

ADOLESCENT MOTHERS' CONCEPTUALISATION OF SOCIAL SUPPORT IN THE IBADAN URBAN SLUM: AN INTERPRETIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: Adolescent motherhood represents a global challenge, with significant implications for the holistic health and well-being of adolescent mothers and their offspring. Access to social support plays a critical role in mitigating the challenges faced by adolescent mothers as they navigate the postpartum phase and develop resilience for holistic well-being.

OBJECTIVE: Consequently, understanding the conceptualization of social support among adolescent mothers residing in urban slums of Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria, is essential for designing effective and needs-sensitive interventions and policies.

METHODS: This study employed a qualitative, interpretive phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of adolescent mothers in Ibadan municipality. Utilizing purposive sampling, 20 in-depth interviews were conducted with adolescent mothers across all five urban local government areas, with a pilot study conducted in Oluyole Local Government Area. Data collection involved audio recording and verbatim transcription of interviews into English. A systematic analysis of field notes, reflective insights, and coded transcripts was employed to identify emerging themes. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis was then applied to interpret these themes, providing a rich contextual understanding of social support from the adolescent mothers' perspectives.

RESULTS: Adolescent mothers conceptualized social support as *iranlowo/aduroti*—a construct encompassing the provision of resources, assistance, and interventions designed to address their specific needs and challenges. Participants noted that social support within their communities often transcended kinship ties but was insufficient to meet all their needs.

CONCLUSION: Findings underscore the necessity of interventions aimed at enhancing the quality and efficacy of social support within informal networks.

KEYWORDS: Support, Informal Network, Adolescent Mothers, Urban Slums, Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria.

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INTRODUCTION

Adolescent motherhood is a significant public health challenge that impacts adolescent girls, their children, and the communities in which they live^{1, 2}. It has been described as a consequence of a lack of access to resources (information, health care, quality education)³. Transitioning to motherhood is challenging for most women and even more so for adolescent mothers, who bear the additional burden of adolescence. These challenges are further exacerbated by a lack of access to social and economic resources for adolescent mothers in urban slums^{4, 5}. Social support plays a crucial role in mitigating these challenges^{6, 7} and in ensuring young mothers become resilient; yet the effectiveness and accessibility of support systems vary widely⁸. This background explores the conceptualizations of social support among adolescent mothers in Ibadan's urban slums, drawing on relevant literature and research.

Ibadan, the capital of Oyo State, is home to a range of socio-economic conditions, with many residents living in informal settlements or urban slums⁹. These areas are characterized by inadequate infrastructure, limited access to basic services, and high levels of poverty¹⁰. Urban slums in Ibadan face challenges such as poor sanitation, overcrowded living conditions, and limited access to healthcare and education¹¹. These conditions exacerbate the difficulties faced by adolescent mothers, who often struggle with both the demands of early motherhood and the harsh realities of slum life.

Adolescent mothers in Ibadan's urban slums are at a heightened risk of adverse outcomes. Early pregnancy often leads to interrupted education and limited employment prospects, perpetuating a cycle of poverty¹². The stigma associated with teenage pregnancy can further isolate these young mothers, impacting their mental health and social integration^{13,14}. Social support is critical in mitigating the negative impacts of early motherhood. It encompasses various forms of assistance, including emotional, informational, and instrumental support from family, peers, and

community networks.

Understanding how adolescent mothers conceptualize social support in Ibadan's urban slums is crucial for developing effective interventions and policies that are sensitive to their needs¹⁵. By enhancing social support systems, it is possible to improve the well-being of adolescent mothers and their children, contributing to better health and socio-economic outcomes in these underserved communities. Hence, this study sought to explore the conceptualizations of social support by adolescent mothers in Ibadan's urban slums.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach and interpretive phenomenological design were utilized for this study^{16,17}. The aim was to document the experiences of adolescent mothers from their own perspectives and within their own contexts and to interpret these experiences, making it an exploratory process. In-depth interview and focus group discussion guides were used to collect data on the context of social support for adolescent mothers in Ibadan's urban slums. Participants were selected through a purposive sampling approach.

The study was conducted in Ibadan municipality, which comprises five local government areas: Ibadan Southwest, Ibadan North, Ibadan Northwest, Ibadan Southeast, and Ibadan Northeast. As part of a broader PhD study, O.I. interviewed 20 adolescent mothers in November 2022. Saturation was reached by the end of these interviews. O.I. conducted two community mapping focus group discussions in May 2023 for additional insights into the context of social support in Ibadan's urban slums. Each in-depth interview lasted 40 minutes and covered a range of issues beyond the scope of this paper. The community mapping focus group discussions lasted 1 hour 10 minutes and 53 minutes, respectively. Interviews were recorded in Yoruba, the author's native language, translated, and transcribed verbatim into English. This approach ensured that the insights from research participants and their contexts were retained. Transcripts were coded and uploaded to Atlas.ti version 17. Themes

were generated, and analysis was conducted by combining field notes, reflections, and coded interviews. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis was applied to understand themes and the context of social support from the perspective of adolescent mothers.

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Ibadan/University College Hospital Ethical Review Committee with approval number UI/EC/21/0719. All ethical issues were considered. Data were anonymized, and the privacy and confidentiality of participants were maintained. Participants were well informed of the study's purpose and the possible benefits and risks associated with participation. They were also informed that their participation was completely voluntary and would not affect their access to resources within their communities. Participants gave verbal consent.

RESULTS

Socio-demographic characteristics of participants interviewed

Pseudonyms are as presented, 7 Adolescent mothers were 17 years old, 9 of them were 18 years old and 4 adolescent mothers were 19 years olds. Majority of the adolescent mothers had only one child while 2 of these adolescent mothers have 2 children.

backbone but in more contextual terms means support in Yoruba and mothers were asked to describe what social support meant to them. Three recurring descriptions of support were resources, help and support which enabled them to navigate the period of pregnancy till date.

Theme 1_ Social support as “Resources”

Adolescent mothers recognised social support as a combination of human presence, emotional encouragement, spiritual guidance and material assistance. These resources were not just limited to material items, but also includes emotional and spiritual resources from individuals around them. These various resources gave them relief during pregnancy which for them was critical time; having someone who offered to listen, encourage and stand by them was very appreciated, someone who helped allayed their fear, calmed their anxious mind, and helped them stay resolute in the face of judgement, stigma and exclusion faced within their communities.

Part of the resource's adolescent mothers received was prayers for safe delivery offered by immediate family members which gave them a sense of hope and reassurance. Adolescent mothers described how they were taken to prayer homes for antenatal services which added a layer of comfort and peace to their journey

Table 1: Code, age and parity of Adolescent mothers interviewed

Category	Code (Name- Age)	Age	Frequency (n)
1	TM-17, KD-17, K-17, MA-17, IH-17, MR-17, WM-17	17 years	7
2	MY-18, MM-18, ML-18, MP-18, MR-18, MU-18, MT-18, TM-18, AY-18	18 years	9
3	MA-19, TA-19, MR-19, DS-19	19 years	4

Adolescent mothers' perceptions of social support in Ibadan urban slum

This was a qualitative description of how adolescent mothers conceptualise social support. Social support was conceptualised and described in diverse ways by adolescent mothers. Although, there are similarities in the description of what support meant, for context and better understanding, social support was translated as “atileyin”-translated loosely as

An adolescent mother reflecting on her experience shared below

They are like resources (awon eeyan to duro ti mi, awon nkan ti mo ri- the people that stood by me, the things i received), that were helpful to me during pregnancy up till now .TM-17

This illustrates the dimensions of social support received by adolescent mothers which helped them navigate the delicate period of pregnancy,

emphasising human resources, individuals who supported her as well as the material items she received. Both of which shaped her pregnancy experience helping her manage the practical and emotional demands of pregnancy

Theme 2_Social support as “Help”

Adolescent mothers in Ibadan’s urban slums described social support, known as “Iranlowo,” as a form of help that often feels undeserved because they haven’t had the opportunity to give back. They expressed feeling a deep sense of gratitude but also a strong sense of indebtedness, as they hoped to one day repay the kindness they had received. Many of them felt that the support came at a time when they had little to offer in return, which left them feeling indebted to those who helped them.

One adolescent mother shared her experience after moving from Iwo to Ibadan to join her husband. She talked about how a neighbour, someone she didn’t know beforehand, became like a mother to her, taking care of her during a difficult time:

“Like help, people just helping you even when they do not know you like that, like when I came from Iwo to join my husband in Ibadan, our neighbor stood like my mother. She took care of me; I did not know her from anywhere..... May God bless her and help me to pay her back too.”

(MY-18) For these young mothers, the support they received from neighbors and the community was essential, especially in the absence of formal systems of care. These acts of kindness, often from strangers or acquaintances, became a lifeline. However, alongside the relief of receiving help came a desire to repay it, adding emotional weight to the already challenging circumstances they faced

Adolescent mothers shared that the support received helped them navigate the stigma and shame experienced within their communities, community members passed snide remarks like, “oh she is pregnant”, “who got her pregnant”, “she will soon understand”, they shared that these words were really terrifying but having someone to just be there is relieving and they can focus on how to deliver the pregnancy.

If not for my husband(partner) who said I should not worry about what people are saying about me, (obe ti ge omo lowo, omo ti so obe nu, sugbon obe ti sise owo-Throwing the knife away after a cut is of no use because the deed is done) because worrying about it will not make me unpregnant, that he is there for me and I should focus on how to deliver safely, if I were to consider what people said, I might have committed suicide, MA_19

Adolescent mothers shared that receipt of social support takes time, the news of pregnancy was not a positive news and parents and other support sources required some time to process, the timing is not right, hence the initial reluctance to provide support as needed. however, parents do and may have a change of heart based on some factors, first, is their perceived response to how the partner of their daughter responds to the pregnancy, if he takes up the responsibility of providing the finance, moral and other support that is needed and standing by their daughter, they begin to warm up to the adolescent mother and treat her right and even accord her the respects of a married member of the family. This is corroborated by a participant below. *My family were angry at first but when they saw my partner and the way he treated me, they changed their mind and began to give me the respect of a married woman, everyone changed towards me TA_19*

On the other hand, if the adolescent mother got pregnant by someone who is unable to provide for her needs and does not think much of her, then the road to receipt of social support is longer, she is likely to feel abandoned, and left out, even when she needs it the most.

As shared by one of the participants who moved from her parents to her partner’s mother, she did not receive as much as social support as needed because her partner was not living in the same household, she was handed to her partner’s mother who lives on her own,

Before you got pregnant and started living with your mother-in-law, have you lived with someone else apart from your parents?

R: No

I: *Where is your husband living? How old is he, what*

work does he do?

R: Lanlose, 18years, those selling copper at Gate -MA-17

She shared further that how she took her own delivery and only reached out when it was done even when she was surrounded by people, she could not reach out to ask for help.

Where did you deliver your child?

R: At home, someone came to help me cut the cord, my mother-in-law was not at home -MA-17

The dynamics of support during pregnancy can significantly influence the experiences of adolescent mothers. Adolescent mother's conceptualisation of social support as iranlowo ties to their lived realities and the cultural expectation of shaming of adolescent mothers, hence, receiving any form of help is underserving and met with gratitude and in some instances indebtedness, the gratitude shown stems from their recognition of the impact of such support on their lives, particularly during their moments of vulnerability. This gratitude shapes the way they engage and interact with the social network, doing all they can to remain in the good books of the people who matter to them.

Social support is important (without support life is difficult)

Adolescent mothers in Ibadan's urban slums conceptualize social support as an indispensable element of life, equating its presence with the ability to thrive and navigate challenges, particularly in their roles as young mothers. During focus group discussions, participants highlighted this sentiment, expressing that "ti a ba ri eni ba la, bi ole laari" (when you do not have support, you appear lazy). This proverb encapsulates the idea that the absence of support not only limits one's capacity to act but may also stigmatize the individual, reinforcing societal judgments. For these adolescent mothers, social support is vital to their functioning as caregivers and for maintaining a sense of dignity and productivity.

Social support is not based on kinship ties:

Going further, adolescent mothers understood that social support is determined by kinship or blood, that an individual is related to you or is a parent

or guardian does not imply that they will be able and willing to provide support as needed, It is often offered out of compassion, not necessarily provided by people with whom they shared kinship ties, anyone could be of help without any previous ties (Kinship ties does not confer compassion, only the lord determines who will do you good)

You cannot say this is the person who will do you good, like for me, since I got pregnant till now, my father has not said anything to me, it is like I don't exist to him, I know I have disappointed him, but then, my church has done more for me, they even gave me the house I am living in now, ajumobi o kan tanu o. ML_18

It is not out of place for relatives of adolescents to feel this way because individuals process disappointments differently, the news of pregnancy is devastating to family members who have plans for them and are working hard to meet their needs, yet the duration of pregnancy calls for immediate action to ensure safe delivery for the mother and good health of the baby, it requires the ability to be able to set anger aside and provide the needed support which is easier said than done. Hence it may seem that relatives are hesitant to support while processing the information that their loved one is pregnant before the anticipated time.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the conceptualization of social support among adolescent mothers in Ibadan urban slums. The diverse ways in which adolescent mothers conceptualize social support, described as *atileyin* or *iranlowo* in Yoruba, provide critical cultural and contextual insights that deepen our understanding of their lived experiences in the urban slums of Ibadan. The richness of these conceptualizations highlights the multidimensional nature of support and its impact on their well-being. *Atileyin* and *iranlowo* are not mere translations but embody broader societal attitudes and expectations around caregiving and reciprocity in Yoruba culture¹⁸. The use of these terms reveals that social support is not just material or financial but deeply rooted in relationships, communal responsibilities, and spiritual reassurance. This description resonates with¹⁸, which also included a spiritual dimension in their conceptualization of social support.

Adolescent mothers' descriptions emphasize the multidimensional nature of support, incorporating emotional, material, spiritual, and psychological elements. For instance, spiritual guidance and prayers were described as vital during pregnancy, illustrating a reliance on both tangible and intangible forms of help. Emotional support, such as having someone listen and encourage them, highlights the need for validation and acceptance in a context of stigma and exclusion. These descriptions of support also expose limitations. While *atileyin* embodies ideals of standing by someone, the reality often falls short, with adolescent mothers feeling that their needs remain partially unmet. Conditional support, such as assistance contingent on a partner's behavior or societal judgment, highlights systemic barriers to receiving consistent help. Nevertheless, the study brings to the fore the role of the informal social network in social support provision to adolescent mothers, which is yet to receive adequate attention. Spirituality emerged as a critical dimension of support for adolescent mothers. This finding is similar to the findings of⁶ conducted in Iran among adolescent mothers. Practices such as prayers, visits

to prayer homes, and spiritual reassurances provided a sense of hope, peace, and comfort during what many described as a challenging and uncertain time. Spiritual resources were often intertwined with cultural beliefs about protection and safe delivery, contributing to the mothers' resilience. Family members' involvement in spiritual practices, such as praying for the mother and baby, reinforced a sense of collective care and trust in divine intervention. Practical assistance has ripple effects that extend beyond immediate needs, influencing the long-term well-being and development of adolescent mothers and their children. By addressing immediate concerns like healthcare and childcare, practical support reduces the emotional and psychological burden on adolescent mothers. Supportive teaching and resources build a sense of competence in adolescent mothers, positively influencing their parenting style and relationship with their child. Practical support ensures that children receive better nutrition, healthcare, and developmental opportunities, setting the stage for healthier futures. Families are a form of support to individuals and form an essential part of the social network system¹⁹. Informal networks comprising family, friends, neighbors, and community members are often the primary source of social support for adolescent mothers.

While social support from the informal network provided so much comfort and help, it was delayed, conditional, and inconsistent. Relatives of adolescent mothers were at first angered but eventually warmed up and supported their pregnant daughters in all domains of support. Parents, particularly in resource-limited settings, may initially react negatively to news of pregnancy due to concerns about the financial and social implications of pregnancy^{20, 21}. However, when a partner steps up to share the burden, he alleviates these fears, paving the way for parental support. The dynamics of familial support for adolescent mothers are deeply influenced by the level of involvement demonstrated by their partners. This relationship underscores the interplay between

perceived responsibility, family expectations, and cultural norms, which collectively shape how and when parental support is offered.

When partners actively provide financial, emotional, and practical support, they signal their commitment to the well-being of the adolescent mother. This demonstration of responsibility often reassures parents and other family members, prompting them to view the pregnancy in a more positive light. The influence of partner involvement extends beyond immediate support, shaping long-term family relationships and dynamics. It leads to shifts in power balances. A supportive partner who assumes a central role may help the adolescent mother assert her needs more effectively within the family structure. Conversely, a lack of partner involvement may lead to the adolescent mother becoming overly dependent on her family, potentially straining those relationships. When partners and families collaborate to support the adolescent mother, it fosters trust and cohesion, which are critical for the well-being of both mother and child.

Family members, particularly older women like mothers or grandmothers, often play a key role in teaching adolescent mothers basic parenting skills, similar to⁶. Practical items such as baby clothes, diapers, and feeding supplies are often provided by supportive networks, reducing financial strain and enabling the mother to focus on bonding with her child. Practical support alleviates the stress of managing child-rearing responsibilities alone, which is particularly important for adolescent mothers navigating the challenges of young parenthood.

STUDY IMPLICATIONS

Adolescent mothers possess a nuanced understanding of what social support entails and are capable of articulating its significance during the vulnerable phase of early motherhood. They not only recognize the impact of support on their well-being but also demonstrate an ability to negotiate and maintain interpersonal relationships, enabling them to access social support. This finding challenges the common assumption that adolescent mothers are inherently unable to navigate or sustain such relationships.

However, this understanding of social support often comes with a sense of indebtedness. Adolescent mothers may perceive their access to social support as unmerited or undeserved, creating a dynamic where they feel obligated to their social network. This sense of indebtedness could influence how they interact with their support systems, potentially affecting their willingness to seek further help or their long-term relationships within the network.

Interventions for adolescent mothers should acknowledge their capacity to engage with and sustain supportive relationships. Programs should aim to build their confidence in accessing support without fostering feelings of inadequacy or indebtedness. Efforts should be made to sensitize social networks to provide unconditional and empowering support, reducing the pressure of perceived reciprocity on adolescent mothers. While these findings are specific to Ibadan's urban slums, they are applicable to Africa and contexts where social welfare systems for adolescent mothers and other vulnerable groups are non-existent. Further studies can explore the perception of reciprocity among adolescent mothers.

STRENGTH AND LIMITATION

This study shared an in-depth insight into the experiences of young mothers as they navigated through adolescent motherhood using both in-depth interviews and community mapping focus group discussions. This aided a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of adolescent mothers. However, the study is limited to adolescent mothers in urban slums in Ibadan, Nigeria. While this provides valuable insights, the findings may not be generalizable to adolescent mothers in rural settings, other urban areas, or different cultural and socio-economic contexts. Furthermore, factors such as age, education level, marital status, and family structure could influence how social support is conceptualized among adolescent mothers. A potential bias with self-reported data is that participants could have provided socially desirable responses, especially during the community mapping focus group discussions.

CONCLUSION

Adolescent mothers in Ibadan's urban slums conceptualize social support as an essential lifeline that profoundly influences their ability to navigate the challenges of early motherhood and life in general. They view social support as a determinant of success and survival, embodying both practical help and emotional reassurance. This understanding is deeply rooted in cultural beliefs and their lived experiences, emphasizing the necessity of support for personal growth and the fulfillment of their caregiving roles.

While the gratitude they express for any form of assistance underscores its perceived value, their acknowledgment of inadequacies in the support received highlights the complexity of their needs. Social support is not merely a transactional concept for them but a relational and emotional construct, intertwined with feelings of indebtedness, dignity, and hope. This nuanced understanding of social support calls for interventions that go beyond provision, fostering holistic and sustainable systems that empower adolescent mothers, recognize their agency, and address their multifaceted needs.

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