

Teenage motherhood and the crises of child abuse/child neglect in rural Southeast Nigeria: tracing the dark figures and its implication to children wellbeing, social policy and sustainable development

La maternidad adolescente y las crisis de abuso y abandono infantil en las zonas rurales del sudeste de Nigeria: un análisis de las cifras oscuras y sus implicaciones para el bienestar infantil, la política social y el desarrollo sostenible

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Abstract

Adolescent motherhood and its interaction with child neglect and child abuse is yet to be empirically explored in the developing nations such as Nigeria, especially among the rural communities where culture, illiteracy, poverty and religion trigger and sustain them. Although there are pockets of information scattered in the National Demographic Health Survey, National Bureau of Statistics, National Population Census, etc., the problem of teenage pregnancy and teenage motherhood especially among unmarried youths, and their socioeconomic implications including child neglect and child abuse crises are yet to receive empirical attention in order to build appropriate policy framework to meet up with sustainable development goals in this area of social problem in southeast Nigeria and other developing nations. In view of the importance of the aforementioned research gap, the present study investigated adolescent motherhood, child neglect and child abuse in rural communities in southeast Nigeria. The study involved 540 adolescent mothers between <15+years from rural communities in the region. The study applied survey design and utilized the perception scale for abusive behaviour (PSAB) and the perception scale for neglectful behaviour (PSNB) questionnaire instrument in collecting data from the adolescent mothers. The collected data were analyzed with descriptive and inferential statistics, and the findings demonstrated high prevalence of child neglect and abuse among the adolescent mothers. The study demonstrated a strong negative correlation between teenage motherhood and child neglect ($r = -0.106$) and a strong negative correlation between teenage motherhood and child abuse ($r = -0.170$). Child neglect and abuse among the teenage mothers are predicted by age, education, number of children, family pressure, and average monthly income among the teenage mothers. Conclusively from the study, there is need to capture adolescent motherhood for policy intervention through appropriate public institutions in Nigeria and other developing nations, thereby developing a pragmatic policy approach to the issue.

Key words: Teenage motherhood, child neglect, child abuse, rural development, social policy, sustainable development.

Resumen

La maternidad adolescente y su interacción con la negligencia y el abuso infantil aún no se han explorado empíricamente en países en desarrollo como Nigeria, especialmente en comunidades rurales donde la cultura, el analfabetismo, la pobreza y la religión son factores desencadenantes y sustentadores de esta situación. Si bien existe información dispersa en la Encuesta Nacional de Salud Demográfica, la Oficina Nacional de Estadística, el Censo Nacional de Población, etc., el problema del embarazo y la maternidad adolescente, especialmente entre jóvenes solteras, y sus implicaciones socioeconómicas, incluyendo las crisis de negligencia y abuso infantil, aún no han recibido atención empírica para construir un marco de políticas adecuado que cumpla con los objetivos de desarrollo sostenible en esta área de problemática social en el sureste de Nigeria y otros países en desarrollo. En vista de la importancia de la brecha de investigación mencionada, el presente estudio investigó la maternidad adolescente, la negligencia y el abuso infantil en comunidades rurales del sureste de Nigeria. El estudio involucró a 540 madres adolescentes de entre <15 años o más de comunidades rurales de la región. El estudio aplicó un diseño de encuesta y utilizó la escala de percepción de comportamiento abusivo (PSAB) y el instrumento del cuestionario de la escala de percepción de comportamiento negligente (PSNB) para recopilar datos de las madres adolescentes. Los datos recopilados se analizaron con estadísticas descriptivas e inferenciales, y los hallazgos demostraron una alta prevalencia de negligencia y abuso infantil entre las madres adolescentes. El estudio demostró una fuerte correlación negativa entre la maternidad adolescente y la negligencia infantil ($r = -0.106$) y una fuerte correlación negativa entre la maternidad adolescente y el abuso infantil ($r = -0.170$). La negligencia y el abuso infantil entre las madres adolescentes se predicen por la edad, la educación, el número de hijos, la presión familiar y el ingreso mensual promedio entre las madres adolescentes. De manera concluyente, a partir del estudio, existe la necesidad de capturar la maternidad adolescente para la intervención de políticas a través de instituciones públicas apropiadas en Nigeria y otras naciones en desarrollo, desarrollando así un enfoque de política pragmático para el problema.

Palabras clave: Maternidad adolescente, abandono infantil, maltrato infantil, desarrollo rural, política social, desarrollo sostenible.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescent motherhood also referred as teenage motherhood has been defined as early motherhood among the young girls between the ages of fifteen and nineteen years (WHO, 2024; Bałanda-Bałdyga, Pilewska-Kozak, Łepecka-Klusek, Stadnicka and Dobrowolska, 2020; UNICEF, 2024). By the classification of age and motherhood over the years, researchers as well as extant global organizations such as the World Health Organisation, UNICEF, UNESCO and allied bodies have pointed out the accompanying issues to adolescent motherhood (WHO, 2024; UNICEF, 2024). Adolescent motherhood as a socio-medical as well as public health issue is one of the enduring challenges facing the developing nations with socio-economic and health consequences across the

globe. While the challenges lie mostly with the helpless youths drenched in poverty and other socioeconomic challenges among the developing nations, the socioeconomic and public health burdens of adolescent motherhood spread national, regional and global socioeconomic development impacts. The impacts included but not limited to educational setback among the affected mothers (Psaki, Soler-Hampejsek, Saha, Mensch and Amin, 2019; Egwuaba, and Offordum, 2025; Morgan, Anima, Wadei and Katey, 2025), national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) due to human capital development lost and dwindling income (Malunga, Sangong, Saah and Bain, 2023; Blunch, 2017; Jakubowski, Nakiyingi, Wamae, Oyugi, Starnes, Mudhune, Nyawade, Ochieng, Kelvin, Odhong, Rogers and Wamai, 2025), increased national, regional and global health burden due to health complications accompanying adolescent pregnancy (Kumarasamy, Bowen, Billings and Patrician, (2025); Terefe, 2022; Gurung, Målqvist, Hong, Poudel, Sunny, Sharma, Mishra, Nurova and Ashish, 2020; Ursache, Lozneau, Bujor, Cristofor, Popescu, Gireada, Mandici, ˆain ˆa, Grigore, Matasariu, 2023; Noori, Proctor, Efevbera and Oron, 2022); poverty and crime due to lost opportunity for skill and economic empowerment among the adolescent mothers and their subsequent offspring; prostitution and other social vices by the adolescent mothers who are socially and economically trapped due to break in skill acquisition, education and human capital development (Govender, Naidoo and Taylor, 2020; Olofinbiyi, Mkhize, Dlamini, Maluleke and Olofinbiyi, 2019).

According to the World Health Organization (2024), the burden of adolescent motherhood among the developing nations and the associated problems are overwhelming. This is reflected by about 12 million youth between the ages of 15-19 years who give birth every year, of which about 3 million youth in the same age categories undergo unsafe abortion every year. Similarly, World Health Organization maintained that complications from pregnancy mostly among the adolescent mothers is the leading cause of death among this age category, while about 50 per cent of infant deaths occur mostly among the children of the adolescent mothers in the low and middle income countries (WHO, 2024). Among other issues associated with teenage motherhood is the problem of child neglect and child abuse. Adolescent motherhood according to some studies is associated with poverty, illiteracy, culture, religion and other socio-demographic factors. However, the problem of child abuse and neglect are some of the major challenges resulting from adolescent motherhood among the developing nations (Alukagberie, Elmusharaf, Ibrahim and Poix, 2023; Madume and

Dibia, 2021; Phiri, Kasonde, Moyo, Sikaluzwe and Simona, 2023; Kip-too-Tarus, 2020; Bitew, Akalu, Belsti, Diress, Gela, Belay, Getahun, Terefe and Getnet, 2023).

Across Africa as one of the developing regions, adolescent motherhood, child abuse and child neglect are on the increase in the rural communities despite efforts so far to eradicate the problem (Wado, Sully and Mumah, 2019; Younas and Gutman, 2022; Russotti, Rogosch, Handley, Douthit, Marquis and Cicchetti, 2021). In Africa alone, the rate of adolescent motherhood is documented as high as 54.6 per cent in East Africa, 19.3 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa, 9.2 per cent in north Africa and 18.8 per cent in Africa as a whole (Worku, Tessema, Teshale, Tesema and Yeshaw, 2021; Kassa, Arowojolu, Odukogbe and Yalew, 2018). Child neglect and abuse is recorded as high as 41.8 per cent among girls 1-14 years and 39.8 per cent among boys in Africa (African Partnership to End Violence against Children, 2021). By regional extrapolation, child abuse/neglect is recorded as between 22 per cent, 38 per cent in east Africa, about 39.4 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa, between 28 to 51 per cent in North Africa and between 26 to 41 per cent in southern Africa (African Child Policy Forum, 2019). However, all these documentations appeared to be random and blanket report without a specific focus on the adolescent mothers-related child abuse and neglect in the region.

Within the sub-Saharan Africa, adolescent motherhood prevalence has been documented as ranging from 7.2 per cent to 44.6 per cent (Ahinkorah, Kang, Perry, Brooks, and Hayen 2021). Equally, among the sub-Saharan African nations, there is high prevalence of child abuse and neglect (Kassa, Arowojolu, Odukogbe and Yalew, 2018; Akanbi, Ope, Adeloye, Amoo, Iruonagbe and Omojola, 2021; Gunawardena, 2019; Odimegwu and Mkwanzani, 2016). In Nigeria, according to the available survey, adolescent motherhood is about 23 per cent (Kareem, Abubakar, Adelekan, Ameyaw, Gbagbo, Goldson, Mueller and Yaya, 2023). National Demographic Health Survey reported that 1 in every five adolescent females has started bearing children or is already pregnant; the rural-urban difference is 27 per cent against eight per cent. Regionally across Nigeria six geopolitical zones, the prevalence of adolescent motherhood in the North central region of Nigeria is between ten per cent and 33 per cent, while that of the Northeast is between 34-41 per cent; Northwest is 18-25 per cent, Southeast is between 10-19 per cent, Southwest is 12-18 per cent and South-south stood at 10-17 per cent (Nigerian Demographic and Health Survey, 2018). Child

abuse and neglect have been documented as generally high across Nigeria (Olusegun and Idowu, 2016; Olarinmoye and Uchendu, 2024).

Child neglect/abuse as well as adolescent motherhood is rampant in southeast Nigeria rural communities. This is evidence in the rampant cases of underage mothers across rural and urban communities in the region with accompanying spread of child violence and neglects (Alex-Ojei, Odimegwu and Ntoimo, 2023; Alukagberie, Elmusharaf, Ibrahim and Poix, 2023; Ajaegbu, Madubuike, Ezeonwu, Uchendu, Obidike, Agu and Ajaegbu, 2023). These are attributed to certain phenomenon such as age into marriage, community orientation about marriage, traditional marriage rites, family disposition towards childhood and motherhood, cultural disposition towards adolescent pregnancy/marriage, etc. The situation in southeast Nigeria is not sufficiently covered by national statistical documentation due to the terrain and public willingness to give out vital information regarding adolescent pregnancy and pregnancy out of wedlock. For instance, among the population of the southeast Nigeria mainly dominated by Igbo culture, adolescent pregnancy and motherhood, which mainly occur out of wedlock, are viewed in most cases as obscene. These by implication affect the level of information, which can be willingly divulged by the population to the assumed external body such as government agents and organized institutions.

Although there is yet to be conventional model to capture the prevalence of adolescent motherhood and child abuse/neglect in the national and regional statistical report as a peculiar issue, the more complex issue about adolescent motherhood and child violence is embedded in the communal closeness in the rural communities in the region whereby vital information about such situation is difficult to be divulged due to cultural ethos. Consequently, the problem of adolescent motherhood and the resultant child abuse/neglect continue to appear as dark figure in the region owing to some reasons such as government inability to statistically capture and predict the phenomenon, as well as the observance of adolescent motherhood especially out of wedlock as obscene to the cultural and value system of the population. Adolescent motherhood and the accompanying child neglect/abuse is double barrelled socioeconomic problem to the society and the affected population. For instance, the implication of this challenge is demonstrated in the continuous cycle of socioeconomic poverty, gender inequality, violence against children, and general underdevelopment.

In view of the pertinence of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals to all and sundry especially in the developing nations, the

problem of dark figure of adolescent motherhood and child neglect/abuse ought to be empirically explored to bring to the knowledge of the global community, one of the enduring socio-demographic crises in the tropical region. For instance, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 1-(Ending poverty in all its forms everywhere), 4-(Ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all) and 5-(Achieving gender equality and empower all women and girls) are hampered by the crises of adolescent motherhood and child neglect/abuse, which invariably subjects the victims to perpetual poverty in the affected region.

In southeast Nigeria, women are subject to men's will and intent; at the same time, women are the bread winners for most families in the rural communities making adolescent motherhood a complicated issue. As a matter of fact, adolescent motherhood either through traditional marriage rite or unwanted pregnancy automatically traps unskilled women into perpetual poverty. Adolescent motherhood in majority of cases in the rural communities trigger child neglect and abuse due to the difficulty in managing pregnancy and child upbringing under the pressure of poverty and immaturity (Wycisk, 2016; Shusterman, Nunez, Fettig and Kebede, 2021; Tetteh, Nuertey, Dwomoh, Udofia, Mohammed, Adjei-Mensah and Yawson, 2020; Marti-Castaner, Pavlenko, Engel, Sanchez, Crawford, Brooks-Gunn and Wimer, 2022; Dutta, Naskar, Das and Banerjee, 2023). Because of the strong cultural value among the Igbo of southeast Nigeria, adolescent marriage is not welcomed and by implication, majority of the adolescent mothers are as a result of pregnancy out of wedlock. In southeast Nigeria, majority of the communities do not accept a grandchild from pregnancy out of wedlock on the side of the female folk even as the men responsible for the pregnancy in most cases abandon the victim to herself and family. In order to avoid shame and reprimand from the community and religious organizations the female-victim of adolescent pregnancy out of wedlock is compelled by her parents to go and live with the man who is responsible for the pregnancy. This in extension forces the victim to abusive marriage and subsequent child neglect and abuse.

Other studies in isolated manner have reported child violence and adolescent motherhood, but have not specifically explored the relationship between adolescent motherhood and child neglect/abuse. Equally, there is scanty literature in the global debate on child violence and the underlying factors in the tropical region where southeast Nigeria is located. As such, the peculiar situation on adolescent motherhood and child neglect/abuse in

southeast Nigeria is yet to be empirically explored for policy intervention. In view of the observed gap in literature, this study answered the following research questions:

- i What is the relationship between adolescent motherhood and the indices of child neglect and abuse in rural communities in southeast Nigeria?
- ii What are the predictors of child neglect among the adolescent mothers in rural communities in southeast Nigeria?
- iii What are the predictors of child abuse among adolescent mothers in rural communities in southeast Nigeria?

RESEARCH METHOD

The study was carried out in southeast Nigerian rural communities located at latitude N904.9199 and Longitude E8040.5166 with the landmass of approximately 41,440 km². In southeast Nigeria, there are five administrative states such as Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states. Following the three tier government structure in Nigeria, the administrative states in the region are made up of senatorial zones and local councils, which underneath, have local communities.

Although since 2006 Nigeria has not had population census, through extrapolation and projection, the southeast Nigerian population is estimated to be about 22 million. However, following the interest of this study, which is on adolescent motherhood and child abuse/neglect, the sample of the study was dependent on the teenage population in the region, which is approximately nine million. The adolescent motherhood fall in the category of the population, which cannot be easily sampled following the fact that this category of the population is not specific in the demographic statistical data arrangement for Nigeria as they are summarily lumped with other categories in the census data and the National Demographic Health Survey. Meanwhile, the study depended on pilot study and snowball techniques in developing a sampling frame among the rural communities involved in the study.

Our pilot study systematically categorized the communities in the region into rural communities in the hinterlands, communities with proximity to urban centers, and urban communities. Following the findings of the National Demographic Health that 1 in every five adolescent females has started bearing children or is already pregnant, and rural-urban difference of 27 per cent against eight per cent adolescent mothers, we focused

our pilot study on the rural communities, which eventually constituted our study units and samples. From the pilot study, in each of the community/village/clan, at least four out of every 11 women with child(ren) are adolescent mothers and this informed the estimate for the sampling frame for the study, which depended on the estimated 48,753 teenage mothers among the 18 local councils selected for the study. The study discovered that majority of the mothers in the rural communities who started bearing children in the last ten years were adolescent mothers.

The study applied multistage sampling procedure in selecting the respondents to the study due to the complex nature of the region both in population and household infrastructural designs. The stages included the regional level, the state (the administrative states in the region) level, senatorial zones, the local council levels, and the community/ward levels. Three administrative states were randomly selected, which included Enugu, Ebonyi and Abia states. Within these three states, two senatorial zones were selected from each of the states; three local council areas were selected from each of the senatorial zones included in the study. From the local councils, two communities/villages/clans were purposively selected following the findings of the pilot study, which showed that communities in the hinterlands have more adolescent mothers than rural communities with proximity to the urban areas. Based on this, the study purposively selected the rural communities in the hinterlands with more adolescent mothers.

At the community/village/clan level, the study selected five wards following the delineation pattern by the local councils in the region. From each of the wards selected for the study, three households were purposively selected from which five respondents were selected for the study. The purposive sampling procedure applied here was due to the need to specifically choose the households with adolescent mothers whether married or single mothers. In total, the study selected 540 respondents from 180 wards, 36 communities/villages/clans, 18 local councils, six senatorial zones and three administrative states.

The study applied questionnaire instrument for primary data collection. The perception scale for abusive behaviour (PSAB) and the perception scale for neglectful behaviour (PSNB) developed by Atta and Youssef (1998) was adopted in collecting data from the adolescent mothers involved in the study. The questionnaire instrument was tested in the field during the pilot study to ascertain the reliability of the items in the questionnaire as well as the level of compatibility with the study targets considering the literacy level and other socio-demographic factors among the respondents.

The questionnaires were shared among the respondents through the help of research assistants who were incorporated in the study from the hinterlands for ease of communication with the respondents. The research assistants helped in guiding the respondents to respond to the questionnaire items especially where they needed explanations due to literacy level. The collected data were analyzed using SPSS package (version 23), while the descriptive statistics and inferential statistics were deployed to probe the data for the substantive issues to the study and relationship of the variables included in the study.

STUDY FINDINGS

According to the study, majority of the respondents (50.2 per cent) had their first child birth at 15-18years of age, 36.3 per cent had their first child birth at 19years old, while 13.5 per cent were in the age categories of <15years-15years when they had their first child birth. Majority of the respondents (37.6 per cent) had primary education, 30.9 per cent had secondary education, 22.2 per cent had education up to diploma and above; about 5 per cent had no formal education. Majority of the respondents are traditionally married (41.6 per cent), 35.9 per cent are single mothers, while 22.5 per cent are cohabiting with a man.

Majority of the respondents (49.8 per cent) has two-three children, 35.4 per cent has between first pregnancy and 1 child, while 14.8 per cent of the respondents has four or more children. Among the respondents, majority (45.9 per cent) has between NGN5000- NGN15000 as their average monthly income, 35.9 per cent has less than NGN5000 as their average monthly income, 10 per cent of the respondents has between NGN16000-NGN25000 as their average monthly income, while 8.1 per cent had between NGN26000 and NGN35000 as their average monthly income.

According to the findings, majority of the respondents (45.4 per cent) indicated that they have some frictions with their family members sometimes since their first pregnancy, 32.6 per cent indicated that they experience frequent quarrels with their family members since their first pregnancy, while 22 per cent indicated that they maintain cordial relationship with their family members. This finding points to the critical issues faced by adolescent motherhood in this part of the world as there are cultural and religious underlying factors determining who should be treated with tender care as a mother. According to the studies by Adaramoye, Adedini and Sunmola (2025), Orpin, Papadopoulos and Puthussery (2020), adolescent mothers in the developing nations such as Nigeria are exposed to vulnera-

bilities and unseen domestic violence attributed to the general perception of teenage pregnancy.

Among the respondents, majority (47 per cent) are living with their husband in extended family, 37.8 per cent are living with their family of birth, while only 15.2 per cent are living with their husband alone. Although this living arrangement characterizes the typical traditional African setting especially among the Igbo of eastern Nigeria, the challenges in the modern day family expectation included unnecessary interference. One of the major sources of domestic violence against women in southeast Nigeria is extended family living arrangement.

According to the findings, majority of the respondents (41.9 per cent) are facing with momentary pressure from their family, 36.7 per cent are facing with pressure from the family and neighborhood, while 21 per cent indicated that they do not face with any pressure. Monetary pressure, with financial responsibilities accrued to pregnancy and childcare, is a common phenomenon for adolescent mothers especially when it involved jobless women who are vulnerable to violence and abuse like adolescent mothers. According to the studies by Marciel, Campbell, Silva, Hughes, Salim, Nguyen, Kissler, Hole, Michelson and Kistin (2020), Tabudlo, Pinggen, Jaquias, Erika, Fernandez and Anicas (2024), financial and other pressures on the adolescent mothers contribute to their frustration as well as psychological trauma.

The above Table 1 showed the correlation coefficient of adolescent motherhood and the indices of childcare among the rural teenage mothers. From the table, there is a strong negative correlation between adolescent motherhood and preparing children to attend school early among the teenage mothers in the rural southeast Nigeria ($r = -0.106$). This further showed that the increase in one of the correlated, resulted to the decrease of another in their relationship. There is a weak negative correlation between teenage motherhood and the supervision of the children as a mother while they are playing ($r = -0.248$). Furthermore, this shows that while one variable increases the other tend to decrease. There is a weak negative correlation between teenage motherhood and treating the children's health issues timely among the teenage mothers in the rural southeast Nigeria ($r = -0.356$). There is a strong negative correlation between teenage motherhood and washing/watching children and their hygiene among the teenage mothers in rural southeast Nigeria ($r = -0.170$).

Table 1: Coefficient of teenage pregnancy and indices of child care

	Pearson Correlation	Teenage motherhood	Making sure the children attend school on time	Supervising the children while playing	Treating the children health issues timely	Washing and wat- ching the children and their hygiene	Dressing the children to meet the needs of occasions and contexts
Teenage motherhood		1	-0.106*	-0.0248**	-0.0356**	-0.170**	-0.089*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.014	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.039
Making sure the children attend school on time	Pearson Correlation	-0.106**	1	0.234**	0.204**	0.478**	0.452**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001		0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Supervising the children while playing	Pearson Correlation	-0.248**	0.234**	1	0.647**	0.548**	0.353**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000		00.000	0.000	0.000
Treating the children health issues timely	Pearson Correlation	-0.0356**	0.204**	0.647**	1	0.582**	0.429**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000		0.000	0.000
Washing and watching the children and their hygiene	Pearson Correlation	-0.170**	0.478**	0.548**	.582**	1	0.300**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000		0.000
Dressing the children to meet the needs of occasions and contexts	Pearson Correlation	-0.089*	0.452**	0.353**	.429**	0.300**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.039	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	
N		540	540	540	540	540	540

Note: *significant at 0.05; **significant at 0.001.

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: field data 2025.

The above Table 2 showed the regression model on child neglect and other variables among the adolescent mothers. From the table, about 83 per cent of the factors affecting child neglect among the adolescent mothers in rural communities in southeast Nigeria were explained. From the table, different factors appeared significant in the prediction of child neglect among adolescent mothers in rural communities in southeast Nigeria. Among these factors are age (p.000, b.887, t.21.681); for every 1 unit increase in the age of the adolescent mothers, there was a corresponding 0.88 unit change in child neglect among the adolescent mothers. For every 1 unit change in marital status among the adolescent mothers, there is -1.350 unit change in child neglect among the adolescent mothers (t.-13.647); for every 1 unit increase in age at first pregnancy, there was a corresponding -1.337 unit change in child neglect among the adolescent mothers (t.-19.643).

Table 2: Coefficients of child neglect and other variables

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
	B	Std. Error	Beta	T		Lower Bound	Upper Bound
(Constant)	-1.704	0.315		-5.411	0.000	-2.322	-1.085
Age	1.122	0.052	0.887	21.681	0.000	1.020	1.224
Education	0.007	0.037	0.007	0.197	0.844	0.079	0.065
Marital status	-2.677	0.196	-1.350	-13.64	0.000	-3.062	-2.291
Age at first pregnancy	-1.345	0.068	-1.337	-19.64	0.000	-1.211	-1.480
Number of children	0.554	0.058	0.395	9.471	0.000	0.439	0.669
Average monthly income	-0.737	0.043	-0.682	-17.15	0.000	-0.821	-0.653
Perceived treatment from family	0.619	0.043	0.000	0.002	0.999	-0.0085	0.085
Living arrangement	0.422	0.081	0.307	5.203	0.000	0.262	0.581
Perceived pressure from surrounding	0.213	0.036	0.167	5.903	0.000	0.142	0.284

a. Dependent Variable: child neglect
R = 0.830 (83%), F = 117.211, P = 0.000
Source: field data 2025.

For every 1 unit increase in number of children, there was a corresponding .395unit change in child neglect among the adolescent mothers (t.9.471); for every 1unit increase in average monthly income, there was a corresponding -0.682 unit change in child neglect among the adolescent mothers (t.-17.153). For every 1unit change in living arrangement among the adolescent mothers, there was a corresponding 0.307 unit change in child neglect among the adolescent mothers (t.5.203), while for every 1 unit increase in pressure experienced from the family and neighborhood, there is a corresponding 0.167 unit change in child neglect among the adolescent mothers (t .5.903).

Table 3 above showed the model explaining the factors correlated with child abuse among the adolescent mothers in rural communities in southeast Nigeria. From the table, the model explained about 72 per cent of the factors affecting perceived child abuse among the adolescent mothers in rural communities in southeast Nigeria. According to the model, for every 1 unit increase in the age of the adolescent mothers, there is a corresponding -496 unit change in child abuse among the adolescent mothers (t.-10.405); for every 1 unit increase in education of the adolescent mothers, there is a corresponding -0.313 unit change in child abuse among the adolescent mothers (t.-6.869).

For every 1 unit change in the marital status of the adolescent mothers, there is a corresponding -0.809 unit change in child abuse among the adolescent mothers (t.-6.675); for every 1 unit increase in the number of children among the adolescent mothers, there is a corresponding 0.200 unit change in child abuse (t.3.918); for every 1 unit increase in the average monthly income among the adolescent mothers, there is a corresponding -0.0519 unit change in child abuse among the adolescent mothers (t.-10.566).

For every 1unit change in perceived treatment from family, there is a corresponding -0.621unit change in child abuse among the adolescent mothers (t.-15.336); for every 1unit change in living arrangement among the adolescent mothers, there is a correspond .488unit change in child abuse (t.6.702), while for every 1unit change in the extent of pressure from family and neighborhood on the adolescent mothers, there is a corresponding 0.175unit change in child abuse among the adolescent mothers (t.5.004).

Table 3: Coefficients of child abuse and other Variables

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
	B	Std. Error	Beta	T		Lower Bound	Upper Bound
(Constant)	3.837	0.363		10.579	0.000	3.124	4.549
Age	-.0587	0.056	-0.496	-10.405	0.000	-0.476	-0.0697
Education	-0.287	0.042	-.0313	-6.869	0.000	-.0370	-.0205
Marital status	1.499	0.225	0.809	6.675	0.000	1.940	1.058
Number of children	0.263	0.067	0.200	3.918	0.000	0.131	0.394
Average monthly income	-.0524	0.050	-.0519	-10.566	0.000	-0.0622	-0.427
Perceived treatment from family	-0.755	0.049	-0.621	-15.336	0.000	-0.852	-0.658
Living arrangement	0.627	0.094	0.488	6.702	0.000	0.443	0.811
Perceived pressure from surrounding	0.208	0.042	0.175	5.004	0.000	0.127	0.290

a. Dependent Variable: Child abuse.
R = 0.723 (72.3%), F = 64.502, P = 0.0000.
Source: field data 2025.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Adolescent motherhood, child neglect and child abuse have been observed as threats to children wellbeing especially in the developing nations where child neglect and child abuse are fluidly connected to traditional approach to child upbringing. Child abuse and neglect has been constantly reinforced among the developing nations by poverty, illiteracy, culture and religion. The situation as it is obtainable in sub-Saharan Africa and other developing nations has hampered the United Nations’ sustainable development agenda as it affects mother and child wellbeing (Haustein and Kidy, 2019; Golo and Novieto, 2022). The situation in sub-Saharan Africa appears as “dark figure cases” due to poor and interrupted demographic documentation (Benedict, 2022; Ojong and Ejar, 2017).

The present study focused on the unaccounted cases of adolescent motherhood and child neglect/abuse, which is rampant among the rural communities in southeast Nigeria. From the findings of the study, majority of the respondents (63.7 per cent) are below the age of 19 years but not less than 12 years when they had their first pregnancy. This underscores the earlier observation by the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF, that a significant proportion of the girls' population are experiencing teenage/adolescent pregnancy. Also, the studies by Asmamaw, Tafere and Negash (2023), Aderajew, Ayele, Zewde, Yimer, Hailemeskel and Tiruneh (2024); Mekonen (2024) in sub-Saharan region demonstrated the prevalence of adolescent/teenage motherhood in the region.

More than 72 per cent of the respondents were not educated beyond secondary/high school education, while 64.1 per cent of the respondents indicated that they have married or are living with a man in intimate relationship presently. Teenage pregnancy in the developing nations is feeding on the high rate of illiteracy among the population. The underlying message of the finding in this study is that, the majority of the teenage mothers are already vulnerable to manipulation and socioeconomic crisis. Other studies have demonstrated the association of education and teenage pregnancy and motherhood elsewhere (Senaratne, Pathiranage, Jayawardhana, Kaluarachchi and Gaspé, 2025; Amo-Adjei, Caffé, Simpson, Harris and Chandra-Mouli, 2022; Okafor, Ekwealor, Nkemjika, Anekeje, Ogechi and Egbe, 2024). More so, the studies of Jochim, Cluver, Sidloyi, Kelly, Ornellas, Mangqalaza and Eastern (2023), Isano, Theogene and Blanchet (2025) showed that teenage pregnancy in sub-Saharan Africa was more of literacy crisis than other socioeconomic issues. Majority of the respondents (78 per cent) indicated that they have disorganized, upsetting home life, while majority (84.8 per cent) are finding it difficult to obtain medical care for the child sometimes due to financial crisis. Teenage motherhood is characterized by multiple crisis in sub-Saharan Africa among different ethnic groups especially among the Igbo in southeast Nigeria due to culture and religion, which most times classify this category of the population as minority group with little or no value in the system. This in the long run exposes the teenage mothers to other vulnerabilities and difficulties.

Majority of the respondents (78.6 per cent) offers an inadequate or inappropriate explanation for the child's injury, while majority of the respondents (90.8 per cent) indicated that they give different explanations for the same injury on their child because of pressure. Majority (98.2 per cent) indicated that they discipline the child too harshly considering the child's

age or what he/she did wrong. Motherhood although can be counted from the point of conception, however, mental maturity and moral discipline are very necessary for child upbringing responsibility. These conditions are mostly lacking among teenage mothers hence the disjointed accountability about their children in certain circumstances. Meanwhile, the study finds that the health and security of the children from the adolescent mothers are endangered owing to the way the children are being looked after. For instance, majority (63.5 per cent) exposes their children to unsafe living conditions. As part of the children's wellbeing, there is demanding responsibility on the mothers to look after their wards while playing around to ensure their security and safety, and where this is not observed, the children seem to be vulnerable to a number of risky activities and environments (Russell, 2016; Ogunode, Akinsua-Ajape and Jegede, 2021). According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2024), the emotional wellbeing of the children included the way they are treated by their parents and the relationship obtainable between the children and their parents.

Watching and supervising the children activities by their mothers are some of the essential aspects of caring for them and preserving their wellbeing. However among the rural adolescent mothers, this is not properly done because of some issues ranging from poverty to ignorance and illiteracy. Much of the children's health issues are directly related with their level of hygiene, which originate from their mothers' attitude to the children's health and wellbeing (Ali, Fahmy, Mohamed and Hawy, 2016). The above situation goes a long way to show the vulnerability of the children of adolescent mothers in rural communities in southeast Nigeria. Infant mortality and other related issues in the developing nations like sub-Saharan Africa have been attributed to child neglect and abuse, which is invariably the function of poverty, illiteracy and other socioeconomic factors surrounding adolescent mothers (Simmons, Anthopolos and O'Meara, 2021; Birhanie, Tessema, Endalew and Tamirat, 2025; Anteneh, Gashu, Baffa, Bitew, Yewnew, Demissie, Terefe, Jejaw, Zegeye, Tiruneh, Tamir, Belachew, Negash, Fentie and Asmamaw, 2025; Osborne, Kamara, Bangura and Bah, 2025).

Among other things, the study set to understand the effects of teenage pregnancy on the indices of child abuse and neglect among the teenage mothers in rural southeast Nigeria. From the finding of the study, there is negative correlation between teenage pregnancy and making sure that children attend school on time among the teenage mothers in rural southeast Nigeria ($r = -0.106$). Part of the children's wellbeing is to see to their educational needs of which preparing them for school attendance is the

most important (Sharley, 2022; 2020). The situation in southeast Nigeria among teenage mothers in the rural communities showed that the children among the teenage mothers still have a long way to go in meeting with the ongoing sustainable development agenda as it affects children's wellbeing due to other crises the neglect are likely to bring about. Equally, the study finds that the health and security of the children from the teenage mothers are endangered owing to the way the children are being looked after. For instance, there is a negative correlation between teenage pregnancy and supervising the children while they are playing around among the teenage mothers in rural southeast Nigeria ($r = -0.248$). As part of the children's wellbeing, there is demanding responsibility on the mothers to look after their wards while playing around to ensure their security and safety, and where this is not observed, the children seem to be vulnerable to a number of risky activities and environments (Russell, 2016; Ogunode, Akin-sua-Ajape and Jegede, 2021).

There is a weak negative correlation between teenage motherhood and treating the children's health issues timely among the teenage mothers in the rural southeast Nigeria ($r = -0.356$), while there is a strong negative correlation between teenage motherhood and washing/watching children and their hygiene among the teenage mothers in rural southeast Nigeria ($r = -0.170$). Teenage motherhood is associated with so many challenges that could distract the mothers from giving full attention to their children. As such, the likelihood of neglecting the health of their children is not ruled out. Studies have shown that teenage mothers are the major population category who skip antenatal as well as post natal visits (Twintoh, Amu, Kruh, Kissah-Korsah, Esia-Donkoh and Darteh, 2025; Javadi, Sacks, Bri-zuela, Finlayson, Crossland, Langlois, Ziegler, Chandra-Mouli and Bonet, 2023). Equally, other studies have reported that teenage mothers are the most likely population category to mismanage the health of their children (Swami and Rao, 2024; Rahman, Rashid, Khan Chowdhury and Kader, 2025).

From the study, child neglect among adolescent mothers is dependent on various factors such as age, age at first childbirth, number of children, average monthly income, living arrangement and the extent of pressure from the family and neighbourhood. More importantly to the study, there are factors that positively correlated with child neglect among adolescent mothers in rural southeast Nigeria. From the findings, number of children appeared as a positive factor to child neglect among adolescent mothers. The finding further demonstrates that more children among adolescent mo-

thers tend to trigger child neglect behaviour against the children. Raising children among women has been observed as complex and difficult especially in the means of poverty and other socioeconomic challenges. The studies by Russotti, Font, Toth and Noll (2023); Ochen, Chi and Lawoko (2019) have demonstrated the relationship between motherly responsibility towards child upbringing and mothers' discomfort. The present study added to ongoing debate about child upbringing and women discomfort triggering child neglect and abuse.

Living arrangement among adolescent mothers is another factor that positively correlated with child neglect. This can be explained by other factors such as the relationship with the family members. In rural southeast Nigeria, adolescent mothers are vulnerable to domestic violence and abuse in their family of birth in the case of single mothers and the family of marriage for those who are married (Anikwe, Anikwe, Okorochukwu, Ikeoha, Ikeotuonye, Ewah and Eze, 2023; Tetteh, Nuertey, Dwomoh, Udofia, Mohammed, Adjei-Mensah and Yawson, 2020). This is predicated on the culture of age to marriage in different rural communities within the region. For instance, there is expected age for a young man to marry likewise the females. What is classified as adolescent motherhood in most cases is below the range and by implication attracts some level of stigma and overly interference by the family members of the youth falling in this category in different family contexts. It is more in the families with socioeconomic crisis such as poverty and illiteracy. The young girl becomes vulnerable to unwholesome treatments in the hands of the family members. This by implication results to child neglect as the finding in this study showed that pressure on the adolescent mothers from the family and neighbourhood encouraged child neglect. As other studies have confirmed, the condition of the mothers, especially the early motherhood does affect their relationship with their children and sometimes can generate child neglect and abuse where the mother is not comfortable (Russotti, Font, Toth and Noll, 2023; Ochen, Chi and Lawoko, 2019). More so, in southeast Nigeria, teenage mothers in the extended family living arrangement are vulnerable to domestic violence due to lack of ability to fend for themselves.

Average monthly income among the teenage mothers as a negative factor to child neglect and abuse is explainable by the fact that most of these adolescent mothers are self-supporting mothers with little or no external support from their husband, cohabiting partner or family. With financial improvement, they are most likely to take good care of their wards. The situation is also obtainable in their family relationship in which improve-

ment in their relationship with their family members tend to discourage child neglect and child abuse among the adolescent mothers. For instance, it is a norm in this part of the world especially in the rural areas, to withdraw a woman from certain trade immediately she starts living with a man as long as the man himself is not comfortable with the trade. In majority of the cases, withdrawing the woman is not to offer her some kind of jobs, but to keep her at home as housewife. In such situation, the man may not be able to cater for the needs of the family and this will compel the woman to be living in penury and this in the long run will begin to affect the quality of care giving to the children. The idleness of the teenage mother is automatically a socioeconomic situation capable of affecting the management of the affairs of their children. Other studies have confirmed that the poor economic condition of mothers usually affect the quality of care received by their children (Jakubowski, Nakiyingi, Wamae, Oyugi, Starnes, Mudhune, Nyawade, Ochieng, Kelvin, Odhong, Rogers and Wamai, 2025; Beasley, Jespersen, Morris, Farra and Hays-Grudo, 2022; Mukabana, Abuaya, Kabiru and Ajayi, 2024).

The extent of pressure on the adolescent mothers in this study was captured as the social stigma and mistreatment they receive from their families and neighbourhood due to their condition as teenage mothers, and this was designed as to move from less severe situation to more severe situation. Mukabana, Abuaya, Kabiru and Ajayi (2024) pointed out this challenge faced by the teenage mothers in Kenya in their recent study. The finding here points to the implication of social pressure on the adolescent mothers, to their children. In rural southeast Nigeria, the issue of adolescent pregnancy especially out of wedlock is technically perceived as act of irresponsibility, betrayal of moral trust and waywardness. As such, anyone involved in it is faced with backlash and some level of stigmatization from the family to the outer societal circle (Mbulu, Yang and Wallen, 2024; Anayochukwu, 2022; Nwosu, 2017; Alex-Ojei, Odimegwu and Ntoimo, 2023). However, this in the long run triggers child neglect and child abuse among the teenage mothers in this part of the world as the study has shown. Among other factors, number of children among the adolescent mothers appeared as positively correlated with child neglect and child abuse. Due to the prevalence of poverty in this part of the world as well as attitude towards family planning (Okafor, Onu and Nwaeze, 2021), many women including adolescent mothers are faced with the challenges of managing the number of children they have, and this situation is more complicated with adolescent mothers

who entered the family way without skill and career for financial backup where the family is living in a material poverty.

The living arrangement among these teenage mothers, which included, the extended family, nuclear family and household, appeared to be a positive factor to child neglect and child abuse. The nature of the family arrangement surrounding the adolescent mothers has implication to their ability to take care of their wards and in this case, most of the adolescent mothers in this study were not living in a comfortable condition when it comes to living arrangement. A significant percentage of the women are living with their family of birth, others are living in their extended families, and with their husband. In any case, a large chunk of the adolescent mothers are living in some conditions fraught with some elements of social stigma and other mistreatment, which in the long run encourages child neglect and abuse due to some likely economic and emotional crises among the adolescent mothers.

CONCLUSION

Adolescent motherhood is prevalent in the rural southeast Nigeria with its implications to child neglect and child abuse among the teenage mothers. While teenage motherhood is being fuelled by other factors such as illiteracy, socioeconomic poverty and other socioeconomic issues, the resultant effect included poor management of the welfare of the children of the teenage mothers by their mothers. This is demonstrated in the extent of poor management of the children's healthcare, education, security and social wellbeing as well as the prevalence of child neglect and abuse among the mothers and their children. The problem is deep rooted and is being escalated by other factors such as pressure on the teenage mothers in the family and the neighbourhood, joblessness and poor financial support for the family and childcare making the problem a complex issue. However, teenage motherhood and the associated challenges of their children are still a dark figure across this region as there is no appropriate measure in the institutions saddled with the population documentation responsibilities, to capture and bring this to the limelight of appropriate policy measures. From the findings of the present study, there is need to capture adolescent motherhood for policy intervention through appropriate public institutions in Nigeria and other developing nations, thereby developing a pragmatic policy approach to the issue.

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