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Unwed Mother By Choice: A Study In The Context Of Law And Society

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ABSTRACT

One of the objectives of this study was to develop an intervention model for working with these young unwed mothers. While dealing with unwed mothers it should be kept in mind that each individual is unique and the intervention should not be a blanket approach. There is an urgent need of trained professionals to provide quality interventions. It is in context that the Researcher gave an orientation programme for the Social workers and functionaries of the licensed homes with the objective of enhancing their knowledge, attitude and skills while working with these marginalized and deprived groups of unwed mothers. The implications of the findings for future research and program development were discussed.

1. Introduction

The age of menarche among Indian girls, which is reported to be declining, ranges from 11.5- 14.5 years, with the current average age being 13.5 years. This has resulted in earlier onset of puberty and secondary sex characteristics, and increased reproductive exposure. With sexual maturation taking place earlier and the age of marriage delayed, the period of non-marital fecundity, is increased, exposing more people to more years at risk of an unwanted, premarital pregnancy.

An estimated eight million induced abortions are performed in India, and anecdotal evidence suggests that a fairly large proportion of them are

performed for adolescent mothers and unmarried teenage girls. While no realistic or accurate data are available, the enormity of the problem may be judged by the fact that 8–10 percent of those who seek medical terminations of pregnancy are teenage mothers and unmarried girls. The real percentage may be far larger.

It is difficult to have a correct estimate of the number of unmarried mothers in India because such incidences are always kept as a family secret, and seldom come to the public notice. Even to estimate the number of unmarried mothers coming to the hospitals seem to be practically impossible because these hospitals, specially the private ones, are not willing to give out any such type of information, because of the nature of the problem. Unplanned childbirth leaves the single mother vulnerable to a wide range of issues related to the following: a) interrupted education; b) children having children; c) welfare dependency; d) emotional factors; e) social factors; f) domestic violence; g) child abuse; and h) delinquent behavior.

In developing countries like India, where family structure and functioning were relatively firm and stable, had been remained as a protective shield from teenage motherhood. However, India's intensive urbanization induced by the scientifically planned and politically accelerated economic development redefined the basic tenets of family relationships and its fundamental properties such as stability and functioning. These fundamental changes had produced a wide range of impacts on interpersonal and intrapersonal relationship contexts in individuals, families and communities and in the broader Indian society.

Teenage pregnancy today, is a widely acknowledged common public health problem worldwide, whereas the problems presented by the pregnant unwed teenagers are among the most difficult and perplexing issues faced by those who work in the fields of health, education and social services. No society is immune to teenage pregnancy and it affects every society-developed and developing alike. There is a growing awareness that early child bearing has multiple consequences in terms of maternal health, child health and over all well-being of society. Illegitimate pregnancies may have multiple traumatic impacts on the teenager, her boyfriend, her family, her community and ultimately on her yet to-be-born child. Therefore, pre-marital or teenage pregnancies is a crucial area of scientific exploration and examination in the context when no segment of society is immune to the causes and effects of the out-of-wedlock teenage pregnancy.

2. Meaning of Unwed Motherhood:

An unwed mother is a girl or woman (13-35 Years) who is not legally married to a man by whom she has conceived a child. She may be pregnant or has already delivered a child, whereas the single parent family is defined as a family in which either the father or mother has primary responsibility

for bringing up children with only occasional or no contact with the spouse. The single parent family can be formed through death, divorce or separation”.

Does the term *unwed mothers* include all typologies of single parent women? For this, the researcher critically review the existing research literatures to identity the pattern, characteristics, nature, functions, and inclusiveness of existing definitions that deal with illegitimate pregnancy and subsequent child rearing and family management. In fact, socio-cultural and economic contexts of the society wherein teenage pregnancy takes places set the answers for many of these questions and these answers may vary widely across socio-cultural and economic contexts where teenagers live. There were efforts to define the term unwed mothers from both western and eastern socio-cultural contexts that uniquely responded to sensitive socio-cultural fabric of the society that accommodate these unwed mothers.

There were isolated efforts to define the concept of unwed mothers and unwed motherhood in the context of aboriginals or tribes, though the purpose was to operationalize the concept that was amenable for empirical investigations, these definitions were limited in conceptual clarity and for inclusiveness of diverse typologies of unwed mothers found in the unique tribal social context that often overlaps.ⁱ

Such typologies may include unwed mothers who married later, widows who have single/multiple sexual relationships and gave birth to children, deserted tribal women who gave birth to children in later sexual relationship outside wedlock relationships etc. Thus, it was operationalized towards an effort to define the term unwed tribal mother as a tribal woman or girl who conceived or/and gave birth to one or more children outside the wedlock of marriage by a man of same tribe, or man of other tribe or a man of non-tribe|| (Jose *et al.*, 2010a). In this definition, the purpose was to define the term “*unwed tribal mothers*” operationally where in emphasis was given only to pregnancy or delivery of children outside wedlock relationshipsⁱⁱ. This definition is silent about a variety of typologies such as widows who delivered children outside of further wedlock relationships, or tribal women who were impregnated in pre-marital sexual relationships subsequently got into to wedlock relationships either with same or other men. A common thread that passes across all types of single parents was the functional aspect i.e., parenting. This was exclusively shouldered by women often with no help either from by whom they were impregnated or from their own families.

3. Psychological aspects of Unwed Motherhood:

Identity of unwed mothers:

The adolescence is a developmental stage characterized by multi-faceted event involving every aspect of an individual whereas the identity formation is the critical aspect. The sexuality becomes a dominant feature and makes adolescents prone to risky behaviour that would likely to results in becoming sexually active during early teenage and even in pregnancy. Such incidence is expected to bring a cascade of events that can negatively affect the main social contexts. The impact of pregnancy on the life of unmarried adolescents in the local context, has found that pregnancy as a stressful event that changes an adolescent's life completelyⁱⁱⁱ Important aspects like financial dependence, negative self-image, sudden responsibilities and changes in aspirations are highlighted. Practical and emotional support was identified as critical for the young mothers'well being; without adequate help they are likely to flounder.

4. Self concept and Self esteem:

The term self-concept is a general term used to refer to how someone thinks about or perceives themselves. Lewis (1990) suggests that development of a concept of self has two aspects: (1) The Existential Self is —the most basic part of the self-scheme or self-concept; the sense of being separate and distinct from others and the awareness of the constancy of the self". (2) The Categorical self, having realised that he or she exists as a separate experiencing being, the child next becomes aware that he or she is also an object in the world. Just as other objects including people have properties that can be experienced (big, small, red, smooth and so on) so the child is becoming aware of him or herself as an object which can be experienced and which has properties. Carl Rogers believes that self-concept has three different components. They are the view you have of yourself (Self image), how much value you place on yourself (Self esteem or self-worth) and what you wish you were really like (Ideal self). Self-efficacy as a concept refers to being able to picture yourself achieving what it is you want to achieve at the level you want to achieve it. As Bandura had put it, self-efficacy refers to people's convictions about their own capabilities for successfully executing a course of action that leads to a desired outcome. It's what they call a context-specific construct. Within a particular context, can you picture yourself being able to do something? Self-concept, by contrast, is a broader term, referring to one's sense of self.

Low self concept had been shown to be associated with adolescent pregnancy and has been associated with decreased attendance at prenatal and post natal care and with repeat pregnancy. Self-efficacy is another factor that can be predicted to influence the prenatal care. Social cognitive theory conceptualizes human functioning as a reciprocal interaction between personal factors such as self-efficacy and outcomes of expectancies, environmental factors, and behaviours^{iv} Hence, self-efficacy refers to the people's confidence to regulate their motivation, thought process, emotional

state, and social environment to effect a given behaviour. Hence guided by social cognitive theory, a peer-centred mastery model group intervention was designed. The programme focused on modelling and rehearsal skills to achieve (a) increase knowledge about pregnancy (b) prepare for childbirth (c) work with self care systems (d) including hospitals, clinics and physicians and nurses (d) enable expectant mothers to assess her own and her babies' health (e) prevent an unplanned repeat pregnancy (f) improve health self care. 262 pregnant adolescents were randomly assigned to either experimental or control groups of 6-8 participants. Experimental groups were provided peer-centered mastery model group intervention by nurse-midwives.

5. Socio-Demographic aspects of Unwed Motherhood:

The existing evidence suggests that socio-demographic variables are critical onto the pathways to unwed motherhood while there is a paucity of evidences on socio-demographic pre-dispositions of unwed mothers, from Indian socio-cultural scenario. Thus, current study mostly relied on western empirical literature in order to depict a broader socio-demographic picture of unwed mothers. Sylvia has studied using two socio-economic variables such as the median income of all families and the percentage of families on welfare. US census data was used for this study with a conceptualizing a negative correlation between median income and teenage birth rates. This conceptualization was happened in the background that nationwide study of never-married women aged 15-19, which revealed that an inverse relationship between family income and sexual experience^v. But a positive relationship between family socioeconomic status and a teenager's likelihood of using contraception was also found in that study with an implication that —wealthier teenagers are not only less likely to be sexually active, but they also have easier access to contraceptive services, and are more likely to use them. Subsequent studies have also shown that wealthier family's teenagers are more likely to use contraceptives and abortion services. The percentage of families on welfare was expected to show a positive relationship with teenage births. Teenage mothers tend to come disproportionately from areas of low socioeconomic status.

After examined the association with pre-existing characteristics and teenage pregnancy showed no statistical associations between the demographic, economic, and educational characteristics of the teenage mothers at registration and whether or not they had a rapid subsequent pregnancy. The variables studied were age, number of years of residence in New Haven, number of parents in the household, total number of persons in the household, ordinal position, number of previous pregnancies, socioeconomic quartile, welfare status, educational goals, or whether or not they were in the age appropriate grade in schools. The authors attributed or explained these extremely surprising results on lack of associations as a result of homogeneity of the study group on many of these variables. The

author further reported that this was partly due to the nature of the program (based in a hospital clinic) and partly to the research design (all who participated had to meet the study 29 criteria) Among the pre-existing characteristics, only school status at registration was correlated significantly with subsequent pregnancy those in school were less likely to become pregnant again by 15 months postpartum.^{vi} However, this result cannot be treated as conclusive because existing studies show strong influence of socio-demographic and economic variables in out of the wedlock pregnancies.

6. Family and Social Responses to Unwed Motherhood:

Familial and societal reactions to unwedded pregnancy and individuals were reviewed. Literature search has revealed that a limited number of studies were available with this focus which was in aboriginal context. Such studies discussed that typical reactions of the alleged father to the news of the pregnancy would be annoyance, fear, anger and a desire to escape from the entire situation. Another set of reactions to pregnancies were the boys would react proudly when they learned of their prospective parenthood, and would offer to marry their pregnant girlfriends. Reviewing the responses of men by whom tribal girls in Kerala were impregnated. They placed responsibility and blame of out of the wedlock pregnancy on the victims, denied fatherhood of the conceptions, persuaded women to go for abortion and also refused the responsibility of household and children rearing. It was also reported that men were forced to provide financial security for households and child rearing in the context where they were questioned either by formal and non-formal institutions of justice^{vii}. The same study revealed that unwed mothers live through a series of positive and negative emotions and psychological responses in their initial periods of pregnancy while some of them felt very happy because during initial periods because they enjoyed their men's support and physical proximity. These mothers reported that, by being impregnated, they could find new meaning for their life and relationships. However, this was not the case for many other unwed mothers. They learned about their pregnancy with shock, disbelief and denial and experienced uncertainty about future, became fearful, felt giddy and weak. Some of them experienced anger towards self which were associated with occasional suicide ideation and actual suicidal attempts. Many perceived that every one stopped loving them and are left alone. They also felt difficulty to mingle with people in their families and neighborhood. In addition, these unwed mothers experienced frequent blame, isolation in families, peer groups, neighborhoods and in wider tribal communities. In an extreme example, a study participant changed her religion in order to get away from the discriminatory treatment she faced from her society.

7. Legal perspectives/human rights:

Social norms and legal systems that encourage or do not censure men's multiple sexual partners are likely to leave many of the women who become mothers through such unions economically vulnerable. Few men have sufficient wealth to adequately support multiple families and invest equally in each mate and her offspring, yet men continue to father children with multiple partners (Saran, 1999). In addition, structural violence in the forms of stigmatization and discriminations coupled with sexual harassment and violence is likely to restrict women's ability to seek legal redress and even deny access to or fare treatment from locally available non-formal judicial systems. For example, when men responsible for pregnancies deny or refuse to shoulder the responsibility of fatherhood, cases are often filed in police stations, not even reaches to the courts. But most of the time, such cases are settled outside courts with nominal financial assistance and a promise to bear a share of the household and child rearing expenses by men. However, instances are many wherein ongoing financial support for household and child rearing simply remain as promises. As these men suddenly move away from women, contacts also do not exist in many cases where these promises remain unfulfilled. Hence, investigations need to focus on the process and outcomes of both institutional and non-institutional conflict resolutions models in practice that govern the lives of women because very minimal knowledge base is available in this regard (Jose *et al.*, 2010c). Similarly, a few social activists and a very limited number of NGOs have taken up the issue on their agenda but they too could not do much to stop the exploitation, resulting inadequate civil society response to facilitate and strengthen access to socially marginalized women's groups. Thus, it is vital to identify what are the capacity building needs of civil society organizations and strengthening them to effectively respond to human rights concerns.

8. Conclusion:

This study has infact added more clarity to the problems of institutionalized unwed mothers. Development of an Intervention Module for the Unwed mothers residing in the Licensed Homes and the intervention programme has proved that it has helped them to improve their sexual knowledge, self esteem and subjective well being which would help in their future life.

A few studies which have been conducted in this field, found many psychological and social factors as the reason for unwed motherhood. Majority of the tribal women were exploited by persons from outside the community and studies found that, the psychological problems are high among the unmarried mothers.

There is meager research on the Quality of Life of single parent and the available studies on quality of social life shows that marital status significantly influenced quality of social life. This is implied that unwed tribal mothers were more likely to enjoy less quality social life than married mothers and unwed mothers who later married.

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