after their pregnancy. The major, overall finding in this intersectional feminism study is the voices of the mother-learners, who experienced overlapping and concurrent forms of discrimination while pursuing their studies. This illustrates the continuing dominance of patriarchal attitudes and cultural perceptions, which promote and enable ongoing harmful, unequal gender and power relationships in Namibian society. This contributes to the discrimination and stigma against pregnant learners and teenage mothers, forcing them to drop out of school and isolating them from their friends, family, and community. The intention of the Learner Pregnancy Policy (MoE, 2012; Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare, 2010) to treat school-going mothers as learners with special needs who require attention due to the pressure and anxiety they face in their schools, homes, and communities was not evident at any of the three schools in this study or experienced by the participants. The policy states unequivocally that teachers must provide all necessary psychological and educational support to teenage school-going mothers, both before and after the birth of their children. This directive contradicts the experiences of school-going mothers. Furthermore, the findings clearly show a lack of support from the teachers of these girls. Instead, the school-going mothers experienced discrimination, stigmatisation, bullying, insults, and all kinds of humiliation in the school environment, often from the teachers themselves. The analysis of the 16 school-going mothers' stories shows that their lived experiences intersect in four social realities that predispose them to discrimination and marginalisation: gender, sexuality, culture, and education. The evidence from their stories shows that people's ways of thinking, reasoning, and expectations were influenced by the customs and traditions of the community they came from (Karimi, 2015; Musese, 2018). Patriarchal culture is powerfully dominant because cultural practices in the Ovambadja community, as in many other African countries, are shaped by, and perpetuate deeply held beliefs that enforce gender inequality. These beliefs curtail women's control over themselves and their bodies (Kambarami, 2006).

Radical feminism and intersectionality theory provide powerful lenses to understand the challenges of discrimination and the marginalisation of school-going mothers. According to feminist theorists (Chiponda, 2014; Bryson, 1999), traditions and customs that exist within our societies create barriers for mother-learners that prevent their participation equally within public spaces, beyond the home and family. Those barriers are so deeply rooted in cultural norms that they impede school-going mothers from attaining their full potential, preventing them from completing their education (Akella & Jordan, 2015). These deep-rooted customs and traditions, such as *Olufuko*, prevent mother-learners from fully participating in society through their schooling, as teenage pregnancy is regarded as culturally unacceptable (Imene, 2015). This means that these girls are not afforded equal educational opportunities despite the existence of international and national policies that are meant to ensure this. The goal of feminism is to free both women and men from the rigidity of unequal gender roles that society has imposed on them through patriarchy (Jaggar & Rothenberg, 1993). Even so, this article demonstrates that teenage mothers were the victims of oppression and gender inequality in education, which poses a significant problem for the effective implementation of Namibia's policy requirements. Apart from radical feminists who assert that women's subordination is rooted in societally enforced biological expectations, intersectionality theory further illustrates that the girls in this study are oppressed and subordinated because of their multiple identities, including gender, sexuality, culture, and education (hooks, 2001). It is evident from the findings that the young age of these school-going mothers also contributes to their vulnerability to discrimination. Clearly, there is a significant gap between international rights movements and the reality in Namibia, in terms of access to education and moral support for pregnant girl learners.

Lastly, the findings suggest that teenage pregnancy remains a powerful social taboo in Namibia, leaving school-going mothers highly stigmatised by their own community members, which also includes other women. This claim stems from cultural beliefs that teenage pregnancy is wholly the fault of the girls, without considering that pregnancy is the result of sex, which means the boys involved also bear responsibility (Nguyen, Scott, Neupane, Tran & Menon, 2019). However, in Namibian society, gender expectations of how girls should behave hold them accountable if they go against what is expected, which affirms the patriarchal dominance of a male-centred society. The blame for

becoming pregnant before initiation is directed solely at teenage mothers because culturally, it is regarded as the woman's fault for allowing the man to impregnate her (Nhongo, 2018). Teenage fathers do not face the same discrimination and oppression because, in a patriarchal society, such as Namibia, men are given absolute priority and women's rights are disregarded. Feminist thought is relevant here as it advocates for equal educational rights and opportunities for school-going mothers to ensure they receive an education like any other girls, and as intended by the Learner Pregnancy Policy.

Conclusion

This article presents some of the lived experiences of the 16 school-going mothers from three public rural schools in the Okalongo circuit in the Omusati region of Namibia. The findings reveal the various constraints that mother-learners experience and demonstrate that they did not receive the adequate educational and moral support that the Learner Pregnancy Policy is intended to provide. Evidently, the Learner Pregnancy Policy (MoE, 2012) is not being implemented meaningfully, and ongoing discrimination against teenage school-going mothers continues. There is also a lack of consistency among Namibian stakeholders in education, as not all are in support of the policy. Evidently, patriarchy still exists in Namibian society, particularly in rural areas, and many women continue to be marginalised by cultural beliefs and practices that can harm mother-learners physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Mother-learners continue to be culturally oppressed in homes, schools, and society, despite laws protecting the rights of all teenage mothers and mother-learners, as reflected in the findings of this study.

However, despite the constraints experienced by the mother-learners, they were also extremely brave in their desire to return to school and complete their education. This is in spite of them being seen as deviating from cultural norms and expectations concerning motherhood and being ostracised by their own community. By exercising their educational rights, they were able to move beyond the traditional belief that teenage motherhood should be relegated to the private sphere. Instead, they firmly established motherhood in the public domain of schools, demonstrating the transformative nature of school-going mothers' positive agency (Wekesa, 2010).

According to the study's recommendations, there is a necessity to increase efforts at the national level in Namibia to raise awareness among members of parliament, school administrators and principals, and all policymakers about the importance of developing better monitoring systems to improve policy implementation in schools. Furthermore, community members need education to refrain from cultural and patriarchal views that condemn teenage mothers and mother-learners and to understand the importance of education for these young women. All barriers that prevent mother-learners from reaching their full potential in social institutions, such as schools, hospitals, and churches, must be removed because their right to education supersedes any discriminatory beliefs about teenage motherhood. In conclusion, the challenges faced by mother-learners in schools remain unresolved due to a misalignment between progressive policy, cultural norms, and societal behaviours. Achieving equality and non-discrimination for these young women in Namibia, particularly their right to education, remains an ongoing and vital task.

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