Chapter 6

A Human Rights-Based Approach to Teenage Pregnancy Prevention in China

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the causes and consequences of teenage pregnancy in China and how to prevent teenage pregnancy using a human rights-based approach. It shows that teenage pregnancy is caused by social and cultural factors, including adolescents’ more open attitude towards sex, the lack of formal and comprehensive sex education at schools, parents failing to be prominent socializing agents of sexuality for their children, and the problem of “left-behind” children in rural areas. Teenage pregnancy adversely affects adolescents, their babies, and their family in different ways. In order to solve the problem of teenage pregnancy, this study suggests the adoption of a human rights-based approach to teenage pregnancy prevention by recognizing adolescents’ right to sexual and reproductive information and education, their right to sexual and reproductive health services, and their right to participate.

INTRODUCTION

Teenage pregnancy is a serious problem worldwide. In 2000, leaders of 189 United Nations Member States agreed to achieve the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by the year 2015 to “tackle the most basic forms of injustice and inequality in our world: poverty, illiteracy and ill-health” (World Health Organization, 2005, p.3). One of the MDGs was to improve maternal health by reducing the maternal mortality ratio by three quarters and achieving universal access to reproductive health (World Health Organization, 2015). China is facing the problem of rising unwanted teenage pregnancy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and United Nations System in China, 2015, p.55). According to the Report on China’s Implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015), the healthcare demand of adolescent girls undergoing puberty had not been fully met because the government mainly focused on providing reproductive health services for women of childbearing age (Ministry of Foreign Affairs...
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and United Nations System in China, 2015, p.52). This is one of the reasons why teenage unintended pregnancy and abortion rates are very high in the nation. A review of previous literature shows that while there are some studies examining unintended pregnancy and associated factors among a specific group of people in a specific city (He and Blum, 2013) or a specific risk factor for adolescent pregnancy in the nation (Wei and Yu, 2013), there is lack of study that gives a detailed account of teenage pregnancy in China and the solutions to this problem. In order to fill this research gap, this study examines the causes and consequences of teenage pregnancy in China and how to prevent teenage pregnancy using a human rights-based approach.

BACKGROUND

Teenage pregnancy, which refers to pregnancy in female adolescents between the ages of 13 and 19 (UNICEF Malaysia Communications, 2008, p.1), is a serious problem that continues to deserve local and worldwide attention. It is not simply a public health issue that is concerned about adolescent girls being exposed to the risk of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and sexually-transmitted infections (STIs) (Loaiza and Liang, 2013, p.4). It is also an economic issue associated with the economic wellbeing of teenage mothers, their children and the state (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017), and a human rights issue associated with adolescent girls’ rights to health, education, and non-discrimination (Loaiza and Liang, 2013; Niemasik, 2015). According to World Health Organization (WHO), about 16 million adolescent girls aged between 15 and 19 years and about 1 million girls aged below 15 give birth every year (World Health Organization, 2014). The vast majority of these girls are in low- and middle-income countries (World Health Organization, 2014). Since most of the teenage pregnancies are unintended or unplanned, pregnant teens may resort to unsafe induced abortion (Dahlbäck, Maimbolwa, Kasonka, Bergström, & Ransjö-Arvidson, 2008), become mothers with inadequate parenting skills (Woods, Obeidallah-Davis, Sherry, Ettinger, Simms, Dixon, Missal, & Cox, 2003), abuse or abandon their children (Akanji and Ojo, 2012).

In China, the prevalence of teenage pregnancy and abortion has become a growing concern. The statistics of the National Health and Family Planning Commission showed that there were 13 million abortions conducted at licensed hospitals and clinics every year and of those almost 50 percent were conducted on women aged below 25 (Jiang, 2013 September 30). Supported by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the nationwide survey on 22,288 unmarried youth between the ages of 15 and 24 in 30 provinces in 2009 showed that the situation regarding their sexual and reproductive health was worrying (Zheng, Chen, Han, Chen, Lin, Qiu, Yang, Hu, Qiao, Wang, Zhang, Mu, Song, Pang, Wu, Lin, Liu, Pei, Li, & Wei, 2010, p.14). Among females who had been sexually active, about 21 percent of them experienced pregnancy and about 5 percent of them experienced repeat pregnancies (Zheng et al., 2010, p.12). Among female youth who experienced pregnancy, about 91 percent of them resorted to abortion and 19 percent of them had repeated abortions (Zheng et al., 2010, p.13). The proportion of unmarried youth between the ages of 15 and 19 having multiple sexual partners was higher than unmarried youth between the ages of 20 and 24 (Zheng et al., 2010, p.12). Besides, the rate of repeat pregnancy among unmarried youth between the ages of 15 and 19 was higher than unmarried youth between the ages of 20 and 24 (Zheng et al., 2010, p.12). The startling statistics on teenage pregnancy and abortion reveal that there is a lack of knowledge on reproductive health among adolescents in China. Indeed, teenage pregnancy in the nation is a serious problem that deserves an in-depth investigation.