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THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WELFARE PROFESSIONALS IN CONTROLLING THE TEENAGE PREGNANCIES IN ESTATE SECTORS: THE STUDY OF MODERATING EFFECT

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ABSTRACT

Teenage pregnancy is a significant socio-economic and public health challenge in the estate sectors of Sri Lanka and a global issue affecting high, low, and middle-income countries. This study aims to investigate the role of social welfare professionals in addressing the contributing factors, associated risks, and prevalence of teenage pregnancy in rural communities. The research employed a quantitative approach involving 157 teenage mothers who gave birth for the first time between the ages of 13 and 19 in the Nuwara Eliya Medical Health Office area from 2020 to 2023. During the selected period in Sri Lanka, there was a notable prevalence of teenage pregnancies, which coincided with various socioeconomic challenges affecting the country. This situation provides a valuable opportunity to analyse the multiple factors contributing to adolescent pregnancies. The data collection process included identifying pregnant mothers, clarifying the study's objectives, administering questionnaires, formulating open-ended questionnaires, and arranging interview arrangements. After data purification, 153 responses were analysed. As per the results, the above-stated factors were significantly contributing to teenage pregnancy, and among those, lack of knowledge (individual factors) and mother migration (social factors) were acknowledged as the leading contributing dimensions of teenage pregnancy. The study's findings demonstrate the significant role of social welfare professionals in mitigating teenage pregnancies through their implementation of social education programs. However, the study also indicates that the overall impact of these efforts is relatively limited, highlighting the need for further improvement and prompting ongoing debate regarding the adequacy and effectiveness of social welfare professionals' contributions. The researcher recommended actions for

stakeholders, identified new factors contributing to teenage pregnancy in Sri Lanka, and proposed a model showing the role of social welfare professionals.

KEYWORDS: Teenage Pregnancy, Individual Factors, Social Factors, Cultural and Environmental Factors, Economic Factors

1. Introduction

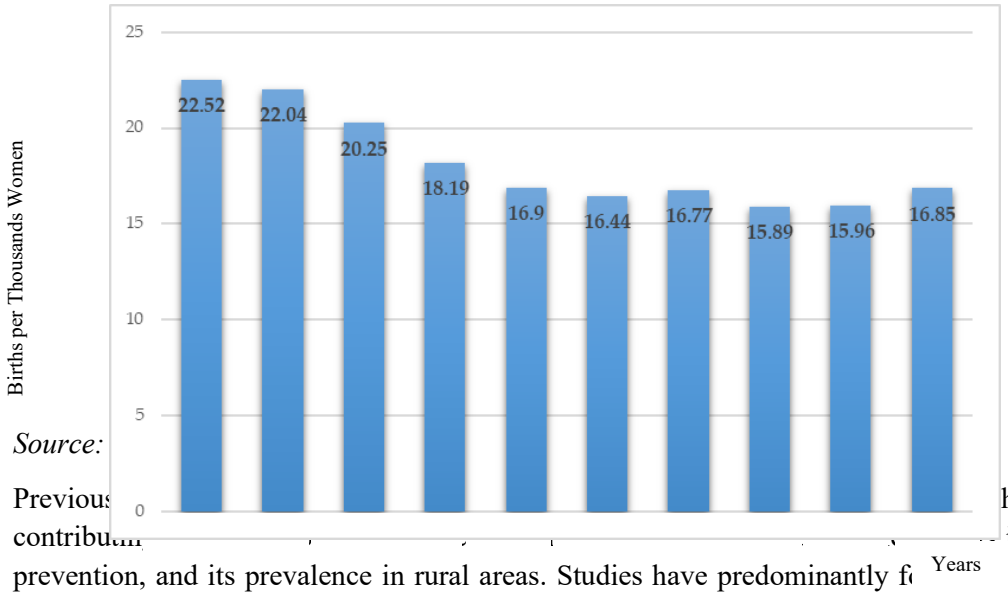
"Children are often regarded as the world's most valuable resource and a vital hope for the future, a sentiment articulated by John F. Kennedy. However, in contemporary society, the children are frequently compromised by various factors, including crime, abuse, and exploitation. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), individuals under the age of 18 are classified as children. Ideally, children should be able to celebrate their childhood; however, in Sri Lanka, the National Child Protection Authority's 2023 report documented 9,673 incidents of child abuse and related offences. All forms of child abuse and offences against children are of significant concern, and this study aims to address the pertinent social issue of teenage pregnancy in Sri Lanka.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) defines a teenage pregnancy as the occurrence of pregnancy in adolescents, typically between the ages of 13 and 19. This phenomenon reflects a situation where a child gives birth to another child, exacerbating the challenges faced by both the teenage mother and her offspring. A recent study involving 1,100 unmarried youths in three districts of Sri Lanka found that approximately 55% were female, and 49% were in the 15-19 age group. The study also revealed that these unmarried youths were sexually active (De Silva et al., 2022). Research also indicates heightened sexual desires in both men and women, leading to significant societal, economic, physical, and psychological consequences for pregnant teenage women and their children. Despite being a critical social issue, there has been limited research in this area in Sri Lanka, and the medical social work aspect remains relatively unexplored.

Teenage pregnancy represents a significant socio-economic challenge and a severe public health issue within the Estate sectors in present-day Sri Lanka. This global issue is prevalent in both high-income and Low- and Middle-Income Countries. Adolescence is a transformative period marked by substantial physical, emotional, psychological, cognitive, and social changes (Berer et al., 2001). The substantial adolescent fertility rate in Sri Lanka is depicted in Figure 1, based on recent statistics. It is imperative to address and potentially mitigate this troubling trend.

Figure 1

Adolescent fertility rate in Sri Lanka



Source:

Previous he contribution in prevention, and its prevalence in rural areas. Studies have predominantly f the outcomes of teenage pregnancies, lacking a comparative analysis of the primary reasons and factors leading to higher rates of teenage pregnancy in the Estate sector. Insufficient attention has been given to urban and rural teenage pregnancy issues, particularly in the Sri Lankan context. The perspective of social welfare professionals on the issue of 'Teenage Pregnancy' has not been fully explored. Therefore, this study aims to expand the understanding of the factors contributing to teenage pregnancy and its associated risk levels.

After identifying the overarching research problem, the researcher aimed to address the following research questions: What is the risk level associated with teenage pregnancy in the estate sector of Sri Lanka? Furthermore, what risk level is attributed to the following factors: (a) social factors, (b) economic factors, (c) cultural and environmental factors, and (d) individual factors in relation to teenage pregnancy in the estate sector of Sri Lanka? Lastly, how do these factors—(a) social, (b) economic, (c) cultural and environmental, and (d) individual—impact the risk level of teenage pregnancy in this sector?

2. Literature Review

The researchers systematically applied the PRISMA framework to conduct a thorough review of 31 scholarly journals on teenage pregnancy. This model, introduced by Cochrane (2009), is designed for extensive literature analysis. In the current study, the researchers utilised the PRISMA model to identify gaps concerning teenage pregnancy and its contributing factors. The process involved four key steps:

identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion criteria. Ultimately, this approach yielded valuable insights into existing empirical gaps identified through the research.

To conduct this review, the researchers selected two primary multidisciplinary databases: Web of Science and Scopus. These databases are known for their high-quality peer-reviewed literature and extensive citation records. The comprehensive examination revealed several factors that contribute to the increased risk of teenage pregnancy. Following the initial literature review, the researchers identified several significant socio-economic, cultural, and environmental elements that elevate the risk of teenage pregnancy. The extant literature offers a comprehensive analysis of the social and economic determinants associated with teenage pregnancy. Noteworthy contributing factors include poverty, low educational attainment, peer pressure (Menon et al., 2018; Svanemyr, 2019; Wado et al., 2019; Munakampee et al., 2021), and school dropout (Blystad et al., 2020). These factors have been extensively discussed as significant contributors to the incidence of teenage pregnancy.

Beyond social and economic factors, a society's cultural values and norms significantly influence the prevalence of early pregnancies among teenagers lacking sufficient awareness of marital and related matters. Emphasis on cultural values, sexual norms (Svanemyr, 2020; Menon et al., 2018), socio-cultural factors, and gender-related aspects have unveiled notable vulnerabilities and an escalating risk associated with teenage pregnancies.

Confronting this issue warrants an inquiry into the efficacy of the standards and regulations upheld by authoritative bodies, including the government, the healthcare sector, and relevant social services. Extant research within the teenage pregnancy domain has highlighted a lack of access to Sexual Reproductive Health Information and Services (Menon et al., 2018) as a significant causal factor of unawareness and perilous pregnancies among adolescents.

In addition to external influences such as social, economic, cultural, and political factors, the individual is identified as a significant contributor to this issue. Specifically, age, exposure to media (Wado et al., 2019; Munakampee et al., 2021), lack of resources, insufficient knowledge of sexual health (Menon et al., 2018; Svanemyr, 2019; Austrian et al., 2019; Munakampee et al., 2021), and early marriage (Menon et al., 2018) have been recognised as influential factors.

To enhance the current discourse with theoretical underpinning and bridge the identified empirical gaps, the researcher adopted the Social Exchange Theory as the foundational framework. This theory, pioneered by sociologist Homans (1958), emphasises the comprehension of social behaviour from an economic standpoint, highlighting the pivotal nature of relationships in determining their strength.

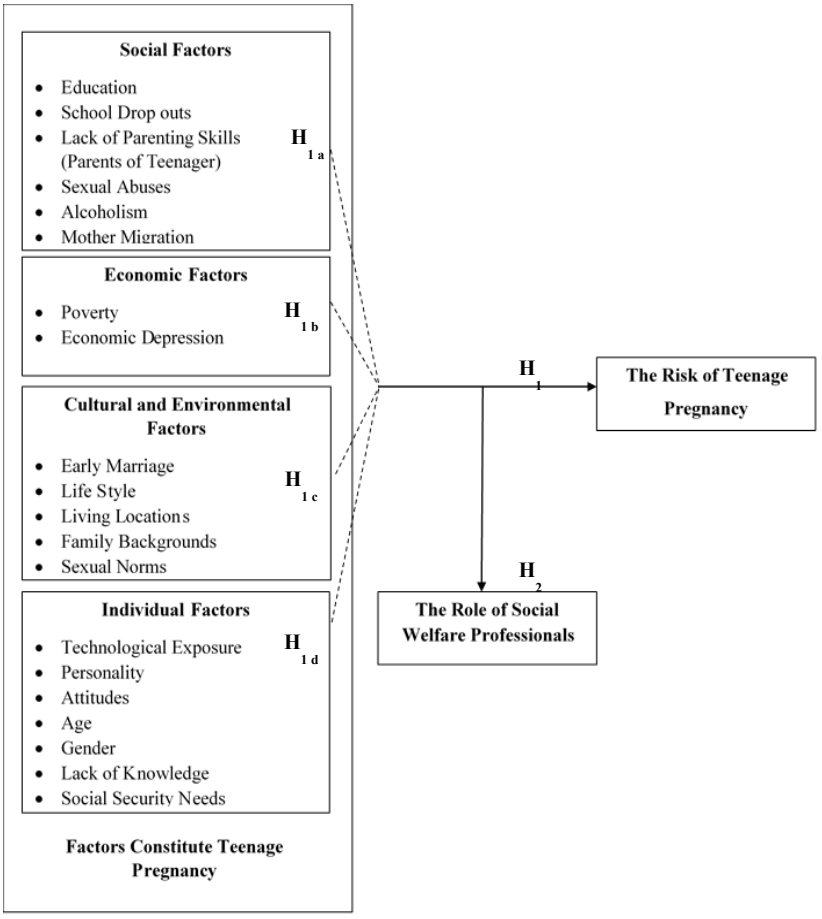
When confronting issues such as teenage pregnancy, various stakeholders, including social welfare professionals such as social workers, non-governmental organisations

(NGOs), international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), government bodies, Ministry of Health (MOH), Estate Medical Officers, Public Health Midwives (PHM), Public Health Inspectors (PHI), and volunteers bear significant responsibility. Effective execution by social workers in raising awareness, providing sexual education, and implementing relevant programs pertaining to teenage pregnancy holds the potential to mitigate risks and reduce the prevalence of perilous teenage pregnancies, particularly in remote and estate sectors.

Subsuming all the essential knowledge from the existing studies into the social exchange theory, the researcher has developed the following framework, as indicated in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Factors Constitute Teenage Pregnancy



Source: Authors' Compilations based on the systematic review

3. Methodology

This section outlines the researcher's methodology for conducting the study. It encompasses the approach employed to gather requisite data, the data collection process, and the measurement and evaluation techniques implemented to enhance the study's credibility. It furnishes systematic guidelines for conducting the research. The researcher opted for a quantitative approach within the positive paradigm. Employing a stratified sampling technique, 157 adolescent mothers aged 13 to 19 who had given birth for the first time in the Nuwara Eliya Medical Health Office area between 2020 and 2023 were selected for the study.

Data collection entailed identifying expectant mothers, defining the study's objectives, administering questionnaires, formulating open-ended questionnaires, and scheduling interviews. Following data purging, 153 responses were subjected to analysis. The researcher utilised SPSS (version 29) to conduct Descriptive Analysis, Regression Analysis, and Moderating Variable Analysis to address the following research hypotheses.

H1: There is a significant impact between the factors constituting teenage pregnancy and the risk of teenage pregnancy in the estate sector in Sri Lanka

$H1_a$: The Social factors (SF) significantly influence the risk of teenage pregnancy (TP) in the Estate sector in Sri Lanka.

$H1_b$: The Economic Factors (EF) significantly influence the risk of teenage pregnancy (TP) in the Estate sector in Sri Lanka.

$H1_c$: The Cultural and Environmental Factors (CEF) significantly influence the risk of teenage pregnancy (TP) in the Estate sector in Sri Lanka.

$H1_d$: The Individual Factors (IF) significantly influence the risk of teenage pregnancy (TP) in the Estate sector in Sri Lanka.

H2: There is a significant moderating effect of the social welfare professionals (SWP) on the relationship between the factors constituting teenage pregnancy and the risk of teenage pregnancy in the estate factor in Sri Lanka.

4. Data Analysis

The initial dataset consisted of information gathered from 157 teenage pregnant mothers. However, due to incomplete questionnaires, four samples were excluded, resulting in a finalised sample size of 153 for the data purification. This process encompassed data simplification through factor loadings (with Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (KMO) at 0.844, exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.8), validation of normal distribution (with skewness and kurtosis falling within the acceptable range of -2 to 2 as per (Chou & Bentler, 1995; Curran et al., 1996)), and conduction of reliability and validity tests. The obtained results indicated satisfactory values for the respective independent factors: (a) social (AVE= 0.8; CA= 0.7; CR=

0.9), (b) economic (AVE= 0.6; CA= 0.6; CR= 0.7), (c) cultural & environmental (AVE= 0.7; CA= 0.7; CR= 0.9), and (d) individual factors (AVE= 0.5; CA= 0.7; CR= 0.8). The moderating variable of social welfare professionals (AVE= 0.7; CA= 0.8; CR= 0.9) and the dependent variable of the risk of teenage pregnancy (AVE= 0.5; CA= 0.8; CR= 0.7) also satisfied the reliability and validity requirements. After these purifications, it was ascertained that there were no multicollinearity issues (Variance Inflation Factors were less than five, as recommended by Hair et al., 2010).

From the total sample, it was observed that a significant proportion of participants exhibited limited educational attainment, with 59% having discontinued their studies due to factors such as poverty, early marriages, maternal migration for employment in Middle Eastern countries, and a lack of awareness. The predominant age group among participants comprised 18-year-old mothers (40%), followed by those aged 17 (25%), 19 (23%), and 16 (10%) years. A smaller percentage of teenage mothers were categorised among the ages of 15 and 13 (0.6%) and 14 (1.2%). In the context of pregnancies, excluding a 3% minority reporting abuse, the remaining teenage mothers cited involvement in affairs as the primary cause of their pregnancies.

To identify the risk level of social factors (SF), economic factors (EF), cultural and environmental factors (CEF), and individual factors (IF) in the context of teenage pregnancy (TP) within the estate sector in Sri Lanka, a descriptive analysis was conducted. The findings indicated that all variables exhibited high attributions based on the mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) values. Among the identified factors contributing to teenage pregnancies, social factors (M=4.271, SD=0.551) were observed to exhibit the highest values compared to other factors EF (M=4.271, SD=0.551); CEF (M=4.271, SD=0.551); and IF (M=4.271, SD=0.551).

Simultaneously, a multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the influence of social factors (SF), economic factors (EF), cultural and environmental factors (CEF), and individual factors (IF) on the risk level of Teenage Pregnancy (TP) in the Estate Sector in Sri Lanka. The findings indicated that all factors significantly influenced and caused teenage pregnancies in the sample. Among them, social factors were identified as the highly influential factors behind the increasing rate of teenage pregnancies. Table 1 explains the results of the hypothesis and the values.

Table 1

Influential Factors and Teenage Pregnancy in the Estate Sector in Sri Lanka

Hypothesis	Path		Beta	t-value	p-value	Decision
	Independent	Dependent				

H1-a	SF	The risk level of TP	0.18***	2.96	0.003	Accept
H1-b	EF	The risk level of TP	0.08*	1.93	0.054	Accept
H1-c	CEF	The risk level of TP	0.10**	1.97	0.050	Accept
H1-d	IF	The risk level of TP	0.11**	2.23	0.026	Accept

Source: Data analysed based on the collected information

Note: *p ≤ 0.10, **p ≤ 0.05, ***p ≤ 0.01

In examining the moderating effect of Social Welfare Professionals (SWP) on the relationship between factors contributing to teenage pregnancy and the risk level of teenage pregnancy in the Estate Sector in Sri Lanka, a moderation analysis was conducted. The study revealed that, except for economic factors, a moderation effect was found in all three other factors, including social factors, cultural and environmental factors, and individual factors, in relation to the risk level of teenage pregnancy. Furthermore, consistent with previous findings, the presence of social welfare professionals was found to significantly influence the risk of teenage pregnancy by addressing social factors, including the provision of awareness education for teenage mothers, implementing parenting programs, taking preventive actions against sexual abuse and domestic violence, and offering support to teenage girls who are living alone due to maternal migration. Table 2 explains the results of the hypothesis and the values.

Table 2

The Moderation Effect

Hypothesis	**Path**		**Beta**	**t-value**	**p-value**	**Decision**
	Independent*Moderation	Dependent				
H2-a	SF * The Role of SWP	The risk level of TP	0.34***	2.65	0.008	Accept
H2-b	EF * The Role of SWP	The risk level of TP	0.17	1.37	0.172	Reject
H2-c	CEF* The Role of SWP	The risk level of TP	0.11*	0.83	0.041	Accept
H2-d	IF * The Role of SWP	The risk level of TP	0.22**	2.15	0.032	Accept

Source: Data analysed based on the collected information

Note: *p ≤ 0.10, **p ≤ 0.05, ***p ≤ 0.01

5. Discussion

Based on the findings, it has been ascertained that several factors contribute to early teenage pregnancy (Menon et al., 2018; Svanemyr, 2019; Wado et al., 2019; Munakampee et al., 2021). These factors encompass social determinants such as educational deficiencies, school dropouts, inadequate parenting skills, sexual exploitation, alcoholism, and maternal migration; economic determinants including poverty and economic downturns; cultural and environmental determinants comprising early marriages, lifestyle choices, residential settings, family backgrounds, and societal norms; and individual determinants encompassing technological exposure, personality traits, attitudes, age, gender, lack of knowledge, and social support requirements. Notably, in contrast to existing knowledge (Buhori, 2025; Menon et al., 2018; Svanemyr, 2019; Wado et al., 2019; Munakampee et al., 2021), this study identifies the lack of knowledge (individual factors) and maternal migration (social factors) as the primary contributing factors to teenage pregnancy among the selected participants.

Limited knowledge and awareness significantly influence teenage pregnancies. Although Sri Lanka conducts awareness programs on sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR), the majority of participants (89%) reported that they have not received any education on the subject. A small proportion of participants received SRHR education at schools (4%) and community clinics (7%), with none receiving guidance from their own families. This indicates a gap in the current service delivery mechanisms. Cultural dilemmas also contribute to this gap, as some communities perceive SRHR education as inappropriate for certain ages.

To address this issue and increase awareness, collaborative efforts in educational delivery are essential, respecting cultural values. Myths within the community, such as the belief that SRHR topics are not suitable for adolescents, discourage young people and their families from seeking information and utilising available services. To dispel these misconceptions and encourage utilisation, welfare professionals must work jointly to promote the importance of age-appropriate SRHR education. Ensuring that services are tailored to the developmental stage will foster community acceptance and engagement. Social workers can play a critical role by providing outreach programs and intervening through social work's primary methods with adolescents, particularly in estate sectors. Nonetheless, a collaborative approach among all welfare professionals is necessary to effectively enhance service delivery and awareness. The lack of knowledge pertaining to civic rights and legal procedures relevant to marriage and family has been observed to negatively impact interpersonal relationships and contribute to unplanned pregnancies. Additionally, it has been noted that individuals with low literacy levels may exhibit reluctance to access essential services and may face social stigmatisation, thereby impeding their effective communication with healthcare professionals and their ability to avail themselves of healthcare services.

Moreover, alcohol and drug abuse are recognised as significant public health concerns, as they elevate the likelihood of engaging in unsafe sexual behaviour and forgoing condom use, leading to unintended pregnancies and exacerbating the health complications associated with sexually transmitted infections.

Furthermore, a significant number of adolescent mothers are compelled to assume familial responsibilities prematurely due to the absence of their mothers, who frequently seek employment opportunities in foreign countries, particularly in the Middle East. Consequently, these young mothers are denied the guidance and support they require, resulting in their assumption of familial obligations and entry into marital life at an early age. These circumstances have been identified as influential determinants of the escalating prevalence of teenage pregnancies.

The coordinated efforts of social welfare professionals, including social workers, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), government organisations, Ministry of Health (MOH), Estate Medical Officers, Public Health Midwives (PHM), Public Health Inspectors (PHI), and volunteers are instrumental in mitigating the risk levels through the implementation of awareness programs targeted at teenage mothers in the estate sectors. While these professionals may not be able to entirely mitigate poverty or economic disparities, they play a crucial role in identifying prevalent issues within the estate sectors, fostering awareness, implementing precautionary measures, evaluating the deficiencies in current Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) programmes, achieving the overarching objective of establishing social welfare schemes and delineating and prioritising the responsibilities and roles of social workers in addressing these pressing social challenges.

As delineated in the background and problem statement, there is a notable scarcity of literature pertaining to the factors encompassing teenage pregnancy and its associated risk levels within the estate sectors of Sri Lanka. Therefore, this study endeavours to contribute novel insights by developing a comprehensive model that delineates the factors contributing to teenage pregnancy and by evaluating its associated risk levels. The study also underscores the pivotal role of social workers in ameliorating the overall impact of teenage pregnancies. Nevertheless, it is imperative to acknowledge the limitations of this study, which solely focused on a select few estate sectors and a limited set of factors. Future research endeavours will adopt an inductive approach, expand the sample size, and broaden the research scope to acquire a more profound understanding and identify additional factors crucial for managing teenage pregnancies.

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