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Factors Associated with Adolescent Mother Return to School: A Review of Literature

Eunice Kinya Stephen¹, Daniel M. Nzengya², and Molly Secor³

¹School of Education & Social Science, St Paul's University, Limuru, Kenya; ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3394-6618>; kinyaeunice277@gmail.com; +254714029098

²School of Education & Social Science, St Paul's University, Limuru, Kenya; ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6588-364X>; dmuasya@spu.ac.ke.

³ Mark & Robyn Jones College of Nursing, Montana State University; ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2360-4080>; molly.secor@montana.edu.

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Address for Correspondence:

Eunice Kinya Stephen, School of Education & Social Science, St Paul's University, Limuru, Kenya. (kinyaeunice277@gmail.com; +254714029098)

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Abstract

The status of adolescent mother education stands as a pivotal concern for sustainable development across the continent. The SSA region has a disproportionately highest number of adolescent pregnancies and the lowest number of adolescent mothers who return to school, further undermining the potential of women to escape from poverty and contribute significantly to economic development and sustainable development goals (SDGs) despite most governments in Sub-Saharan Africa region having an adolescent mothers' return to school policy. Using a sample of 28 empirically peer-reviewed journals, this paper utilizes a systematic review methodology to evaluate factors influencing adolescent mothers' return to school in the Sub-Saharan Africa region. Six broad themes or factors were identified from the synthesis of the sample of the 28 papers, namely: category of school preferred by returning adolescent mothers, family factors influencing return to school, school experiences with the implementation of return to school policy, adolescent support systems and stakeholder perception, teachers and school principals' perspectives on adolescent mother return to school and adolescent mothers lived experiences and realities. A lesser studied theme on factors influencing adolescent mothers' return to school and retention to completion are the adolescent mothers' lived experiences and realities. Narratives from the scholars who have examined lived experiences highlight mothers' feelings that negative perception and treatment by those around them create a hostile learning environment, discouraging them from fully engaging in their studies and leading to higher dropout rates. This review, however, highlights a complex and challenging environment for teen mothers' return and retention in traditional schools. Although many countries in the SSA region have a return-to-school policy for adolescent mothers, there are still significant gaps regarding the school characteristics that promote the return and retention of adolescent mothers in traditional schools in the region. Such gaps continue to undermine the region's efforts in meeting SDG 5, with consequences in gender inequalities and women and girls.

Keywords

Adolescent mother return to school, retention, challenge, support, Sub-Saharan Africa

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1. Introduction and background

Adolescence is a transitional period from childhood to adulthood, accompanied by physical, psychological and emotional changes. It is during this period that young people also experience sexual development/maturation and begin engaging in sexual behavior that may lead to adolescent pregnancy. Adolescent pregnancy has been defined as pregnancy in girls aged between 10 and 19 years of age. Historically and in the contemporary global community, teenage pregnancy and motherhood have been associated with gender inequality in education. Though education enables people to make reasoned choices and provides them with greater opportunities, teenage childbearing interferes with girls' educational attainment in many settings, marking the end of their schooling. Lack of education leads to higher rates of poverty and disease, unemployment, hopelessness and underdevelopment. Hence, providing girls with an education is one of the fundamental rights they deserve to develop their human capacities and enable them and the nations they live in to advance socially and economically.

Global statistics compiled by the World Health Organization illustrate that approximately 12 million girls aged 15 to 19 and at least 777,000 girls under 15 years of age give birth yearly in developing regions (UNFPA, 2015). At least 10 million unintended pregnancies occur each year among adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 years in the developing world. Nearly one-third of all women in low- and middle-income countries enter motherhood during adolescence. Prior studies indicate that the total number of girls giving birth is projected to rise in Sub-Saharan Africa if current trends continue. For instance, *Kassa et al. (2018)* conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis, revealing a high prevalence of adolescent pregnancy in the region, which is likely to increase without significant intervention. Similarly, *Asmamaw, Tafere, and Negash (2023)* identified factors contributing to teenage pregnancy and projected a rising trend in high-fertility sub-Saharan African countries. Additionally, *Mekonen (2024)* emphasized that demographic and health survey data from 2019 to 2022 show a sustained high rate of teenage pregnancies, further supporting the projection of an increase in the number of young mothers. The number of girls under 15 who give birth is expected to rise from 2 million a year today to about 3 million a year in 2030. Births to teenage mothers account for more than half of all the births in this region: an estimated 101 births per 1000 women aged 15 to 19, with the majority of countries with teenage pregnancy levels above 30% being in sub-Saharan Africa. (*Bright Opoku Ahinkorah, et al 2019*). Therefore, government and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have attempted to address this via policies and other initiatives.

In Kenya, 15 per cent of women aged 15-19 have already given birth, and an additional 3 per cent are pregnant with their first child. These statistics highlight the significant prevalence of teenage pregnancies within this age group (*Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2022*). The percentage of women who have begun childbearing increases rapidly with age, from about 3 per cent among those aged 15 to 40 per cent among those aged 19. (KDHS 2022) With the recognition of adolescent pregnancy as both an individual and national challenge due to its related socio-economic costs, the Kenyan government formulated the "return to school" policy for adolescent mothers in 1994. The policy was developed and adopted to ensure that more girls can enroll, stay on and complete education at both primary and secondary school levels. The "return to school" policy for teenage mothers allows the teenage mother to be allowed, after delivery, to go back to school or be given support to gain admission into another school if she feels there are issues of stigma and discrimination. Further, the Basic Education Act of 2013 was formulated to ensure that learners who drop out have the opportunity to continue with their education. The Re-Entry policy for pregnant schoolgirls in Kenya has faced inconsistent implementation, largely due to an insensitive school environment, parental attitudes towards educating girls, and broader social influences. Despite their desire to return to school after delivery, many girls prefer transferring to different types of schools, including day/boarding mixed schools, day/boarding girls' only schools, and public, private, or faith-based institutions (*Human Rights Watch, 2021*).

The 2020 National Guidelines for School Re-Entry in Early Learning and Basic Education provide a framework for enhancing re-entry for learners who dropped out of school, including those with disabilities. The guidelines allow all such learners to acquire re-entry and access quality education in learning institutions. They provide modalities and mandates for stakeholders involved in implementing the entry policy. Kenya's 2009 National Health Policy also allows pregnant schoolgirls to stay in school to continue their studies if possible or practical.

1.1 Return to school policy in other African countries.

In Zambia, the return-to-school policy process dates back to June 1995 when the Zambia Association for University Women organized a conference on the situation of female children in their county. The conference proposed to the then Government that girls who became pregnant ought to be readmitted to school once care for the child was

assured (Ministry of Education, 2005)—this set the ground for the re-entry policy in 1997. Since then, the Zambian Government, through the Ministry of General Education (MoGE), has allowed pregnant girls to take leave and continue their education after delivery. The re-entry policy was grounded in the outcomes of the Beijing Conference 1995, a conference at which the Women's' Movement drew up its priorities and action plan. The conference demanded that girls who dropped out of school because of pregnancy should be readmitted after delivery. The implementation guide for the re-entry guidelines was developed and commissioned two years later to strengthen operationalization. The guidelines were distributed to schools, stakeholders, parents, and guardians to enable them to help schoolgirls complete their education after delivery.

In Malawi, the re-admission policy was enacted in 1993 by the Ministry of Education, Science & Technology to promote the continuity of formal education for teen mothers. In 2006, the implementation guidelines were revised to address handling the schoolboy fathers responsible for the pregnancy, ensure the baby's safety, and clarify re-admission procedures. The policy allows teen mothers to return to school after one academic year upon application, contingent on proof of safe custody of the child. Similarly, the male responsible for the pregnancy is also required to leave school for one academic year. The policy specifies that the opportunity for re-entry is available only once during a student's school career (Revised Re-admission Policy Procedures, 2006, pp. 2).

In Tanzania, the Government of the United Republic of Tanzania undertook resolute measures to address this dropout problem in various ways. For instance, in June 2021, the Government of Tanzania announced that school dropouts, including pregnant girls, would be offered opportunities to return to school through alternative colleges. Later, in November 2021, the Ministry of Education Science and Technology issued Education Circular No. 2, 2021, expressing that the Government would readmit dropout students back to formal schooling. Furthermore, in February 2022, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology again issued a Re-Entry Guideline for Students who dropped out of Primary and Secondary School. The new set of Reentry Guidelines was titled, "*Mwongozowa Kurejsha Shuleni Wanafunzi waliokatiza Masomokatika Elimuya Msingina Sekondarikwa Sababu Mbalimbali.*" Meaning "Guidelines for the Re-admission of Students Who Dropped Out of Primary and Secondary Education for Various Reasons."

In South Africa, the Constitutional Court ruled against the Department of Basic Education's (DBE) Pregnant Learner Management Policy in 2012, which subjected adolescent mothers to a two-year postpartum ban from school. The court determined that this policy violated the constitutionally protected right to education (South African Constitutional Court, 2012). In 2021, the Cabinet approved the National Policy on the Prevention and Management of Learner Pregnancy in Schools. This new policy seeks to retain pregnant learners and adolescent mothers in school without imposing any bans, obligating schools to implement measures for retaining pregnant learners and reintegrating adolescent mothers into the schooling system during the postpartum period (South African Department of Basic Education, 2021)

Eswatini (Swaziland) has no stand-alone re-entry policy. Practices vary from school to school, but generally, a pregnant adolescent girl must drop out of school. Those who become pregnant may be allowed to return to write their exams at the same school or be advised to find another examination center. The Swaziland Education and Training Sector Policy of 2011 (EDSEC) explicitly states that "every child, irrespective of their life circumstance, has the right to be reintegrated into the same institution that the girl was previously attending" (Swaziland Ministry of Education and Training 2011).

1.2 Progress with Right to Education Policy in African Countries

Education is a right of every child, and Article 11(6) of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child affirms that "state parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that girls who become pregnant before completing education are able to continue with their education" (African Union, 1990).

According to Human Rights Watch, in 2018, there were around 26 African countries that had policies, laws, or strategies for guaranteeing schoolgirls re-entry back to school after pregnancy. By the year 2021, the number increased to 30 African countries that possessed re-entry policies prescribing education rights for pregnant schoolgirls, including Botswana, Burundi, Cameroon, Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Namibia, Senegal, South Africa, Swaziland, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. In addition, countries with national laws referring to pregnant schoolgirls' right to education with policies or strategies providing for continuation were Cabo del Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, and Gabon. Those with national laws relating to pregnant schoolgirls' right to education, like Benin, DRC, Lesotho, Liberia, Kenya, Rwanda, and Sierra Leone, enable pregnant schoolgirls the right to education at varying

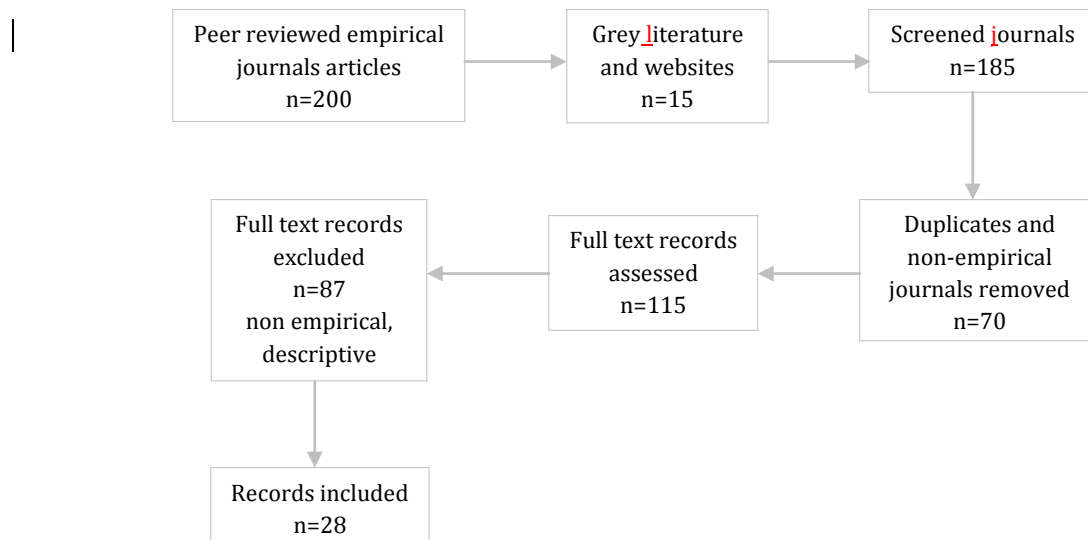
degrees. Lastly, Mozambique, Sao Tome Principe, Nigeria, South Sudan, and Zimbabwe have all removed restrictive policies but still have a policy gap. Data in record evidence the gap that around the world, 129 million girls are out of school, including 32 million girls of primary school age, 30 million girls of lower-secondary school age, and 67 million girls of upper-secondary school age (UNICEF). Across sub-Saharan Africa, approximately 34 million adolescent girls of secondary school age remain out of school (Leora Klapper et al., 2023). Further, in Kenya, data on estimated pregnancy-related school dropout is 13,000 girls per year (Ikamari, L 2013)

Recently, robust research has been conducted addressing teenage mothers' re-entry to schooling. The present review focused on answering three important questions: 1) What are the individual-level factors associated with adolescents' return to school and continuation to completion after childbearing? 2) What are the community-level factors associated with adolescents' return to school and continuation to completion after childbearing? 3) What are the school-level factors associated with adolescents' return to school and continuation to completion after childbearing?

2.0 Methods

2.1 Study design and search strategy

This systematic review adhered to the 2020 Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines. With the assistance of a reference librarian, the researcher meticulously combined text words and medical subject headings, including terms like "pregnancy OR birth OR delivery" paired with "adolescent OR teen," further combined with "school," "education," "return to school," and "school re-entry." The searches spanned multiple databases, including WILEY Online Library, EBSCOhost, Emerald Insight, JSTOR, OECD, SAGE Journals, and Taylor & Francis Group.



The Boolean operators used encompassed combinations such as "teenage mother AND education," "adolescent mother AND education," "teenage mother AND school re-entry," "adolescent mother AND return to school," and "adolescent mother AND health." This comprehensive search strategy ensured a thorough exploration of the literature, capturing a wide range of studies pertinent to the education of adolescent mothers and their re-entry into school systems.

2.2 Study selection

Citations retrieved from database searches were organized and exported to a Master Excel sheet to facilitate the identification and removal of duplicate entries. This step ensured that the review was not biased by repeated data.

Inclusion Criteria

1) Publication Date: Only articles published between 2005 and 2024 were considered. This time frame was chosen to ensure that the review included the most recent and relevant research findings; 2) Focus on Adolescent Mother

Education: The primary focus had to be on the education and enrollment outcomes of adolescent mothers; 3) Language: Only articles written in English were included to maintain consistency and ease of analysis; 4) Alignment with Research Questions: Articles needed to significantly align with the specific research questions posed by the review; 5) Peer-Reviewed Journals: The studies had to be published in peer-reviewed journals to ensure they met high academic standards; and 5) Quantitative Research Methods: Preference was given to studies employing quantitative research methods to facilitate robust data analysis and comparison.

Exclusion Criteria

1) Older Publications: Articles published before 2005 were excluded to keep the review current; Irrelevant Focus: Studies not directly related to adolescent motherhood education were excluded to maintain focus; 2) Non-empirical Content: Opinion pieces and editorials were excluded as they do not provide empirical data; 3) Language: Articles not available in English were excluded to avoid translation inconsistencies; 4) Duplicates: Duplicate studies were removed to prevent redundancy; 5) Systematic Reviews: Systematic reviews were excluded to focus on primary empirical studies; and 6) Focus on Adolescent Pregnancy: Articles focusing on adolescent pregnancy without a specific emphasis on education were excluded to narrow the scope to educational outcomes.

2.3 Document Selection and Eligibility Criteria/Search Outcomes

The search initially identified 200 documents related to adolescent mother education. After removing 15 grey literature and website sources and eliminating 70 duplicates, 115 full texts remained. Upon reviewing the abstracts of these texts, a bibliography was compiled, narrowing the selection to 87 papers for detailed assessment. During the thorough evaluation of the full texts, 59 papers were excluded based on specific criteria (described above). Papers that relied solely on descriptive statistics without incorporating any theoretical framework were excluded, as theoretical grounding is crucial for understanding the findings' broader implications and underlying mechanisms. Additionally, papers employing mixed methods but with purely descriptive quantitative analysis and lacking a theoretical basis were excluded. This decision aimed to ensure that the retained papers provided a robust and comprehensive analysis that could meaningfully contribute to the existing body of knowledge.

By applying these criteria, the remaining papers offered a more rigorous and theoretically grounded examination of issues related to adolescent mother education. This approach ensured the inclusion of high-quality studies that could provide valuable insights and inform effective interventions and policies.

2.4 Quality appraisal framework for literature

A total of 28 studies were reviewed, including 24 qualitative and four quantitative studies. All articles addressed adolescent mothers' education.

2.5 Data Extraction and Analysis

The data extracted from each journal in the sample covered several critical components. These included the research questions the studies aimed to answer, the theoretical frameworks referenced, and any diagrammatic conceptual or theoretical frameworks used. The research design and target population of each study were identified, as well as the geographical context and sampling techniques employed.

Furthermore, the data detailed the primary outcomes or dependent variables (DVs) the studies aimed to measure and the specific data collected for these DVs. It also listed the independent variables (IVs) and the data collected for each IV. The instruments or methods used for data collection, along with any reliability and validity tests conducted to ensure the accuracy of these tools, were also noted. Participants in key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) were recorded, along with the qualitative data collected and the methods used for its analysis. The inferential statistical techniques used to analyze the data and the key findings or conclusions of each study were highlighted. Further *Research Is Needed (FRIN)*, and the statistical methods used to assess the reliability and validity of the research tools were detailed.

Table 1: Sample data extracted from each journal article included in the sample

Analysis Method	Description
Outcome per country/region	Descriptive statistics used to summarize outcomes by researchers in each country/region.
Target population per country	Frequency Distribution in Excel used to assess gaps based on target populations.
Indicators per country	Frequency Distribution used to evaluate gaps based on indicators across different countries.
Independent variables per country	Assessment of gaps based on independent variables for each country.
Theory per country	Examination of theoretical frameworks employed by researchers in different countries.
Research design per country	Analysis of gaps based on research designs used in various countries.
Hypothesis tested per country	Evaluation of hypotheses tested across different countries.
Inferential statistics analysis per country	Assessment of inferential statistical analysis conducted by researchers in each country.
Moderating IVs per country	Identification of gaps in the analysis of moderating independent variables across countries.
Mediation variables per country	Examination of gaps in the analysis of mediation variables in different countries.
Expert analysis of qualitative journals	Summary of focus categories by prior qualitative researchers based on expert analysis of research questions.

Descriptive statistics were utilized to tally and summarize research outcomes by country. At the same time, frequency distribution in Excel was employed to assess gaps in each outcome under various scenarios, such as target population, indicators, independent variables, theory, research design, hypothesis, inferential statistical analysis, moderating independent variables, and mediation variables per country. For the 24 qualitative journals, content analysis of research questions distilled the focus categories of prior qualitative research. Table 1 summarizes sample data extracted from each journal article included in the sample. The content analysis identified several gaps in empirical knowledge:

3. Results

3.1 Description of the sampled collection of the empirical review papers

The analysis covered a review of 28 studies, including 24 qualitative and four quantitative studies, all focusing on the education of adolescent mothers. These studies were conducted in various Sub-Saharan African countries, specifically four in Kenya, three in Tanzania, two in Rwanda, ten in South Africa, two in Malawi, four in Zambia, two in Zimbabwe, and one in Eswatini. The populations studied included adolescent mothers (aged below 20 years) during pregnancy and postpartum, parents, headteachers, education officials, NGO representatives, and students. The study settings varied widely, ranging from community locations to school sites, and included urban, suburban, and rural areas. This diversity in setting and participant demographics provides a comprehensive overview of the region's educational challenges and support systems for adolescent mothers. Table 3.1 summarizes the frequency distribution of Journals by Country.

Table 3.1: Summary of Frequency distribution of Journals by Country (N= 28)

Country	# of studies	Number Quantitative	Number Qualitative	# of studies that had Theory
Kenya	4	2	2	1
Tanzania	3	-	3	0
Rwanda	2	-	2	2
South Africa	10	2	8	6

Malawi	2	-	2	0
Zambia	4	-	4	1
Zimbabwe	2	-	2	0
Eswatini	1	-	1	1
TOTAL	28	4	24	11

Out of the 28 studies analyzed, 11 studies employed a theoretical framework. However, most of the sampled studies did not utilize a theoretical framework, which challenges the comparability of findings. The absence of a dominant theoretical framework is not surprising given the multifaceted nature of the outcomes associated with adolescent mothers returning to school and the diversity of scholars interested in this subject, ranging from educationists to social scientists. These scholars' varied dimensions and perspectives contribute to the lack of a unified theoretical approach, which complicates the synthesis and comparison of findings across different studies. Furthermore, the majority of the studies in the sample were qualitative. This is not unexpected, as research questions concerning teen mothers often require in-depth exploration of personal experiences, attitudes, and social contexts, making qualitative research designs more suitable. Qualitative methods allow for a deeper understanding of the unique challenges and protective factors that influence the academic achievement of adolescent mothers.

3.3 Factors influencing return to school

Taken together, the sample size of 28 papers focuses on the following six broad themes, namely: category of school preferred by returning teen mothers, family factors influencing return to school, school experiences with the implementation of return to school policy, adolescent support systems and stakeholder perception, teachers and school principals' perspectives on adolescent mother return to school and adolescent teen mothers lived experiences and realities.

3.3.1 Type of school influences teen mothers' return to school and retention to completion

Various authors posited that different school environments impact these young mothers' re-adjustment and academic progress. Research by [Opondo, C. M., & Aloka, P. J. O. \(2022\)](#), who has examined the re-adjustment of re-admitted teenage mothers in different school categories by comparing girls-only schools with mixed-gender schools argue that teen mothers in mixed schools are faced with greater challenges that affect their settling and retention to school to completion. The incidence of abuse and stigma from male students tends to be amplified, and many teen mothers shy away from returning to mixed schools for their continuation of education. Conversely, teen mothers reported better experiences returning and adjusting to girls-only schools. Teen mothers who returned to girls-only schools reported better overall adjustment and found the school environment supportive and conducive to their continuation in education. This suggests that girls-only schools may report higher retention of teen mothers who return to school to complete their basic education. The implications of such findings seem to be supported by the recent establishment of Serene Haven girls' school in Kenya, which is predominantly a girls' school that prides itself on allowing young mothers the space to finish their education while caring for their children. [Opondo, C. M., & Aloka, P. J. O. \(2022\)](#) further points out that the Type of school plays a crucial role in shaping the experiences of re-admitted adolescent mothers. Argumentatively, girls-only schools seem to offer a more protective environment, reducing the trauma and stigma associated with teenage motherhood. This supportive atmosphere is critical for helping young mothers integrate into the education system and maintain their academic pursuits.

Empirical evidence on preference for traditional schools suggests that faith-based schools, driven by religious values, may also provide supportive environments for adolescent mothers, potentially demonstrating higher re-entry and continuation rates. [Gemignani, R., Shojo, M., & Wodon, Q. \(2014\)](#) report that faith-based schools often have strong moral and ethical frameworks that can help mitigate stigma and offer additional support systems. These findings have implications for policy on return to school for teen mothers, such that girls-only schools may be incentivized to improve the return and retention of teen mothers.

Further studies are, however, needed to examine return and retention in private schools. Private schools vary from entrepreneur-run institutions to high-end establishments managed by multinationals. These schools often prioritize high academic performance and discipline, which could influence their acceptance and support of adolescent mothers. However, there is a need for empirical research to determine whether private schools provide an environment that minimizes stigma and supports the academic and emotional needs of adolescent mothers. On the

other hand, Mbithi (2020) suggests that government schools may feel pressured to adhere to return-to-school policies and could lobby for additional support for marginalized adolescent mothers. However, the effectiveness of these efforts in providing a supportive environment for adolescent mothers needs further investigation. These studies indicated that the category of school significantly influences the return to school and continuation rates of adolescent mothers. Girls-only schools, faith-based schools, private schools, and government schools each present unique environment that can either hinder or support the reintegration of these young mothers into the education system.

3.3.2 Family factors influencing return to school

Ayub M. J. et al. (2021) contend that family factors significantly influence student mothers' return to school and engagement in school activities. The authors describe engagement and educational participation as participation in leadership roles, such as class representatives or prefects, and involvement in extracurricular activities, which are more evident among teen mothers with supportive families. The authors note that student mothers can often be distracted from school activities due to domestic chores like cleaning and meal preparation resulting from teen motherhood. Family support is crucial in reducing the burden of these household chores for teen mothers, enabling adolescent mothers, especially day scholars, to stay after school and participate in extracurricular activities. These scholars underscore the pivotal role that families play in supporting adolescent mothers. According to the authors, family status and characteristics can significantly influence a girl's likelihood of dropping out during pregnancy and resuming schooling after delivery. A stable family environment offers security and stability, essential for educational success. Supportive parents or guardians provide emotional encouragement, practical help with childcare, and financial assistance, all vital for adolescent mothers to stay in school. The studies emphasize that relationships of trust and respect within the family foster a sense of self-worth, acceptance, responsibility, and agency, enabling adolescent mothers to balance motherhood and education effectively.

Ruzibiza (2021) further critiques community-level stigma and cultural norms often discouraging young mothers from resuming their education. Within the school environment, the lack of support systems and discriminatory practices can further hinder their re-entry and continuation, as highlighted by Mmassy (2023). Additionally, traditional gender roles and a lack of economic support at the family level create additional barriers, as pointed out by Ntini et al. (2017). In this sense, resources provided by the community, such as healthcare, counselling services, and financial aid, significantly alleviate some of the burdens adolescent mothers face, enabling them to focus more on their education. Jochim et al. (2022) in South Africa contend that there are numerous challenges adolescent mothers face at the individual level when they become primary caregivers to their infants. Balancing childcare and education is particularly challenging due to the demanding need to ensure good health and nutrition for their babies, such as exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months, which often conflicts with school schedules. Medical complications requiring frequent healthcare visits further disrupt consistent school attendance. The study identifies self-esteem, coping skills, and overall health and well-being as crucial individual factors. High self-esteem and intrinsic motivation are essential for overcoming educational barriers, while effective coping mechanisms and good physical and mental health support educational resilience.

Other scholars contend that family factors moderate the complex relationship between individual, community, and school factors. Scholars argue that multiple factors mediate the interaction between individual, family, and community factors and adolescent mothers' return to school. While family factors play a significant role, the interaction between individual, community, and school factors adds complexity to this issue. Jochim et al. (2023) offer crucial empirical evidence demonstrating that household poverty significantly moderates the influence of family and community on adolescent mothers' educational outcomes. Their research is motivated by the lack of comprehensive evidence on the factors and mediators associated with mothers' postpartum return to school, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, where adolescent pregnancy rates are high. Jochim et al.'s study reveals that lower household poverty correlates with a higher likelihood of returning to school postpartum, continuing schooling during pregnancy, and utilizing daycare services. These insights emphasize the importance of household economic status in shaping the educational trajectories of young mothers.

3.3.3 School experiences with the implementation of return to school policy

Mutua, M. N., Miriti, J. M., and Mogeni, S. (2019) 's work points to significant gaps and inconsistencies in policy implementation across many schools. These include a lack of mechanisms to compensate for lost academic time and the reinforcement of traditional gender roles where adolescent mothers drop out to give birth and take on caregiving

roles. At the same time, teenage fathers continue their education uninterrupted. Additionally, the study found discrimination in schools, with some institutions selecting teenage mothers for readmission based on academic or extracurricular abilities rather than offering unconditional support. There was also a lack of alignment with other policy frameworks and an absence of accountability mechanisms, leading to ineffective implementation. The authors called for coordinated efforts and a multi-faceted approach to protect the educational rights of teenage mothers. Nyariro has noted this view, and M. P. (2018) advocated for a girl-centered approach in policy formulation, integrating the voices and experiences of young mothers.

Nyariro, M. P. (2018) highlights the importance of participatory methodologies, critical feminist frameworks, and a comprehensive understanding of the causes of teenage pregnancy to develop effective policies that support school re-entry and continuation.

Further, Chiyota and Marishane (2020) highlight a lack of awareness and understanding of the re-entry policy among stakeholders, significant stigma and discrimination, and the need for robust support systems, including counselling, financial assistance, and childcare services. The study highlighted gaps between policy formulation and implementation, with many schools lacking the resources and capacity to support adolescent mothers effectively. Kamanga R. et al. (2022) 's work emphasized that school management perspectives can impact the girl re-entry policy, pointing to inconsistent policy awareness among managers and the need for counselling and health services, the need for training and capacity building for teachers and administrators, as well as community and parental involvement to ensure the policy's successful implementation. While motivated to unravel gaps in teachers' perspectives on the school re-entry policy for adolescent mothers in Zambia, Zuilkowski S. S. et al. (2019), agree that teachers' attitudes significantly impact the policy's effectiveness. The negative treatment of adolescent mothers by teachers usually pushes them to stay home.

Thwala et al. (2022) work in Eswatini further provides empirical evidence related to significant implementation challenges, including lack of resources and support and stigma and discrimination from peers and teachers. The author points is that comprehensive support mechanisms are needed, including counselling, financial aid, and specialized teacher training. These studies underscore the complexities and challenges in implementing policies to support adolescent mothers' education. They highlight the need for comprehensive support systems, including counselling, financial assistance, childcare services, and robust policy frameworks. Effective implementation requires coordinated efforts among stakeholders, community involvement, and a commitment to addressing the unique needs of adolescent mothers. Such comprehensive approaches are crucial for promoting the educational success of adolescent mothers and fostering a more inclusive and equitable educational environment.

3.3.4 Adolescent support systems and stakeholder perception.

Ruzibiza (2021) and Mmassy (2023) both describe the significant stigma and discrimination that pregnant schoolgirls and young mothers face from peers, teachers, and the community. This social stigma often leads to isolation and shame, discouraging these young mothers from continuing their education. While this research underscores similar challenges within non-formal education systems, it also highlights the gaps in support systems for these young mothers due to traditional gender roles and cultural expectations that place the bulk of childcare and household responsibilities on young mothers, complicating their efforts to balance these duties with their educational pursuits. On the other hand, fathers often face financial pressures that can disrupt their schooling. Moreover, Ntini et al. (2017) provide a comprehensive view of the dual roles that teenage mothers and fathers must navigate. Their research notes that adolescent mothers often develop coping strategies and lean on educational institutions for support. While highlighting practical measures that educational centers can adopt to assist adolescent mothers, such as flexible learning options, on-site childcare, counselling, and financial aid, Malatji et al. (2023) opine those practical insights demonstrate the direct support mechanisms that can facilitate a more conducive learning environment for young mothers. Similarly, Chinkondenji (2022) offers significant insight into the role of cultural norms, economic support, and the need for educational policy reforms that are crucial in creating an enabling environment that supports the continuation of education for young mothers.

Other scholars, including Setwin, M. M., & Rachel, K. M. (2019), Ngaza, B., & Mwila, P. M. (2022), Gatsinzi, P. (2022), Amod, Z. et al. (2019), and Kurevakwesu, W., et al. (2023) collectively highlight the multifaceted challenges faced by adolescent mothers in educational settings and emphasize the importance of comprehensive support systems to address these challenges. Setwin, M. M., & Rachel, K. M. (2019) found critical shortcomings in-school support for learner-mothers, identifying the lack of free education or school bursaries as a major factor leading to truancy and

school dropouts. They also noted that schools did not accommodate teen mothers with their babies, preventing necessary breastfeeding, nor did they provide material or financial support, including preschool services for their children. Despite offering counselling services and re-admission agreements with guidance teachers, some scholars criticized these amenities, fearing they might transform schools into maternity centres, especially in faith-based and private institutions concerned about their reputations.

Ngaza, B., & Mwila, P. M. (2024) call for a supportive, non-judgmental school environment and effective re-entry policies through collaboration among schools, communities, and government agencies. In affirmation, Gatsinzi, P. (2022) emphasizes the necessity of financial support, counselling, psychological assistance, and parental involvement to help adolescent mothers manage education and motherhood as advocated for by Amod, Z. et al. (2019), who recommended building strong support networks, including family, friends, and community organizations, for the well-being and success of adolescent mothers. Further, Kurevakwesu W. et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of holistic support addressing educational, emotional, and financial needs, teacher training and policy advocacy. Setwin, M. M., & Rachel, K. M. (2019) describe peer support groups as providing a valuable platform for adolescent mothers to share experiences and support each other. Together, these studies underscore the critical need for comprehensive support systems, flexible educational options, and strong community engagement to address the complex challenges faced by adolescent mothers. They highlight the importance of creating an inclusive and supportive environment to facilitate these adolescent mothers' educational and personal success.

3.3.5 Teachers' and school principals' Perspectives on adolescent Mothers' return to School

Few studies have examined the role of teachers and school principals' perspectives on adolescent mothers' return to School; Nkani F. N. et al. (2010) and Bhana, D. et al. (2010) highlight identify gaps in this critiquing that teachers' attitudes and perceptions of teachers and school principals toward adolescent mothers remain largely under explored. The author's work, however, suggests that male principals often adopt a moralistic viewpoint regarding teenage pregnancy. This perception frames pregnancy as a manifestation of moral decline within the community, which leads to several negative consequences. The scholars contend that those male principals hold negative attitudes and have biased views towards pregnant learners and young mothers, perceiving them as deviants who have breached social and moral norms. This moralistic lens often results in a lack of empathy and support for adolescent mothers. The scholars opine that male principals' perspectives can significantly affect adolescent mothers' re-entry experiences in several ways. For instance, an unsupportive or hostile school environment can discourage young mothers from returning to education. This includes inadequate support from school authorities; schools with principals who hold these moralistic views may lack the necessary support structures, such as counselling services, flexible learning options, and on-site childcare, essential for young mothers to continue their education. These consequences can increase dropout rates among adolescent mothers who are learners, hence limiting their educational and economic opportunities.

The studies point to conspicuous gaps in policy awareness on adolescent re-entry to School among male school principals, and the same can be improved by implementing mandatory training on the importance of creating a supportive school environment and sensitization programs for teachers and school principals to help shift perceptions. Secondly, strengthening the enforcement of existing policies that protect the educational rights of adolescent mothers is crucial to conducting regular monitoring and evaluation to ensure compliance and identify areas for improvement among male-headed secondary schools. The positive attitudes among male principals can facilitate the establishment of comprehensive support structures within schools, such as counselling services, on-site childcare, and flexible learning schedules that enable young mothers to continue their education. Therefore, the perspectives of male principals, as highlighted by Nkani, F. N. et al. (2010) and Bhana, D. et al. (2010), underscore the need for targeted interventions and policy reforms to create a supportive educational environment for adolescent mothers through a multifaceted approach that includes training, policy enforcement, inclusive policy development and support structures in schools.

3.3.6 Adolescent teen mothers lived experiences and realities

A lesser-studied theme on factors influencing adolescent mothers' return to school and retention to completion is adolescent teen mothers' lived experiences and realities. Muzingili, T. et al. (2024), Silver, R. (2024) and Chigona, A., & Chetty, R. (2007) work highlight significant challenges adolescent mothers face in educational settings from their lived realities as well. From work by these scholars, the narratives of adolescent mothers display feelings that

negative perception and treatment by those around them create a hostile learning environment, discouraging them from fully engaging in their studies and leading to higher dropout rates. The authors opined that the absence of adequate counselling services deprives adolescent mothers of the emotional and psychological support necessary to navigate the challenges of motherhood and education simultaneously. By using life history theory, the studies emphasize the importance of understanding the personal narratives of young mothers, which helps identify specific interventions tailored to their unique needs and circumstances. These scholars further highlight challenges noted in other studies that point to challenges experienced by adolescent mothers that include stigma and discrimination from peers, teachers, and the community, which negatively impacts their educational experiences; lack of adequate support systems, such as counselling and childcare services, which are crucial for helping these mothers balance their educational and parental responsibilities.

Additionally, teen mothers who participated in studies described pointed out their struggle with financial difficulties, making it hard for them to afford school fees and related expenses. Lived experiences from the studies highlight the burden of early childbearing and child-rearing and that lack of support for adolescent mothers creates significant stress and challenges as they try to juggle motherhood and schooling. Further, the studies underscore the importance of considering the personal and contextual factors that influence the educational trajectories of adolescent mothers.

5. Conclusion

This review of recent studies highlights a complex and challenging environment for adolescent mothers attempting to reintegrate into formal education. Although many countries in the SSA region have a return-to-school policy for teen mothers, there are still significant gaps, particularly in the school characteristics that promote the return and retention of teen mothers in traditional schools in the region. Such gaps continue to undermine the region's efforts in meeting SDG 5, with consequences in gender inequalities and women and girls. Although family support is reported as a factor in teen mothers' return to school, significant gaps exist in sociocultural contexts that negate this support, particularly in marginalized and vulnerable communities. Gender inequality compounds the challenge of teen mothers' access to basic education, reinforcing traditional roles that place the responsibility of childcare almost exclusively on young mothers. Despite these adversities, there is a growing consensus in the literature about the need for comprehensive and inclusive policies and support mechanisms. Effective strategies require the involvement of a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including educators, policymakers, community leaders, and teen mothers.

6. Limitations

This review presents findings of factors influencing teenage mothers' return to school. However, the included studies do not cover all the regions, limiting the review findings' representative to generalize globally. In addition to this, the low number of studies included in the final review and the inclusion of various designs of studies led to heterogeneity that hindered the ability to perform a meta-analysis. Further, this review may be limited since the researcher used open-access journals. Many journals were disqualified for poor quality because they lacked clarity in the methodology and ethical considerations. Few studies on adolescent mothers' return to school were readily available. There was scanty literature on return to alternative schools because, in the SSA, there are very few countries that have implemented alternative school models targeting teen mothers.

7. Recommendation for further research

The review highlights the need for further empirical research on adolescent mothers' lived experiences and realities on return to school. Studying adolescent mothers' lived experiences and realities as they return to school is crucial for creating effective support systems and policies. These studies will offer a comprehensive view of young mothers' challenges, informing policy development and empowering them. Additionally, they will contribute valuable evidence-based interventions and cross-disciplinary insights to the scientific community. Addressing these issues will foster a more inclusive and supportive educational environment, ultimately enhancing adolescent mothers' long-term outcomes and well-being.

The review further highlights the need for research successful case studies to collect insights into effective strategies that have helped adolescent mothers overcome these challenges. Such an approach could inform more effective interventions and support mechanisms for adolescent mothers returning to school. This approach can lead to the development of more effective interventions, policy improvements, and a broader understanding of the factors that contribute to successful educational outcomes for young mothers. Such research can create a more inclusive and supportive educational landscape that empowers adolescent mothers and enhances their long-term success.

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Authors Biography

Eunice Kinya Stephen is currently an Adjunct Lecturer in St. Paul's University, School of Education and Social Sciences. Also she is currently a PhD Candidate in Development Studies at St. Paul's University. Her research investigates Gender and Inequality in Development specifically socio-demographic inequalities in the prevalence of adolescent motherhood.

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3394-6618>

Dr Daniel Muasya Nzengya holds a PhD in Sustainability from Arizona State University, USA. He currently serves as the Director of Research & Innovation at St Paul's University. Also, he is the founding Chair of St Paul's University Institutional and Scientific Ethics Review Committee (SPU-ISERC), and Senior Lecturer in the School of Education and

Social Sciences, St Paul's University. His research explores the impact of climate change on sexual and reproductive health among adolescent girls and young women.

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6588-364X>

Dr. Molly Secor, PhD, RN, FSAHM, is the Associate Dean for Research and Professor in the Mark and Robyn Jones College of Nursing, Montana State University, Bozeman, Montana. Her research examines the role of social context on adolescent sexual and reproductive health.

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2360-4080>

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