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Resilience amid Stigma: Analyzing the Agency and Well-Being of Teenage Mothers in Rural Uganda

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Abstract: Teenage motherhood remains a significant public health and socio-economic challenge in Uganda, especially in rural areas where access to education and health care services and economic opportunities is limited and social stigma and rejection are prevalent. The study explores the agency applied by teenage mothers to improve their well-being in rural Uganda particularly in Kanungu District. The study employed a phenomenological research design, and data were collected through in-depth interviews that involved Community Development Officers (CDO's) and parents, focus group discussions (FGDs) which involved the teenage mothers, and key informant interviews (KIIs) that involved the District officials, Non-Government Organizations (NGO's), Religious and community leaders. Findings reveal that family structures, parenting styles, cultural norms and institutional gaps significantly shape teenage mothers' ability to act independently, access services, and plan for their prospects positively. Supportive family relationships were found to be essential in strengthening resilience, self-confidence, and decision-making capability, whereas neglectful and harsh environments compounded vulnerability and isolation. Teenage mothers employed different forms of agency for them to survive such as engaging in vocational training, informal labor and seeking support from (NGO's). Community actors, particularly CDO's emphasized the urgent need for family sensitization, better adolescent-friendly services, increased family awareness and targeted empowerment programs. The study recommends community sensitization, strengthening family and institutional support systems, increasing access to youth-friendly health and education services, and integrating tailored vocational and financial programs for young mothers and pregnant teenagers to advance their agency and holistic well-being in rural Uganda.

Keywords: *Teenage Mothers, Agency, Vulnerability, Resilience, Well-being, Rural Uganda*

1. Introduction

In the hills of Kanungu District, where adolescence should mark the beginning of dreams, many teenage girls like Tindimweebwa Maria Asumpta are instead thrust into the demanding realities of motherhood. Amidst social stigma, fragile family structures, and limited access to essential services, teenage mothers navigate a path often marked by resilience and improvisation. The teenage mother narrates her situation.

"*During the delivery of my son, I got some little support of some things to use from my mother and her friends, but afterwards, she did not even bother to ask me if my child and I wanted as basics. She kept telling me to ask the father of my son to support me, however, he was not interested in giving us even a piece of washing soap. I became sick and the child could not breastfeed because of the delivery of my son, I got some little support of some things to use from my mother and her friends, but afterwards, she did not even bother to ask me if my child and I wanted anything basic support myself and son' survival" (teenage mother FGD, Kihiihi S/C, January 2025)*

Teenage motherhood has continued to be an acute social psychological and public health growing problem globally, with intensified implications in sub-Saharan Africa, predominantly in Uganda (Webb et al., 2023). While early childbearing is sometimes regulated or endured within certain cultural settings, its significance for the distinct teenager, the child, and society is broad (UNFPA, 2021). National statistics indicate that nearly 25% of adolescent girls aged 15–19 in Uganda have begun childbearing, and this prevalence rises to about 50% in rural districts such as Kanungu (UNFPA, 2022).

Resilience is a dynamic psychological and social reserve for persons navigating hardships, particularly the teenage mothers in rural Uganda who face interconnecting challenges. It is referred to as the ability to recover from hardship and adjust positively amidst the consequences, resilience plays an important role in enabling young mothers to regain agency and restore their lives resulting from early pregnancy (Nkansah et al., 2022) and (Worringer, 2020). In the settings where teenage pregnancy is regarded as a destruction of moral and cultural beliefs, teenage mothers often meet rejection from families, exclusion from school, loss of social status,

and limited access to support services Ellis-Sloan, (2014) Naidoo et al. (2021). These experiences reduce their sense of self-confidence and hamper their capacity to make decisions about their lives as well as their children's future.

Moreover, in Uganda, nearly 25% of adolescent girls aged 15–19 years have begun childbearing (UBOS, 2022) , a rate that is significantly higher in rural districts where Kanungu District, where the prevalence of teenage pregnancy is predominantly high estimated at 50%, almost twice the national average (UNFPA-Uganda, 2017). Despite the identified structural challenges by various scholars, (Macleod, 2010); (Mollborn, 2017); (Ellis-Sloan, 2014), ranging from cultural, social economic to public health, their situation may not be solely a narrative of victimhood in the presence of agency responses.

Notwithstanding, studies are increasingly drawing attention to the nuanced ways in which teenage mothers attempt to reclaim agency and reconstruct their lives within constraining environments (Hardgrove et al., 2011). For instance, despite limited institutional support, many adolescent mothers exhibit resilience by engaging in informal labor, joining community networks, or pursuing vocational skills. Still, the dominant literature lacks a nuanced understanding of how teenage mothers in rural settings define well-being and construct meaning in their journeys toward survival and empowerment. This paper contributes to that gap by exploring how rural teenage mothers navigate both visible and hidden support systems to redefine agency in their terms.

Although Uganda's National Strategy to End Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy (MGLSD, 2022) outlines objectives to empower girls and delay early pregnancies through education and community sensitization. Still, implementation remains inconsistent due to limited funding, poor implementation, and community resistance. Additionally, (MGLSD, 2022b) has it that while legal frameworks such as the Children Act and the Constitution prohibit child marriage, society attitudes often overlook their effectiveness. Addressing these gaps is necessary for enabling teenage mothers to exercise agency.

Nonetheless few studies have critically examined how teenage mothers in rural environments like Kanungu navigate social stigma and economic hardship to improve agency. Likewise, little is known about how these young women define well-being or what forms of support they find meaningful. Understanding these viewpoints is important especially in designing interventions that are responsive and specific to environments. In this paper, we argue that centering teenage mothers' voices and agency will challenge avenues for conventional top-down interventions and calls for context-sensitive strategies that reflect the realities and resilience of rural adolescent motherhood. The paper analyzes the existing agencies and well-being of teenage mothers in Kanungu District amidst socioeconomic and health challenges. As for Zarina Chohan, (2011) teenage mothers are actively rejected by stigmatizing narratives in various ways as they pursue life endeavors. Similarly, Brown et al. (2011) highlighted the impact of family-based violence and control on teenage mothers' sense of disempowerment. Therefore in families where teenage motherhood is assumed morally shameful, agency becomes weakened, leaving the young mothers vulnerable to further disregard. Thus, exploring the lived experiences of teenage mothers and identifying the structural and interpersonal factors that either promote or weaken their agency is imperative in this paper.

2. Literature Review

Situating Teenage Motherhood, Agency, Vulnerability and Support Systems

Teenage motherhood remains a persistent challenge in many low- and middle-income countries, with profound implications for the education, health, and socioeconomic futures of adolescent girls (World Health Organization, 2024). Teenage mothers are usually referred to as girls aged between 13 and 19 years who have experienced childbirth in various constitutions in Africa Countries (Gyesaw & Ankomah, 2013). Furthermore, teenage mothers develop various coping strategies in response to the pressures of early motherhood.

According to Kaye, (2008), these include thriving through opportunities, bargaining with challenges, or struggling to survive. McDermott, (2005) emphasizes that effective strategies are not always about knowledge gaps but involve background support such as discussions around contraception. Although, few studies clearly

connect these strategies to, furthermore, teenage mothers develop various coping strategies in response to the pressures of early motherhood.

Nevertheless, these coping strategies do not occur in isolation. Family relations play a vital, yet often ignored, role in shaping teenage mothers' agency. While past studies have explored individual strategies and social responses, there remains a research gap in understanding how parental communication, family dynamics, and support systems directly influence agency among teenage mothers, particularly in African contexts and family dynamics. These are associated with the development of not only medical, but also social problems. Studies carried out by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2021)indicate that social stigma and negotiated health consequences are the major characteristics of teenage motherhood. This study, therefore, seeks to analyze the existing agency that contributes to teenage mothers' well-being in Kanungu District.

Agency, in this context, means the capacity of teenage mothers to make purposeful choices and act in ways that affect their lives even in the face of diversity (Cheung et al., 2020). Feminist theorists argue that agency should not only be measured by explicit acts of resistance but also through everyday survival strategies that reflect intentionality and adaptation within socially constructed limitations Shahsavari (2012). Brophy et al. (2012) highlight the importance of family relationships, access to education, parenting support, and community-based programs in shaping outcomes for adolescent mothers' structures. Bhana & Nkani, (2016) observed that teenage mothers, especially in conservative rural communities, agency is often quietly negotiated through decisions about caregiving, resource management, mobility, and interaction with support structures. These subtle forms of action challenge the notion that young mothers are merely passive recipients of aid or victims of circumstance. In this paper agency involves individual empowerment, resilience, autonomy, and access to supportive structures that enable meaningful involvement in life choices. It involves psychological willingness, capacity access to resources, and supportive relationships with the family and the community.

Vulnerability

Teenage mothers often face discriminating vulnerability due to interconnecting socio-economic, cultural, and institutional challenges. Kuran et al. (2020) similarly indicates that social vulnerability arises from interconnected socio-economic, cultural, and a lack of access to resources. Their early transition into motherhood is commonly accompanied by interrupted education, limited access to reproductive health services, poverty, and social stigma (Pillay, 2021). Although, in many rural settings, including Uganda, society and family reactions to teenage pregnancy often lead to rejection, isolation, and reduced support networks, which significantly deteriorate the well-being and agency of these young mothers (Moganedi & Mudau, 2024; Chung et al., 2018). Cultural norms and gender expectations further impair their vulnerability, as teenage mothers are normally blamed for their pregnancies while their male counterparts are rarely held accountable (Qebengu et al., 2025; Ninsiima et al., 2020). Nonetheless, vulnerability is defined as the degree to which individuals or groups are susceptible to harm due to exposure to external shocks or stresses, Karman, (2020) combines vulnerability with limited capacity to anticipate, cope with, or recover from those impacts.

Therefore, the rise of social exclusion, particularly among marginalized groups, is susceptible to a new form of poverty characterized by informal labor (MGLSD, 2022). Furthermore, inadequate policies and weak institutional support systems leave many teenage mothers without access to justice, psychosocial care, or economic empowerment opportunities. Thus, the nature of compounded marginalization often weakens their ability to exercise agency including, planning for the future, or advocating for themselves and their children.

Support Systems

In this context of early motherhood, especially within rural and limited-resourced communities, support systems act as critical barriers against the multi-dimensional challenges faced by teenage mothers. The embeddedness of family and community structures has the potential to improve or worsen the status of teenage mothers' experiences despite the prevailing stigma (Chohan, 2011). As indicated by Carvalho et al. (2025) that support from family members particularly mothers and grandmothers is instrumental in providing emotional care, assisting with childcare responsibilities, and encouraging the continuation of education or vocational pursuits. These forms of tangible and moral support enable young mothers to navigate hardship and rebuild a sense of purpose, promoting their psychological and physical well-being (Kuri, 2023).

Conversely, the absence or breakdown of reliable support networks significantly compounds the risks associated with early motherhood. Teenage mothers who face rejection or judgment from families, communities, or institutions may not sustain heightened isolation, poverty, and mental health challenges (Ellis-Sloan & Tamplin, 2019). Nonetheless, Okine et al. (2020) note that, weak support systems exacerbate stigma and marginalization, stripping young mothers of critical coping mechanisms and reinforcing structural barriers to recovery. This lack of support not only undermines their well-being but also limits their agency the ability to make decisions, plan for the future, or assert their rights. In this context, resilience becomes less about internal strength and more contingent upon external affirmation and socio-economic reinforcement.

3. Methodology

Study site and Sampling Procedure

The research was conducted in town councils and sub-counties of Kinkiizi East and Kinkiizi West, Kanungu District, in the Western Region of Uganda. Purposive sampling was used to select participants (Child Family Protection Unit, District officials, Community-Based organizations, community workers, parents and teenage mothers). This is because of the need to acquire the knowledge in its natural setup (Rai & Thapa, 2015).

Research design and sampling

The study applied a phenomenological research design to analyze the life experiences of teenage mothers to understand their internal and external agency in multifaceted social settings ((Zarina Chohan, 2011; Kaye, 2008). The research team used three data collection methods, which included key informant interviews (KII's) together with in-depth interviews (IDIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). FGD's included only teenage mothers. The researcher used a stratified method to select teenagers to avoid the benefit of doubt and give a chance for equal participation. 4 teenage mothers were selected from every parish where two parishes were combined and a total of 8 participants per FGD. The Key Informants included district officials, church leaders and community leaders who were dealing with teenage mothers. In-depth interviews included Community Development Officers from selected sub-counties and Town Councils and parents of teenage mothers. They were identified using a stratification method where every sub-county or town council would get one parent. This was because there was a need for deeper insights that teenage mothers would have left out in the discussion. The method used was purposive and stratified selection which followed Chohan & Langa, (2011) recommendations to include participants with different family backgrounds and educational levels and support systems after pregnancy. The research involved two parishes in each focus group discussion which brought together eight teenage mothers per FGD.

Data collection methods, analysis and Ethical considerations

The research instruments used open-ended interview guides to collect data about how participants managed stigma and their educational pursuits and childcare approaches. They were conducted through In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) with mothers/guardians of teenage mothers and Community Development Officers which allowed giving deeper insights about teenage mothers' agency. The study also employed Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with teenage mothers. These discussions enabled the researcher to capture shared experiences, social dynamics, and perspectives on stigma, educational challenges and how they survive. Key Informant Interviews were also conducted including district officials, church leaders, community-based organizations. These offered external lenses on challenges faced by teenage mothers, institutional responses and cultural norms. A combination of these methods enhanced the reliability of richness of the data.

The research applied thematic content analysis to analyze data through a combination of deductive codes from literature (e.g., emotional support, coping mechanisms) and inductively developed themes (Chandra-Mouli et al., 2015; Ketokivi, 2015). The Research Ethics Committee of Mbarara University of Science and Technology (MUST-REC) granted ethical approval for the study which followed ethical protocols that included obtaining informed consent and assent from minors and using female interviewers to create comfortable environments for participants (G & Jejeebhoy, 2015). The research team conducted interviews on teenage mothers, their parents and district officials in neutral and familiar settings such as sub-county offices and district headquarters to gather honest information about the challenges faced by teenage mothers'.

4. Results and Discussion

Vulnerabilities of Teenage Mothers

Societal attitudes frequently portray these young mothers as irresponsible or morally deviant, leading to social exclusion and limited opportunities for personal development, thereby compounding their marginalization. Teenage mothers often find themselves at the intersection of multiple vulnerabilities, including poverty, gender inequality, limited or no access to education, and harmful cultural practices such as early marriages. These structural barriers significantly impede their ability to access necessary services and actively participate in social and economic life. It was revealed that the absence of adolescent-friendly health services, neglect, stigma, and limited institutional support associated with early pregnancy further weaken teenage mothers' ability to exercise agency. However, some were found to have found means of survival amidst the challenges experienced as quoted below;

"One day, my child got sick and when I told my parents about it, my father told me to go and find the person who impregnated me, I felt so bad that I had a sleepless night, I learned a lesson that I should look for all ways to get money to look after my child. I started to go with my mother, for casual labor and they paid me 4000 which was less than the usual amount they pay because of having a baby. Whenever the baby would cry, I would first go and breastfeed him, I did not manage digging carry the baby." Teenage mother FGD Kihiihi, January 2025)

"I started saving a little money in case my child gets sick again I can buy medicine, I would give my mother 2000 and keep the balance for myself. My mother registered me in a group in the village whereby I would save 6000= every week, after two months, my mother got for me 30,000= and I started making pan cakes in the village. I am still selling them, I even go to the weekly markets and I like the business. I sometimes support my mother."(Teenage mother FGD Kihiihi, January 2025)

Findings revealed that, teenage mothers were found to navigate difficult connections of family expectations, cultural norms, limited resources, and social stigma. Cultural beliefs and community attitudes severely constrained external agency. Teenage mothers were often labeled with derogatory terms like "Abinyandaro" and excluded from schools, churches, or social groups. This stigma, driven by rooted cultural values, undermines teenage mothers' agency and reinforces cycles of poverty as well as dependency syndrome. This kind of situation limits them to exercise their agency and affects their well-being

"They (teenage mothers) feel shy and uncomfortable to be in the community after experiencing a teenage pregnancy and also when they hear names tagged on them because they got pregnant, it distances them from socializing and they isolate themselves and are no longer hopeful for the future" (Kihihi T/C CDO, December, 2024)

Another community worker also shared that in most cases, teenage girls are brought up by parents with the skills of digging from childhood and other domestic work. Although, unfortunately, some of them are stopped from schooling to look after their siblings, they end up escaping from home to rent their own houses, survive on their own if not married.

"In Kihiihi Sub County, girls who get pregnant do not have skills and the only skill they have is digging so after giving birth, they resort to looking for digging opportunities for money on people's farms, they are paid wages which they use to buy food for their babies and their parents for those who stay home. The ones who run away from their parents' homes are able to rent some cheap houses and they also go around looking for opportunities for survival" (Kihiihi S/C CDO, December 2024)

More to that, the teenage mother expressed how, following childbirth, she felt degraded within her own family referring to herself as a slave showing a shift in her social status from being a valued daughter to a burden or source of disgrace. Community reactions increased this distress. Neighbors teased her, equating her condition to "ebinyandaaro" a derogatory local term, which stripped her of dignity and excluded her from social interactions. Her friends were prohibited from even greeting her, emphasizing how deeply cultural stigma can break social ties and isolate young mothers.

"For me ever since I gave birth at home I came to know that I did a mistake which gave me a scar in my heart for the rest of my life because I became a slave in our family, even whenever I would pass by our neighbors going to fetch water or collect food in the garden, people would start laughing at me saying that, that is the work of "ebinyandaaro", they abused me, cursed me, even my friends were stopped from greeting me that am

no longer a youth, I go and find a home , they do not always wish me well" (FGD teenage mother, Kanungu T/C, January, 2025).

However, some cultures and communities have provided guidance and support to these teenage mothers which has given them confidence to be independent and regain agency according to this quotation;

"Cultural beliefs have changed and there remains a few people who tend to look at pregnant teenage girls as misfits; culturally it was not allowed for a girl to get pregnant from their parent's home but currently most parents have come to accept that anything can happen and when it happens, they have to be in charge and continue looking after their children. Some parents chose to look after their grandchildren and their children after teenage pregnancies happening, such parents are capable of taking these girls back to school because they have hope that a girl can still become an important person even after having a teenage pregnancy" Some of these parents come to seek for protection measures against their grand children after sending their girls back to school." (Kambuga T/C CDO, December, 2024)

Others highlighted gaps in healthcare access, such as a lack of treatment, rejection of girls attending antenatal care without partners, or the absence of adolescent-specific services which deteriorate teenage mothers' well-being

"When I went to the hospital for antenatal, the nurse asked me about my husband and i told her that I came alone. She said she will not work with me because I have to come with my husband. I told her I don't have a man. She asked me what took you to play sex, she abused me, I did not go back, there was a herbal nurse, I started going to her place, digging for her and later told her what happened, when time to give birth came closer, she talked to my mother, they took me to another health center where I gave birth" (Teenage mother FGD Kambuga, January 2025)

In households where teenage mothers were included in conversations about their future, their agency flourished. This was confirmed by teenage mothers who were allowed to participate in decisions about education, child care, or health showed greater self-confidence. This implies that where there is participatory decision making in families, teenage mothers are more likely to have opportunities for prospects and adapt to the situations fast, unlike those whose decisions are taken without their consent. This drags them behind and they are nurtured with fear and an inferiority complex.

"We normally have conversations... I let her decide what is best for her and the baby. I don't mistreat her, she asked me to go to the saloon and I guided her to go back to school. The baby is one year old and I will take care of her and put her mother in a boarding so that people don't keep seeing her around."(Parent Kambuga TC)

Agency and Well-Being of Teenage Mothers

The role of supportive parents was one of the leading internal agencies. Supportive parenting, particularly from mothers and grandmothers emerged as a foundational pillar for teenage mothers' ability to reassert agency. Emotional, material, and practical support helped buffer the psychological impacts of stigma, rejection, and loss of opportunity. The examples given reflect how such support not only ensured day-to-day survival (through provision of food, clothes, and child care) but also reawakened long-term aspirations by enabling school re-enrollment and rebuilding of self-worth. These findings indicate that intergenerational female solidarity plays a crucial role in restoring agency among young mothers, challenging dominant narratives that portray them solely as dependent or disempowered. For instance, one mother disclosed:

"My grandmother and biological mother are the ones who take care of me because they provide food, school fees, and buy clothes for my child." (Teenage mother Kambuga TC)

"My mother never gave up on me. She supported me to go back to school after giving birth." (Teenage mother, FGD, Kanungu T/C January 2025)

Furthermore, some teenage mothers survived through economic adaptation and emotional endurance due to varying capabilities. Despite the overwhelming pressures of early motherhood ranging from family tension, peer judgment, and economic exclusion, many teenage mothers revealed internal agency by initiating or participating in informal economic activities such as tailoring, hairdressing, basket weaving, and subsistence farming. These strategies were not merely for survival, but also avenues for reclaiming dignity and constructing independent identities. The ability to navigate emotional conflict and interpersonal betrayal, as shown in the

statement "I chose to forget about it and focus on my goals," reveals a high level of emotional intelligence and self-determination.

"They supported me in taking a hairdressing course, but one of my sisters became jealous and falsely accused me… I chose to forget about it and focus on my goals." (Teenage mother, FGD, Kambuga T/C January 2025)

The types of activities teenage mothers engaged in tailoring, hairdressing, housekeeping helping and planting food crops for survival are predominantly feminized and informal. This suggests a gendered dimension to survival strategies where societal expectations shape the nature of permissible or accessible income-generating work. Yet, their involvement in these spaces reflects adaptive use of available resources and social networks. The agency here is therefore, bounded but not absent, operating within cultural norms while still resisting complete dependency.

"When I gave birth, a friend of my mother got me a job as a house helper. I stayed with her relatives, who took care of me and my baby and I was getting a wage from which I would support my mother sometimes" (Teenage mother, FGD, Kanungu T/C January 2025)

Furthermore, the external agency that would take teenage mothers at a supportive level was identified to be particularly limited. This was attributed to the influence of culture, where women are perceived to be homogeneous and as a whole with no reservation on the categories that they appear in. Key informants highlighted the lack of consistent governmental or NGO support. Some parents wished to access programs like the Parish Development Model (PDM) to help their daughters, but lacked information on how to go about the registration procedures. Community and institutional actors emphasized vocational training and education as key strategies although government programs are not tailored to teenage mothers. One Officer portrayed,

"Most of the programs we have are not specifically targeting teenage mothers or pregnant teenage girls; government programs generally target the livelihoods of households. The non-governmental organizations also come with their thematic areas of interest which they operate on" (Kihihi T/C CDO, December, 2024)

Another one shared that,

"We offer support at a family level and we offer counseling as a town council and maybe connecting them to other structures that are going to be of help to them but we cannot do beyond that because we do not have the resources. We normally sit and talk to the parents who are sometimes worried about whether schools will accept admitting their children after giving birth given that they are viewed as grownup women, then we make calls to schools some girls are able to resume school; this normally happens when we counsel both the parents and their teenage girls" (Kambuga T/C CDO, December, 2024)

Notwithstanding some teenage mothers who received institutional help reported positive outcomes, such as completing vocational courses and finding survival means. The study revealed that access to institutional support played a significant role in enhancing the agency of some teenage mothers, particularly in economically constrained rural settings like Kambuga. Agency, in this context, is understood as the capacity of individuals to make choices and act upon them to improve their life circumstances. For teenage mothers who often face stigma, economic hardship, and limited social mobility external interventions from well-structured organizations provided an important platform for exercising this agency. A notable example is the support provided by NYAKA, a local organization that offered vocational training in basket weaving. The testimony of a teenage mother illustrates how this institutional support translated into practical empowerment

"I was supported by NYAKA to learn basket weaving skills, I can now make baskets and sell them in Kambuga weekly market and get money to look after my child." (Teenage mother, FGD, Kambuga T/C January 2025)

These findings highlight the transformative potential of institutional support in enhancing the agency and well-being of teenage mothers. Access to vocational training and livelihood opportunities, such as those provided by organizations like NYAKA, not only equips young mothers with practical skills but also restores their sense of dignity, independence, and hope for the future. As demonstrated by the testimonial from Kambuga Town Council, such support enables teenage mothers to generate income, care for their children, and reintegrate into society thereby countering the disempowering effects of early motherhood and social stigma.

Discussion

The study reveals a multifaceted relationship between internal and external agency among teenage mothers in rural Uganda particularly Kanungu District. An internal agency characterized by resilience, emotional strength,

and individual decision-making is often natural out of inevitability rather than prospect. These findings echo those of Goossens et al. (2015), who noted that young mothers often develop coping strategies that reflect strong internal acceptance and perseverance.

External agency, on the other hand, is largely influenced by background structures such as family relationships, institutional frameworks, and community standards. This finding is consistent with earlier research by Brophy et al. (2012), who observed that emotionally supportive family environments significantly enhance adolescent mothers' self-efficacy and decision-making. Conversely, neglectful or authoritarian parenting, as highlighted by Zarina Chohan, (2011) tends to weaken young mothers' agency by promoting control and discouraging autonomy, coupled with harsh conditions often leading to cycles of dependency and vulnerability.

The role of cultural stigma in weakening agency is also significant. Teenage mothers in Kanungu frequently face derogatory labeling, exclusion from social spaces, and shaming experiences in the community that result in suppressed shame and reduced self-efficacy. This dynamic is supported by Kelly, (2018) and Ellis-Sloan, (2014), both of whom emphasize that stigma reinforces disregard and acts as an obstacle to education access, healthcare, and social support services.

In regard to the institutional level, the study revealed that, while NGOs and community-based programs such as NYAKA AIDS Orphans Project provided a vital support through vocational training, psychosocial counseling, and mentorship, this support was not accessed by all teenage mothers. The findings are consistent with Brophy et al. (2012) and Francis, (2021) who argue that, effective policy implementation must reflect the lived experiences of vulnerable populations especially teenage mothers to achieve meaningful improvement. Teenage mothers in Kanungu who accessed vocational training expressed improved confidence and individual independence thus showing explicit indicators of agency and well-being. However, others reported missed opportunities due to a lack of information or exclusion from programs like the parish Development Model which reflects a gap in adolescent–friendly services.

Agency among teenage mothers in Kanungu is not merely a product of individual behaviors but materializes at the intersection of personal resilience and structural support. Enhancing their well-being needs a holistic strategy that strengthens individual agency while transforming the family, cultural, and institutional systems that shape their choices.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion: The findings of this study highlight that teenage motherhood in Kanungu District is deeply embedded in a difficult trap of family dynamics, cultural beliefs, economic hardships, and structural barriers. Looking at teenage mothers' agency, their capacity to make independent and informed decisions is not simply a matter of personal resilience, but one significantly shaped by the relational and institutional environments in which they live. Supportive families, especially mothers and grandmothers, played a pivotal role in fostering confidence, ensuring access to basic needs, and encouraging continued education or vocational arrangements which enhances their nature of well-being.

Cultural stigma and community attitudes toward teenage motherhood remain considerable impediments. Derogatory labeling and social exclusion diminish self-sufficiency and block reintegration into school or the community lifetime. Yet, the study also found strong examples of agency, particularly where young mothers accessed informal work, vocational training, or received encouragement from NGOs and family members.

Institutional support, while present in the form of NGOs played an important yet inconsistent role in enabling teenage mothers' paths to well-being. Local government initiatives such as the Parish Development Model show potential but limited awareness and accessibility. Meanwhile, challenges in the health and education sectors including stigma in health centers, inflexible school policies, and lack of adolescent-specific services continue to disempower young mothers which affects their well-being.

To enhance the well-being and agency of teenage mothers in rural Uganda, especially in settings like Kanungu, a comprehensive response is needed. Programs should go beyond individual-focused interventions and

address the operational and relational factors that condition a teenage mother's life. Strengthening empathetic parenting, equipping families with tools for reintegration, reducing community stigmatization, improving access to reproductive and mental health services, and expanding vocational and educational opportunities are essential. Through collaborative, culturally sensitive, and community-based strategies, it is possible to transform teenage motherhood from a cycle of disregard into a platform for growth, and empowerment.

Recommendations: To effectively address the persistent stigma surrounding teenage motherhood, there is a critical need for community-based sensitization programs aimed at transforming negative societal attitudes and fostering inclusive environments. Such initiatives can begin with the leaders such as the religious, local authorities, educators, and media actors to challenge prevailing stereotypes and promote narratives that affirm the dignity and potential of teenage mothers. Tackling stigma at both the interpersonal and institutional levels can reduce shame, social exclusion, and psychological distress factors that undermine young mothers' self-worth and social participation. In addition, integrating comprehensive sexuality education into school and community platforms can help prevent early pregnancies while promoting empathy and understanding toward teenage mothers, thus reducing moralistic judgments and increasing acceptance.

In tandem, efforts to strengthen the agency of teenage mothers must prioritize the expansion of accessible, youth-responsive support systems. This includes scaling up vocational training programs, psychosocial counseling, re-entry education policies, and childcare services to enhance young mothers' capacity to make informed decisions, pursue aspirations, and regain control over their lives. Empowerment-focused interventions should be designed in ways that recognize and build on the resilience and resourcefulness already demonstrated by many teenage mothers, rather than treating them as passive recipients of aid. Furthermore, the introduction of collaborations between institutional actors including schools, health centers, and NGOs should be ensured to support structures in handling the unique needs and aspirations of adolescent mothers. This is important in helping the mother to navigate stigma and socio-economic vulnerability.

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