

# “I Believe it is Important and Best to Stay in School”: Resilience in Teenage Mothers Attending School in Omusati Region, Namibia



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## ABSTRACT

Being a teenager is a difficult experience, further complicated when motherhood and schooling co-occur. Indeed, the struggle to navigate and balance motherhood and schooling responsibilities contributes to stress and anxiety, which can negatively impact schooling experiences. Some school-going teenage mothers, however, show resilience in pursuing their education amidst all odds. This paper examines the resilience of school-going teenage mothers at the Okalongo circuit in the Omusati Region of Namibia. The qualitative research method was used in this study to explore the lived experiences of 16 school-going teenage mothers. Findings of this study show that these teen mothers, while attending school, experience trauma, stigma, insults, and discrimination, yet exhibit resilience by refusing to give up to societal expectations or negative stereotypes. Internal motivations among the mothers were characterized by social skills, problem-solving abilities, autonomy, agency, faith, and forgiveness. This research destabilizes the narrative around teenage motherhood from that of a problem to a commitment to viewing young mothers as a potential resource toward society. These findings contribute to an understanding of the experiences of teen mothers, therefore offering some insight into the measures to be implemented that would support educational success and redress gender inequalities.

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## INTRODUCTION

Research on teenage pregnancy and education in Africa reveals challenges for teen mothers pursuing schooling,<sup>1</sup> particularly the effects of patriarchal attitudes, cultural beliefs, and inadequate policy implementation for girls' education after pregnancy. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the increase in teenage pregnancies due to limited access to sexual and reproductive health services, school closures, and socio-economic challenges that hindered families from supporting their daughters' educational needs, pushing young girls into early motherhood as a means of survival.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Desiree Govender, Saloshni Naidoo, and Myra Taylor, “‘I Have to Provide for Another Life Emotionally, Physically and Financially’: Understanding Pregnancy, Motherhood and the Future Aspirations of Adolescent Mothers in KwaZulu-Natal South, Africa,” *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth* 20 (2020): 1–21.

<sup>2</sup> Anna Hako, “A Critical Review of the Plight of Teenage Pregnant Girls Displaced by the COVID-19 Pandemic in Namibian Schools,” *European Journal of Educational Sciences* 11, no. 1 (2024): 32–53; Karine Talbot and Mónica Ruiz-Casares, “Survey of Young People’s Sexual and Reproductive Health Knowledge in Northern Namibia,” *McGill Journal of Global Health* 11, no. 1 (May 31, 2022): 26–31, <https://doi.org/10.26443/mjgh.v11i1.1334>.

When attempting to continue their education, teen mothers face discrimination, economic hardships, and psychosocial challenges.<sup>3</sup> Existing policies designed to support pregnant learners and teen mothers are often inconsistent and ineffective.<sup>4</sup> Research has highlighted the need for improved awareness, better policy implementation, and targeted interventions to address the barriers that teenage mothers face in schools. As responsibilities increase, many experience emotional distress and struggle to balance the roles of learner and mother.<sup>5</sup> They often find themselves caught between the conflicting demands of home and academic duties, making it difficult to prioritise their children's needs alongside their studies, particularly during emergencies or when their children require special attention. This leads to feelings of inadequacy and stress as they navigate the complexities of being present mothers and dedicated learners.<sup>6</sup>

Teen mothers face emotional and psychological strain due to the physical and emotional distance from their children while attending school, leading to feelings of overwhelm, guilt, sadness, and a sense of failure as both parents and learners.<sup>7</sup> This emotional burden significantly impacts academic performance and overall well-being as they strive to meet societal expectations of being nurturing caregivers while pursuing academic success.<sup>8</sup> While countries like Namibia enact policies enabling teen mothers to continue their education, the educational system often fails to provide adequate support for learner mothers. Previous studies have reported insufficient institutional support, including a lack of understanding from teachers and a shortage of resources, making it difficult to balance their roles.<sup>9</sup> Despite governmental efforts, pregnant learners and teen mothers still face social stigma, financial constraints, and limited access to support systems.<sup>10</sup>

Namibia's Education Policy on the Prevention and Management of Learner Pregnancy is commendable, but its implementation and impact require further investigation.<sup>11</sup> The policy's effectiveness in reducing learner pregnancies and increasing educational completion is limited. Key stakeholders often perform their roles ineffectively, and the policy overlooks crucial aspects such as the quality of education for pregnant learners and socio-economic obstacles. Ongoing evaluation and modifications are necessary to empower teen mothers educationally and economically.<sup>12</sup>

This study explores the resilience of school-going teen mothers in the Okalongo circuit of the Omusati Region in navigating motherhood and education. Using the feminist resilience framework, it examines the experiences of teen mothers and factors that enable their perseverance in the face of challenges. The Omusati Region, which has one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates, provides a context to understand the level of resilience teen mothers in rural and disadvantaged communities have. These findings are intended to inform policy, educators, and community stakeholders, guiding interventions and advocacy for structural changes that assure the educational and social well-being of

<sup>3</sup> Dhally M Menda et al., "Socio-Cultural Factors and Experiences of School Going Teenage Mothers in Rural Zambia: A Phenomenological Study," *MedRxiv*, 2023, 2010–23; Rauha Haipinge, Rene Ferguson, and Dominic Griffiths, "The Impact of Patriarchy on the Education of Mother-Learners: A Phenomenological Study of Three Rural Schools in Namibia," *African Journal of Gender, Society and Development (Formerly Journal of Gender, Information and Development in Africa)* 12, no. 2 (June 1, 2023): 55–82, <https://doi.org/10.31920/2634-3622/2023/v12n2a3>.

<sup>4</sup> Haipinge, Ferguson, and Griffiths, "The Impact of Patriarchy on the Education of Mother-Learners: A Phenomenological Study of Three Rural Schools in Namibia."

<sup>5</sup> Govender, Naidoo, and Taylor, "'I Have to Provide for Another Life Emotionally, Physically and Financially': Understanding Pregnancy, Motherhood and the Future Aspirations of Adolescent Mothers in KwaZulu-Natal South, Africa."

<sup>6</sup> U Maluleke et al., "Balancing Dual Roles as Mothers and Students like a Walk on a Tight Rope? Reflections and Experiences of Student Mothers at a South African Higher Education Institution," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 37, no. 3 (2023): 140–60.

<sup>7</sup> Haipinge, Ferguson, and Griffiths, "The Impact of Patriarchy on the Education of Mother-Learners: A Phenomenological Study of Three Rural Schools in Namibia"; Peaceful N. Ntshayintshayi et al., "Exploring the Psychosocial Challenges Faced by Pregnant Teenagers in Ditsobotla Subdistrict," *Health SA Gesondheid* 27 (November 1, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hsag.v27i0.1880>.

<sup>8</sup> Nelago Indongo, "Analysis of Factors Influencing Teenage Pregnancy in Namibia," *Medical Research Archives* 8, no. 6 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.18103/mra.v8i6.2102>.

<sup>9</sup> Haipinge, Ferguson, and Griffiths, "The Impact of Patriarchy on the Education of Mother-Learners: A Phenomenological Study of Three Rural Schools in Namibia."

<sup>10</sup> Haipinge, Ferguson, and Griffiths, "The Impact of Patriarchy on the Education of Mother-Learners: A Phenomenological Study of Three Rural Schools in Namibia"; Barfi Francis Adomako Haruna, "Adolescent Mothers' Re-Entry into Senior High Schools: Attendant Psychological Challenges and Coping Mechanisms," *African Journal of Sociological and Psychological Studies* 2, no. 2 (2022): 59.

<sup>11</sup> Ministry of Education, "Education Sector Policy for the Prevention and Management of Learner Pregnancy (Windhoek, Namibia: Ministry of Education, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Haipinge, Ferguson, and Griffiths, "The Impact of Patriarchy on the Education of Mother-Learners: A Phenomenological Study of Three Rural Schools in Namibia."

teen mothers in Namibia and beyond. The research question guiding this study is: How do school-going mothers in the Omusati Region demonstrate resilience in pursuing their education?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Teenage pregnancy in many developing countries, including Namibia, significantly disrupts the schooling of teen mothers.<sup>13</sup> The World Health Organization (WHO) reported that around 16 million adolescent girls become mothers annually, with sub-Saharan Africa having the highest rate of teenage pregnancies, accounting for 19.3% of all pregnancies.<sup>14</sup> In Namibia, a quarter of all girls become pregnant before age 20; between 2010 and 2022, 160,800 adolescent pregnancies were reported, averaging 13,000 per year without signs of decline, and over 2,400 pregnancies occurred in the first two months of 2022.<sup>15</sup> The Kunene and Omaheke regions have the highest teenage pregnancy rates at 39% and 36%, respectively.<sup>16</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, teenage pregnancies surged from 1,400 to 3,600.<sup>17</sup> Teenage pregnancy persists as a problem demanding critical examination of its underlying factors and existing interventions.

Research consistently shows that teen mothers face immense challenges in balancing the demands of motherhood and schooling.<sup>18</sup> These challenges often stem from systemic factors rather than individual failings. Teen mothers often experience a lack of support from educators, parents, and peers, which leads to feelings of marginalization and disempowerment.<sup>19</sup> This marginalization can discourage these learners from engaging in education and ultimately hinder academic success.<sup>20</sup>

While some optimistic literature suggests that teen mothers may embark on a journey of self-discovery and resilience, it is important to question whether this perspective sufficiently addresses the broader systemic challenges at play.<sup>21</sup> Interrogating resilience, though valuable, can sometimes shift the focus away from systemic challenges and onto an individual's ability to cope with adversity. This can inadvertently perpetuate a narrative that places the burden of overcoming structural challenges on the teen mothers themselves, rather than on the society that creates these barriers.

Resilience, as a multifaceted concept, has varied definitions.<sup>22</sup> The American Psychological Association defines resilience as "the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands."<sup>23</sup> It is categorized as a process, an outcome, and a trait. Resilience as a process involves the capacity to rebound from adversity, adapt to disturbances, and adjust to significant challenges.<sup>24</sup> This conceptualization emphasizes the dynamic and contextual nature of

<sup>13</sup> Agapiti Hipoliti Chuwa, "Sexuality education is key to addressing adolescent pregnancies in Tanzania: A cross-sectional study and content analysis of vital national reports," *Research Square*, v. preprint (2023).

<sup>14</sup> Agapiti Hipoliti Chuwa, "Sexuality Education Is Key to Addressing Adolescent Pregnancies in Tanzania; a Cross-Sectional Study and Content Analysis of Vital National Reports," January 24, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-2497299/v1>.

<sup>15</sup> Donald Matthys, "160 800 Teen Pregnancies since 2010," The Namibian Investigative Unit, July 22, 2022, <https://investigations.namibian.com.na/160-800-teen-pregnancies-since-2010/>.

<sup>16</sup> Bewuketu Terefe, "The Prevalence of Teenage Pregnancy and Early Motherhood and Its Associated Factors among Late Adolescent (15–19) Years Girls in the Gambia: Based on 2019/20 Gambian Demographic and Health Survey Data," *BMC Public Health* v.22 n.1 (2022).

<sup>17</sup> Bewuketu Terefe, "The Prevalence of Teenage Pregnancy and Early Motherhood and Its Associated Factors among Late Adolescent (15–19) Years Girls in the Gambia: Based on 2019/20 Gambian Demographic and Health Survey Data," *BMC Public Health* 22, no. 1 (2022): 1767.

<sup>18</sup> Prisca Ama Anima et al., "Reflections on Lived Experiences of Teenage Mothers in a Ghanaian Setting: A Phenomenological Study," *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth* 27, no. 1 (December 31, 2022): 264–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2022.2085052>.

<sup>19</sup> Amos Amuribadek Adangabe, "Challenges Facing Teenage Mothers in School, Teachers' Perspective: The Case of WA West District," *South Asian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 01, no. 03 (2020): 01–16, <https://doi.org/10.48165/sajssh.2020.1301>.

<sup>20</sup> Anthony Kwame Morgan et al., "'We Were Girls but Suddenly Became Mothers': Evaluating the Effects of Teenage Motherhood on Girl's Educational Attainment in the Volta Region," *Cogent Social Sciences* 8, no. 1 (December 31, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2022.2036312>.

<sup>21</sup> Constanze Pfeiffer et al., "Understanding Resilience of Female Adolescents towards Teenage Pregnancy: A Cross-Sectional Survey in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania," *Reproductive Health* 14, no. 1 (December 26, 2017): 77, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-017-0338-x>.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Kananga Mukuna and Peter J O Aloka, "Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Teenage Mothers Resiliency in Overcoming Adversities in Pregnancy and Early Motherhood in South Africa," *Problems of Education in the 21st Century* 79, no. 1 (2021): 104.

<sup>23</sup> Gary R VandenBos, "American Psychological Association. APA Dictionary of Psychology," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament and Central Franconian Psalms and Glosses*, 2nd ed. (Washington D.C.: American Medical Association, 2015), 1–128, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111704227.1>.

<sup>24</sup> Froma Walsh, *Strengthening Family Resilience*, 3rd edition. (New York: The Guilford Press, 2016).

resilience, where individuals draw upon various resources and protective factors to navigate and overcome adversity.<sup>25</sup> Resilience as an outcome focuses on observable manifestations of resilience, such as the ability to maintain well-being or experience growth despite challenging circumstances.<sup>26</sup> Resilience is not a binary concept but exists on a continuum, varies across different life domains, and evolves with developmental and environmental interactions.<sup>27</sup>

### ***Feminist Resilience Perspective***

A feminist perspective guides how resilience was explored in teen mothers attending school in the Omusati Region in Namibia, emphasizing cultural and contextual nuance. This perspective provides the opportunity to move beyond deficit-based narratives that portray teenage motherhood as a "problem" to be solved.<sup>28</sup> Feminist resilience highlights the importance of understanding resilience as an individual trait in irremovable socio-cultural, political, and economic contexts.<sup>29</sup> This aligns with Jarvis's *embodied resilience*, that recognizes resilience as a cognitive or emotional process and materially and discursively constituted through the body and its interactions with the environment.<sup>30</sup> For example, for teen mothers attending school, resilience may manifest in their ability to mobilize various forms of capital—economic, social, cultural, and symbolic resources—to support educational and personal goals whilst concurrently navigating societal attitudes and educational policies that shape their experiences.<sup>31</sup> Resilience is often embodied through a dynamic and sustained process that involves overcoming both micro (personal hopes) and macro (cultural messages) challenges.<sup>32</sup>

The feminist resilience perspective acknowledges the role of systemic and structural factors in shaping the experiences of teen mothers attending school, challenging the notion that teenage pregnancy is solely an individual issue. Rather, it highlights how societal attitudes, cultural practices, and educational policies and support (or the lack thereof) significantly impact teen mothers' resilience.<sup>33</sup> This emphasis amplifies teen mothers' voices to assert their agency and rights.<sup>34</sup> This perspective highlights the need to understand the cultural and contextual factors shaping mothers' experiences, advocating for interventions and support systems aligned with their unique needs and strengths.<sup>35</sup> Through this framework, researchers and policymakers can better support teen mothers by recognizing their autonomy to pursue and develop their interests, even if these interests contradict societal norms.<sup>36</sup>

From a feminist perspective, resilience encompasses more than simply overcoming challenges - it also involves challenging and confronting institutions and societal norms that perpetuate injustice and

<sup>25</sup> Kathleen Sherrieb, Fran H. Norris, and Sandro Galea, "Measuring Capacities for Community Resilience," *Social Indicators Research* 99, no. 2 (November 14, 2010): 227–47, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-010-9576-9>.

<sup>26</sup> Steven M. Southwick et al., "Resilience Definitions, Theory, and Challenges: Interdisciplinary Perspectives," *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* 5, no. 1 (December 1, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.3402/ejpt.v5.25338>.

<sup>27</sup> Julia Kim-Cohen and Rebecca Turkewitz, "Resilience and Measured Gene–Environment Interactions," *Development and Psychopathology* 24, no. 4 (November 15, 2012): 1297–1306, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579412000715>.

<sup>28</sup> Ann S. Masten, "Global Perspectives on Resilience in Children and Youth," *Child Development* 85, no. 1 (January 16, 2014): 6–20, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12205>.

<sup>29</sup> Lea Caragata, "Feminist NGOs: Building Resilience in Low-Income Single Moms," *The International Journal of Community and Social Development* 4, no. 2 (June 25, 2022): 226–40, <https://doi.org/10.1177/25166026221079436>; Beatriz Revelles-Benavente, "Intra-Mat-Extuality: Feminist Resilience within Contemporary Literature," *European Journal of English Studies* 25, no. 2 (May 4, 2021): 190–206, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13825577.2021.1949852>.

<sup>30</sup> Caitlyn M. Jarvis, "Expanding Feminist Resilience Theorizing: Conceptualizing Embodied Resilience as a Material-Discursive Process during Infertility," *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 50, no. 4 (July 4, 2022): 440–58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2021.2011373>.

<sup>31</sup> Shakila Singh and Preenisha Naicker, "Development of Resilience in Teenage Mothers within Contextual Realities of Poor Rural South Africa," *Journal of Poverty* 23, no. 7 (November 10, 2019): 559–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10875549.2019.1616038>.

<sup>32</sup> Jarvis, "Expanding Feminist Resilience Theorizing: Conceptualizing Embodied Resilience as a Material-Discursive Process during Infertility."

<sup>33</sup> P. Shaw et al., "Intellectual Ability and Cortical Development in Children and Adolescents," *Nature* 440, no. 7084 (March 2006): 676–79, <https://doi.org/10.1038/nature04513>.

<sup>34</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, "Gender, Black Feminism, and Black Political Economy," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 568, no. 1 (2000): 41–53.

<sup>35</sup> Caragata, "Feminist NGOs: Building Resilience in Low-Income Single Moms."

<sup>36</sup> Collins, "Gender, Black Feminism, and Black Political Economy."

oppression.<sup>37</sup> This viewpoint promotes resilience that encourages collective action and community support.<sup>38</sup>

Resilience involves how individuals actively engage with and resist the material and discursive forces that shape their experiences. For example, teen mothers attending school navigate societal expectations, stigma, and pressures while attempting to assert their autonomy and agency in adversity. By centering the voices and experiences of these teen mothers, this study aimed to develop more inclusive and empowering approaches to support them and promote their well-being and success, built from their experiences.<sup>39</sup> This perspective approaches resilience as a dynamic process that is led by interactions among individuals, communities, and broader societal forces.<sup>40</sup> The study documents factors that enabled these teen mothers to pursue education despite obstacles, underscoring survival and thriving within and against oppressive systems. Further, it underscores the significance of feminist resilience as a tool for personal and collective empowerment, offering avenues for teen mothers to reclaim their narratives and shape their future.

## METHODOLOGY

This study explores the experiences of teenage mothers in the rural Okalongo Circuit, Omusati Region, Namibia, using a qualitative design to capture participant perspectives. Participants were purposively sampled from schools with high teenage pregnancy rates, targeting teen mothers in Grades 7-10 who were willing to participate.<sup>41</sup> Data collection was approved by the Directorate of Education, Arts and Culture in Namibia. Eligible participants were identified by Life Skills teachers who informed them about the study and their right to withdraw. Sixteen participants, including two minors with parental consent, participated. Participants were briefed on the study's purpose, their rights, and confidentiality measures that would be undertaken to guarantee anonymity, and pseudonyms were used. Interviews were conducted in private on school premises after hours to avoid disrupting lessons; family members were asked to assist with childcare while interviews took place. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus groups, addressing power dynamics by emphasizing voluntary participation and respectful behavior. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed thematically to preserve each participant's context.

## PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The four themes identified from the data were: Educational determination and future aspirations; Community support and advocacy; Personal Growth and Responsibility; and Spiritual coping and resilience.

### *Educational determination and future aspirations*

Teen mothers attending school are resilient and determined to continue their education despite challenges such as discrimination, victimisation, and societal stigma. They demonstrate strength and perseverance in pursuing their educational goals. They express aspirations for a better future, emphasising the importance of obtaining qualifications and pursuing careers. Namalimbo stated, "*Staying at home will have no effect. I believe it is important and best to stay in school... to study and one day have a career like my teachers.*". Their commitment to academic success despite adverse circumstances, such as financial constraints and the social stigma associated, contrasts with social expectations to focus solely on motherhood.

<sup>37</sup> Cath Larkins et al., "Working Back to the Future: Strengthening Radical Social Work with Children and Young People, and Their Perspectives on Resilience, Capabilities and Overcoming Adversity," *Critical and Radical Social Work* 9, no. 2 (August 2021): 185–204, <https://doi.org/10.1332/204986020X16031172027478>.

<sup>38</sup> Larkins et al., "Working Back to the Future: Strengthening Radical Social Work with Children and Young People, and Their Perspectives on Resilience, Capabilities and Overcoming Adversity."

<sup>39</sup> Bell Hooks, "Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory," *Revista Brasileira de Ciência Política*, 2015, 193–210.

<sup>40</sup> Kristyn Gorton, "'Don't Let the Bastards Grind You down': Feminist Resilience/Resilient Feminism in *The Handmaid's Tale* (Hulu, 2017-)," *Critical Studies in Television: The International Journal of Television Studies* 16, no. 3 (September 13, 2021): 227–44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17496020211021326>.

<sup>41</sup> L. Cohen, L. Manion, and K. Morrison, *Research Methods in Education* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018).

*Being a young mother is difficult to manage, especially with morning sickness... yooo... is unbearable... but it never stopped me from going to school". (Lorence)*

*"My ambition is to work hard and become a doctor because Mathematics and Physical Science are my favorite subjects" (Kakuki)*

*"My goal is to pass Grade 10 because I may not be able to continue on to Grade 12. After Grade 10, I intend to attend vocational schools... have a career and look for a job" (Dollar)*

Embodied resilience is evident in young mothers who remain in school despite judgements by society.<sup>42</sup> In spite of the obstacles, one being the management of childcare responsibilities along with their studies-the motivation to learn among learner mothers is always high and strong enough for them to achieve success. They cope with their situation, but they take active resistance against discrimination and stigma that might force them to abandon education; they embody resilience through continuing to go to school, not letting the roles of mothers and social stigma restrain them. The determination of the young mothers to continue with their schooling despite physical and emotional difficulties epitomizes a kind of feminist resilience against the marginalization caused by expectations from society.

Teen mothers uphold educational aspirations, a desire to succeed in school, and thereby provide a better life for their children through education. Their remarks reveal the impact of role models, personal interests, and practical considerations in shaping desires and goals. Indeed, Kakuki said that "[I] want to be a language teacher because my English teacher is my role model". The young mothers are willing to work hard and make sacrifices to secure a better future for themselves and their children. The desire to provide a better life for their children is a powerful motivator driving them to overcome obstacles and persevere in their endeavours.

### **Support and Advocacy**

Resilience is an individual trait and a relational process.<sup>43</sup> Support from teachers and social workers enables these young mothers to cope and actively engage in a process of resilience that challenges the systemic barriers they face. Kakuki stated, *"My aunty refused to let me return to school after I became pregnant for the second time. I informed my teacher counsellor, who later enlisted the assistance of a social worker from the Ministry of Gender and Social Welfare to persuade my aunty to allow me to continue attending school."* This resilience network helps them resist the social stigma and discrimination that often frames teenage motherhood, emphasising a collective aspect of resilience. The learner mothers become advocates for other girls, sharing their experiences to raise awareness and prevent similar situations. For instance, Dulika became a motivational speaker to prevent other girls from experiencing the challenges she faced, stating, *"I became a motivational speaker at most of our school's events... because I do not want other girls to go through what I went through"* (Dulika)

For some participants, resilience stemmed from having an internal dialogue: *"Because of the name calling and being accused of being a bad influencer, I have decided to walk alone to and from school."* (Dollar). This comment reflects personal growth, where young mothers are willing to change their challenges into opportunities for personal and academic advancement, asserting their agency.

### **Personal growth and responsibility**

Teen mothers attending school demonstrated a shift in identity, and personal growth, as they navigate the complexities of motherhood and schooling.

*In comparison to before I became a mother, I saw myself as different from others (referring to learners who do not have children). Unlike in the past, I am preoccupied with my child's well-being the rest of the time. My child is my joy, and I now have a huge responsibility to study hard so that I can support my child in the future. (Lorence)*

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<sup>42</sup> Jarvis, "Expanding Feminist Resilience Theorizing: Conceptualizing Embodied Resilience as a Material-Discursive Process during Infertility."

<sup>43</sup> Jarvis, "Expanding Feminist Resilience Theorizing: Conceptualizing Embodied Resilience as a Material-Discursive Process during Infertility."

*In comparison to my classmates, I am more mature now. I do not play or make unnecessary comments like I used to; all I want to do now is study and find a job... to help my child in the future. (Mweulenga)*

*[I] really feel different now that I have realized, I have more responsibilities. I am constantly thinking about my baby, so I choose to study very hard in order to pass and secure a job in the future so that I can support my child. (Rusia)*

This shift in identity and responsibility illustrates the adaptive-transformative nature of resilience. Young mothers adapt to new roles and transform their identities, empowering them to resist societal expectations. Their resilience is evident as they redefine priorities, balancing motherhood and education, and challenging the notion that these roles are incompatible. They reflect on past mistakes, take responsibility, and strive for positive change. One participant expressed a desire to amend past errors and support her family after completing her studies, stating *“My motivation for attending school is to study hard and obtain a qualification... I am willing to make amends... once I finish my studies and find a job”* (Dulika)

Interview excerpts reveal a significant shift in perspectives and priorities post-motherhood, with participants viewing education as a pathway to a better future for themselves and their children. Evidence shows young mothers' growing maturity, sense of agency, and commitment to their children's well-being, highlighting their determination to succeed academically and support their families. Participants' identities and priorities are notably reshaped by their relationships with children, parents, peers, and societal expectations. Their relational resilience stems from navigating social dynamics as both learners and mothers, aligning with research indicating that early motherhood often accelerates maturation and strengthens their sense of responsibility leading to increased motivation to succeed in their education and future careers.<sup>44</sup>

### ***Spiritual coping and resilience***

The findings indicate that school-attending teen mothers use spirituality as a coping mechanism and resilience process, helping them navigate stigma and discrimination a *material-discursive process* of resilience. Prayer provides solace against societal narratives that diminish their worth as mothers and learners. Spirituality and faith offer strength in adversity. Kakuki prayed for forgiveness for mistreating her and relied on faith to persevere in her studies, stating,

*Instead of retaliating, I prayed to God (Tate Kalunga) to forgive these girls, knowing they have no idea what I am going through. I didn't give up on my studies with God's help because I believe he will help me.”*

*Some of my classmates wrote in my summary book that because I am pregnant, I should leave school and work as a house helper because I deserve it... I prayed to God to forgive them so that they would no longer mistreat pregnant learners (Kaupu).*

The excerpts explore feminist spiritual practices, using spiritual resources to assert dignity and agency against societal oppression. Instead of anger or retaliation, solace and reflection through prayer are emphasized. Spirituality and religious coping are common in stressful situations, providing comfort and hope to marginalized groups. Faith in a higher power empowers young mothers to persist in their studies despite barriers, believing in divine assistance to overcome obstacles. Religious belief fosters resilience and psychological well-being among young mothers facing adversity.<sup>45</sup>

## **DISCUSSION**

The study examined resilience in school-attending teenage mothers in Namibia's Omusati region through a feminist resilience framework, highlighting their determination and the systemic barriers they face. It

<sup>44</sup> Catriona Jones et al., “‘Other Girls’: A Qualitative Exploration of Teenage Mothers’ Views on Teen Pregnancy in Contemporaries,” *Sexuality & Culture* 23, no. 3 (2019): 760–73.

<sup>45</sup> Raphael M. Bonelli and Harold G. Koenig, “Mental Disorders, Religion and Spirituality 1990 to 2010: A Systematic Evidence-Based Review,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 52, no. 2 (June 19, 2013): 657–73, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-013-9691-4>.

seeks to amplify their voices and validate their experiences as sources of knowledge. Findings challenge deficit-based narratives, showing resilience as both an individual trait and a collective, systemic process. From a feminist perspective, these young mothers' commitment to education and parenting is an active resistance to societal stigma and discrimination, shaped by the material conditions and societal narratives they navigate.<sup>46</sup>

The theme of educational determination and future aspirations reveals education's critical role in enabling young mothers to overcome obstacles and achieve their personal goals. Their determination to pursue education despite challenges resulting from having children can be described as a political act of resistance.<sup>47</sup> Their determination to continue school challenges societal expectations, congruent with feminist principles of gender equality and expanding opportunities for women: "Education for women remains the most vital tool in the promotion of equality between men and women and in the empowerment of women to contribute fully to society."<sup>48</sup> It is fitting that these teenage mothers see education as an empowerment tool to improve their, and their children's, lives.<sup>49</sup>

The mothers' educational determination and future aspirations reflect previous studies that found that teenage mothers and pregnant learners' ability to remain in school, despite many challenges of gender stereotyping and discrimination, is a sign of resilience.<sup>50</sup> The identified role models and personal interests, such as their respected teachers and favorite subjects, serve as powerful motivators in their educational pursuits.<sup>51</sup> Their decision to remain in school defies cultural expectations, even with disapproval at their going to school.<sup>52</sup>

The theme of support and advocacy emphasizes the crucial role that teachers, counselors, social workers, and peers play in supporting these young mothers. The data suggests that these individuals provide crucial support and advocacy, enabling young mothers to navigate challenges and remain engaged in their education. Resilience cannot be reduced to merely bouncing back from adversity. Instead, support provided in whatever form is a critical element in enabling these young mothers to challenge any difficulties they encounter in schooling and motherhood. The theme highlights how, in this study, the support provided to young mothers attending school was integral to helping them navigate the complexities that come with being a parent and learner. The collective support bolsters their resistance to societal norms and persistence in their educational journeys, reinforcing the need for systemic interventions that go beyond individual coping mechanisms.

The theme also stresses the importance of providing support in challenging stigma and creating inclusive educational environments where young mothers feel valued and supported. Young mothers going to school need constant support as they do not have maternal and decision-making skills.<sup>53</sup> Young mothers require adequate social and educational support due to their multiple responsibilities.<sup>54</sup> A lack of support to balance parenting with education makes it significantly harder for teen mothers to return to school.<sup>55</sup>

The themes of personal growth and responsibility reflect the significant shift in perspective and priorities that young mothers experience following motherhood. While their personal growth is commendable, it is important to resist romanticizing their resilience. Resilience should not shift the

<sup>46</sup> Jarvis, "Expanding Feminist Resilience Theorizing: Conceptualizing Embodied Resilience as a Material-Discursive Process during Infertility."

<sup>47</sup> Gorton, "'Don't Let the Bastards Grind You down': Feminist Resilience/Resilient Feminism in *The Handmaid's Tale* (Hulu, 2017-)."

<sup>48</sup> Maluleke et al., "Balancing Dual Roles as Mothers and Students like a Walk on a Tight Rope? Reflections and Experiences of Student Mothers at a South African Higher Education Institution."

<sup>49</sup> Barbara Knapp Herz and Gene B Sperling, *What Works in Girls' Education: Evidence and Policies from the Developing World* (Council on foreign relations, 2004).

<sup>50</sup> Hilja Iita, "Challenges Faced by Learner-Mothers in Schools in Omuthiya Circuit of Namibia" (University of Namibia, 2021).

<sup>51</sup> Mukuna and Aloka, "Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Teenage Mothers Resiliency in Overcoming Adversities in Pregnancy and Early Motherhood in South Africa."

<sup>52</sup> Francis M Deng, *War of Visions: Conflict of Identities in the Sudan* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2011).

<sup>53</sup> Massoumeh Mangeli et al., "Exploring the Challenges of Adolescent Mothers From Their Life Experiences in the Transition to Motherhood: A Qualitative Study.," *Journal of Family & Reproductive Health* 11, no. 3 (September 2017): 165-73.

<sup>54</sup> Anneli Ndapandula Haufiku, "Educational and Psychosocial Experiences of Women University Students Who Became Teenage Mothers Whilst at School" (Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University, 2023).

<sup>55</sup> Catriona Macleod and Tiffany Tracey, "Review of South African Research and Interventions in the Development of a Policy Strategy on Teen-Aged Pregnancy," *World Health Organization & Health Department in South Africa: Grahamstown, Rhodes University*, 2009.

burden onto individuals to overcome systemic barriers alone.<sup>56</sup> Personal growth must be supported by broader societal changes that address structural challenges. While the young mothers' ability to navigate motherhood while pursuing education is commendable, more policies are needed to ensure that such resilience is not merely a necessity for survival but a pathway to empowerment.

The data suggests that becoming a mother led to a sense of responsibility and maturity among these participants, recognizing their new duty to their children. These teen mothers possessed individual characteristics, such as a positive outlook on life and the reasoning ability to process positive experiences, while opposing the reality of oppression.<sup>57</sup> There is a feminist dimension of educational empowerment at work here. Feminists' inspiration advocates for teenage mothers to not limit their educational aspirations because of what is traditionally expected of them.<sup>58</sup> In feminist theory, empowerment is a fundamental concept where the oppressed play critical roles in the process of change.<sup>59</sup> The young mothers' behavior toward other girls who are not (yet) mothers can be seen as aligning with the feminist ideology of finding ways to strengthen themselves, resist forces of dominance as experienced, and transform their lives into successful and responsible people.<sup>60</sup> Despite the challenges and hardships, they face, early motherhood provided them with a sense of maturity and purpose in their lives.<sup>61</sup> Motherhood introduced significance and meaning.<sup>62</sup>

Finally, the theme of spiritual coping and resilience highlights the multifaceted nature of resilience, encompassing practical strategies and spiritual and emotional resources that young mothers utilize to navigate their educational journey. The material-discursive framework suggests that these spiritual practices are part of the broader strategy young mothers use to navigate both the material challenges of motherhood and the societal narratives that stigmatize them.<sup>63</sup> For these young mothers, faith, and spirituality are sources of personal strength and tools for resisting the societal narratives that seek to diminish their worth as both mothers and learners. Spirituality and faith served as a powerful coping mechanism, providing young mothers with strength and resilience to persevere in their studies. These teen mothers regarded prayer as the assurance of the strongest motivation and possibility of remaining in or returning to school.<sup>64</sup> If young mothers consider prayer a useful coping strategy, policymakers should consider its inclusion to devise strategies for changing traditional perspectives. Teenage motherhood and schooling responsibilities cannot be met by the individual on their own but must be shared by all those with, or without, a voice to bring about change in society.

## RECOMMENDATION

The study recommends that efforts be made to further strengthen the implementation of the Education Policy on prevention and management of learner pregnancy by ensuring that schools are adequately resourced, teachers trained to safeguards against discrimination of young mothers when back to school. Schools should also provide additional support through programmes that provide counseling, tutorials, flexible attendance, and peer mentorship. Family and community engagement is necessary and this can be done through awareness campaigns to reduce stigma. Additionally, workshops and information sessions can spur family support and cooperation. Community leaders and organizations should speak up for the rights of teenage mothers to education, encouraging a positive, supportive culture.

<sup>56</sup> Sarah Lahm, "“They Were Too Fragile”: Questioning Feminist Resilience in *Russian Doll*,” *Journal of Gender Studies*, April 15, 2024, 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2024.2341752>.

<sup>57</sup> Michael Rutter, “Resilience Concepts and Findings: Implications for Family Therapy,” *Journal of Family Therapy* 21, no. 2 (May 16, 1999): 119–44, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6427.00108>.

<sup>58</sup> Olivia Guy-Evans, “Feminist Theory in Sociology: Definition, Types & Principles,” *Simply Sociol*, 2023.

<sup>59</sup> Nelly P Stromquist, “Women’s Empowerment and Education: Linking Knowledge to Transformative Action,” *European Journal of Education* 50, no. 3 (2015): 307–24.

<sup>60</sup> Urvashi Sahni, *Reaching for the Sky: Empowering Girls Through Education: Empowering Girls Through Education* (Brookings Institution Press, 2017).

<sup>61</sup> Kayi Ntinda, S’lungile K Thwala, and Thulile P Dlamini, “Lived Experiences of School-Going Early Mothers in Swaziland,” *Journal of Psychology in Africa* 26, no. 6 (2016): 546–50.

<sup>62</sup> Hila J Spear, “Teenage Pregnancy: “Having a Baby Won’t Affect Me That Much”,” *Pediatric Nursing* 27, no. 6 (2001): 574.

<sup>63</sup> Jarvis, “Expanding Feminist Resilience Theorizing: Conceptualizing Embodied Resilience as a Material-Discursive Process during Infertility.”

<sup>64</sup> Patricia Katowa Mukwato et al., “Experiences, Needs and Coping Strategies of Pregnant and Parenting Teenagers: A Perspective from Lusaka and North Western Provinces of Zambia,” 2017.

## CONCLUSION

This study highlights the resilience of young mothers in navigating the dual roles of schooling and parenthood despite the challenges they face. The study has indicated that the young mothers' determination manifests as agency but exposes policy and institutional support gaps. The study notes motherhood as a motivating factor for these young mothers, heightening their sense of responsibility and purpose. The study views resilience as entailing the young mother's personal strategies and emotional resources while pursuing an education. However, the feminist resilience perspective contends that real empowerment needs to be structurally wrought, locating responsibilities from individuals onto institutions. Raising awareness about stigma may help retention, but romanticizing adversities risks normalizing systemic barriers. This critique focuses on educational policy practices that need to take an empowering approach toward young mothers and dismantle systemic barriers.

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