



The Influence of Family Structures, Support Systems and Teenage Mothers' Agency in Kanungu District, Uganda

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Abstract: *The situation of teenage motherhood in Kanungu District, Uganda, is characterized by significant socio-economic and health problems. This study aimed at establishing the relationship between family structures and support systems and teenage mothers' agency, especially in relation to health care, education and social support. Data were collected from 345 teenage mothers (13–19 years) using structured questionnaires and analyzed using R version 4.5.0. The results indicated that 66.4% of the respondents lived in nuclear families and open family communication was found to enhance agency ($\chi^2 = 12.45$, $p = 0.002$) while limited communication was found to decrease decision making power. Although grandparent-headed households were noted (10.2% in Kihihi Town Council), structural differences were not statistically significant ($p > 0.006$). Weak family support was found to be associated with high economic needs (72%) and social exclusion (66.1%), and second teenage pregnancies were more frequent among those with poor family relations ($\chi^2 = 10.78$, $p = 0.001$). In conclusion, although family structure alone was not a significant factor, communication quality and family support were found to be the most important factors that influenced teenage mothers' agency. It is therefore recommended that emotional support, family counseling, education re-entry programs, and community-based support networks should be enhanced.*

Keywords: *Teenage mothers, family structures, agency, Family support, Kanungu District Uganda.*

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1. Introduction

Teenage motherhood presents a persistent public health and social concern worldwide, particularly in middle and low-income countries where access to education, reproductive health services, and social support systems are limited (Goldstein, 2011). Teenage pregnancy often results in significant socio-economic and health consequences, affecting not only the young mothers but also their children and broader communities (Huda et al., 2022). In Uganda, particularly in Kanungu District, teenage mothers encounter numerous challenges, including

limited educational opportunities, economic hardship, and social stigmatization (Nkabura, 2016) Understanding the socio-demographic characteristics of teenage mothers and the role of family structures in shaping their agency is crucial for informing targeted interventions and policy development.

The family unit plays a fundamental role in the lives of teenage mothers, influencing their well-being, decision-making, and access to resources (Malebo, 2020) . Previous studies have highlighted the significance of family structures in determining maternal and child health

outcomes, with nuclear, extended, step, grandparent-led, and single-headed families each presenting unique dynamics (Skurat, 2023; Favour, 2024). Family support is particularly critical in ensuring that teenage mothers receive the necessary emotional, financial, and psychological assistance to navigate early motherhood (McGregor & Arditti, 2023). However, there is limited evidence on how different family structures influence the agency of teenage mothers in Uganda, predominantly in Kanungu District.

Communication between teenage mothers and their parents has been identified as a key determinant of agency and decision-making (Huda et al., 2022). The frequency and quality of communication can affect a teenage mother's ability to access healthcare, educational opportunities, and social support (Qizi, 2020). Research has shown that frequent and open communication within families fosters stronger emotional bonds and enhances decision-making power among young mothers (Nasir & Johari, 2024). Similarly, a lack of communication may contribute to isolation, increased vulnerability, and poor maternal and child health outcomes (Gatheru et al., 2024).

Additionally, strong family bonds have been linked to better psychosocial well-being and improved maternal outcomes (Polisetty & Pothu, 2024). Factors such as trust, shared values, and participation in decision-making significantly influence the strength of family bonds. Teenage mothers who feel excluded from family decisions often experience lower self-esteem and reduced access to resources, which may further impede their ability to make informed choices about their lives and their children's well-being (Machoka et al., 2024). Moreover, teenage mothers who experience a second pregnancy often face even greater challenges, with studies indicating that they are more likely to have weaker family bonds and increased poverty cycles (Dangal, 2006; Ramachandran et al., 2024).

Assuming the significant role that family structures and communication play in shaping the experiences of teenage mothers, this study seeks to examine the frontrunners and barriers to teenage mothers' agency in Kanungu District by analyzing demographic characteristics, family structures, and support systems. The findings will inform policies for strengthening family support mechanisms and enhancing the agency of teenage mothers to improve their well-being and future forecasts.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Review

The study is underpinned by Bronfenbrenner's Social Ecological Theory, which provides a broad framework for understanding how teenage mothers' agency is influenced by numerous, interacting environmental systems. The

theory suggests that human development happens through shared interactions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Within this framework, the family represents a critical microsystem that directly affects adolescent behavior and decision-making. Interactions with parents, siblings, and extended relatives shaped by cultural beliefs, economic conditions, and institutional influences contribute to a teenager's coping ability, resilience, and agency. This theory is particularly relevant in examining how teenage mothers in Kanungu District experience and respond to support or neglect within their family and wider community settings.

2.2 Family Structures and Teenage Mothers' Agency

Family structure refers to the composition and functionality of a household, including the presence and roles of parents, siblings, and extended relatives (Davids et al., 2016). In Kanungu District, teenage mothers exist within different family structures such as nuclear, extended, single-parent, and grandparent households, each of them influencing their agency differently. Socialization theory emphasizes the role of family dynamics in shaping adolescents' behaviors and decision-making (Mkwananzi & Commission, 2021). Supportive structures, mainly those with open communication and clear prospects, reduce risk behaviors and promote autonomy (Dunkley, 2013; Cahyaningtyasa et al., 2020). However, dilemmas like parental absence and conflict have been linked to increased vulnerability to teenage pregnancy (Odimegwu & Mkwananzi, 2018). Nuclear families offer stability but may lack extended support whereas extended families provide shared caregiving but can limit autonomy (Ochen, 2015). Grandparent and stepfamilies, while often support emotionally, may also face challenges related to age, resources, and adjustment issues (Harvey, 2020; Shorey & Ng, 2022). Single-parent families commonly face socioeconomic challenges which affect young mothers' self-efficacy (Coles, 2015). This study aims to explore these different family structures in Kanungu District and how they relate to teenage mothers' agency, focusing on decision-making, autonomy, and well-being.

2.3 Family-related Factors

Family related factors which include socio-economic status, family beliefs, and parental education play an essential role in shaping the agency of teenage mothers. Close parent-child relationships offer emotional support and connectedness which promotes self-efficacy and decision-making (Silk, 2013). Socio-economic constraints, including poverty, large family sizes, and low parental education, limit supervision and often expose adolescents to risky behaviors, leading to early pregnancies (Ochen, 2015; Anifah et al., 2018). Family beliefs rooted in cultural norms may either disregard early childbearing or encourage delay, impacting the way teenage mothers are

perceived and supported (Mkwanzzi, 2019). Parental education improves communication and support, while low education or abusive behaviors correlate with teenage pregnancy risks (Alcott, 2020). Moreover, negative family dynamics, including neglect or stigma, further disempower these young mothers. This study explores how such factors influence the resilience, autonomy, and decision-making of teenage mothers in Kanungu District, seeking to fill existing gaps.

2.4 Family Support Systems

Family support systems are vigorous in shaping teenage mothers' agency, resilience, and overall well-being. These systems encompass emotional, instrumental, and financial support. Emotional support expressed through love, empathy, and encouragement build self-confidence, reduce stigma, and promotes mental well-being, enabling teenage mothers to face challenges with resilience (Kaye, 2008; Goossens et al., 2015). Instrumental support includes practical help with childcare, healthcare visits, and daily tasks, which relieves burdens and allows young mothers to pursue education and personal development (Govender et al., 2020). Financial support, such as provision of money, food, or school fees, reduces economic dependence and improves access to essential services, promoting health outcomes for both mother and her child (Webb et al., 2023; Ngabaza, 2011). These support forms together create an enabling environment for teenage mothers to exercise autonomy and long-term planning. However, the absence of these support systems increases vulnerability and limits opportunities, emphasizing the need for family-based interventions (Naidoo et al., 2021).

2.5 Agency

Agency is assumed as an individual's ability to make intentional choices based on available resources and capabilities including psychological, social and human capital (Koggel, 2020). It also depends on structural opportunities and constraints in the social, political and institutional environment. Women's empowerment is closely tied to agency as it enables individuals to define and pursue personal goals (Shankar *et al.*, 2019 ;Mishra & Tripathi, 2011). Suryawanshi, (2020) adds that women empowerment is a thought for improving the fiscal status of women in contributing through full participation for the growth of the family and its survival. Despite the extensive literature on women's empowerment, there is limited research addressing how teenage mothers exercise agency within family contexts.

3. Methodology

3.1 Study area

The research took place in Kanungu District situated in Western Region Uganda where both rural and urban areas of Kihiihi, Kanungu and Kambuga Town Councils were included. The district maintains a population of 310,062 people while being recognized for its agricultural sector and trading activities and tourism industry.

3.2 Research design

The research used a cross-sectional design to study how socio-demographic factors and family structures and support systems impact teenage mothers' decision-making abilities. The research focused on teenage mothers between 13 and 19 years old who had experienced at least one birth.

3.3 Sampling

The research team selected 345 participants through purposive sampling from health centers and community support groups and local government records.

3.4 Data collection methods

Data were collected using structured questionnaires. The questionnaire captured demographic information and family environments, support systems and decision-making factors.

3.5 Data analysis

The researchers analyzed the responses using R version 4.5.0 to perform descriptive statistics including percentages, family relations and teenage mothers' agency were used to summarize the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. Cross-tabulation and chi-square tests were used to evaluate associations between family structures, support systems and agency. Pearson correlation analysis was for variable association assessment.

3.6 Ethical considerations

The Research Ethics Committee of Mbarara University of Science and Technology provided ethical approval for the study and all participants gave their informed consent. The researchers protected participant confidentiality through anonymized data collection while obtaining ascent forms for minors.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Demographic and geographic characteristics

The table presents descriptive and inferential statistics for key demographic and geographic variables of 345 teenage mothers in Kanungu District. It ascertains the most frequent category per variable, their proportional representation, and the statistical significance using Chi-square (X^2) tests.

A disproportionate number of respondents came from Kihiihi T/C with 31.6%, suggesting a geographic hotspot for teenage motherhood. The significant χ^2 value ($p < 0.006$) indicates that teenage motherhood is not evenly distributed across sub-counties. This may possibly be influenced by population size development, access to services, or socio-economic conditions. Although Kihiihi Town Ward had the leading individual representation with 10.2%, the non-significant ($X^2 = 13.877$, $p=0.459$) shows

no statistical meaningful difference in teenage motherhood across parishes/wards. This could imply that smaller sample sizes were randomly distributed which indicates that there is weak significance.

A highly significant result shows the vast majority of teenage mothers are in the upper teen years, indicating late adolescence is a critical risk period. This has policy implications for tailoring reproductive health and empowerment programs specifically to 17–19-year-olds.

Majority were aged 18–19 years (72.8%), showing highly significant results, primarily unmarried (71.4%), pointing to high levels of non-marital teenage pregnancies. Most teenage mothers had one child (74.6%), indicating the first pregnancy is most common in adolescence. However, the high X^2 may also suggest significant difference in the number of children across subgroups. Second pregnancies were most common among teenagers of 18-19 olds (79.7%), suggesting a cycle of vulnerability.

Table 1: The geographic and demographic characteristics of respondents

Variable	Most Common Category	% of Respondents	X^2	p-value
Sub-county	Kihiihi T/C	31.6%	12.55	0.006
Parish/Ward	Kihiihi Town Ward	10.2%	13.877	0.459
Age	18–19 years	72.8%	265.807	0.001
Marital Status	Not married	71.4%	62.327	0.001
Number of Children	One child	74.6%	462.632	0.001
Level of Education	Primary	69.0%	392.386	0.001
Age at First Pregnancy	16–17 years	53.2%	197.977	0.001
Age at Second Pregnancy	18–19 years	79.7%	63.688	0.001

4.2 Family related factors and teenage mothers' agency

The most commonly reported primary caregiver was the father (40.1%). This is famous as, in many African settings, caregiving is often the role of mothers or female relatives. The highly significant Chi-square value ($\chi^2 = 277.088$, $p = 0.001$) suggests strong variation in caregiving roles across households. Majority of respondents (57.0%) reported having more than three siblings, a statistically significant finding ($\chi^2 = 298.029$, $p = 0.001$). This may indicate large family sizes are common, which shows weak parental attention and resources. The most reported family structure was nuclear (66.4%), and this association was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 471.567$, $p = 0.001$). While nuclear families may suggest a stable home environment, the study indicates that structure alone does not always guarantee support or agency. A significant proportion of respondents (64.9%) identified domestic work as their primary role within the family, and this too was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 292.69$, $p = 0.001$). Half of the respondents (50.3%) reported not staying with their parents, and this finding was

not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 0.012$, $p = 0.914$). This suggests that there is no clear pattern or influence between co-residing with parents and family relations as defined in this study. A large percentage (75.4%) cited family meals as the most common tradition in their households, with a highly significant Chi-square result ($\chi^2 = 661.07$, $p = 0.001$). Sharing meals is often a proxy for family cohesion, routine, and opportunity for communication. A majority of respondents (64.3%) reported not having step-siblings, and this variable was also significant ($\chi^2 = 28.082$, $p = 0.001$). The presence or absence of step-siblings can reflect the stability or complexity of family structures. Most respondents (70.8%) were not staying with a partner, with a highly significant Chi-square value ($\chi^2 = 58.959$, $p = 0.001$). This suggests that many teenage mothers in Kanungu are raising their children without spousal or partner support. 65.2% of participants indicated they communicated with their families daily, a pattern that was highly significant ($\chi^2 = 462.591$, $p = 0.001$). Regular communication is a vital indicator of relational closeness and trust, both of which are associated with increased agency. Respondents most frequently cited eating together

(42.1%) as an indicator of strong family bonds. The Chi-square test showed this variable was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 142.035$, $p = 0.001$). Eating together often implies time for emotional connection, shared values, and supportive environments. The majority (90.1%) reported

that they were not the family breadwinners, with a significant Chi-square value ($\chi^2 = 219.52$, $p = 0.001$). This reinforces the reality of economic dependency among teenage mothers.

Table 2: Association between family relations and teenage mothers' agency

Variable	Most Common Category	% of Respondents	Chi-Square Value	p-value
Primary Caregivers children	Father	40.1%	277.088	0.001
Number of Siblings	More than 3	57.0%	298.029	0.001
Family Structure	Nuclear	66.4%	471.567	0.001
Family Roles	Domestic work	64.9%	292.69	0.001
Staying with Parents	No	50.3%	0.012	0.914
Family Traditions	Family meals	75.4%	661.07	0.001
Step-Siblings	No	64.3%	28.082	0.001
Staying with a Partner	No	70.8%	58.959	0.001
Family Communication	Daily	65.2%	462.591	0.001
Strong Family Bonds	Eating together	42.1%	142.035	0.001
Family Breadwinner	No	90.1%	219.52	0.001

4.3 Association between family support systems and teenage mothers' agency

Table 3 presents the agency, and well being of the respondents. There was considerable variation in perceived parental support, with 43.0% reporting "a lot" and 38.6% reporting "very little" support. Fathers were the primary decision-makers in most households (52.3%), and respondents reported frequent exclusion from family decisions (66.1%). Common family conflicts included denial of educational opportunities (38.0%) and harsh parenting practices (45.6%). Despite these challenges,

there was a strong demand for vocational training, particularly in tailoring and saloon skills (66.7%). The study emphasizes the association between communication patterns and agency, particularly the frequency of communication. It provides insights into the support systems available to teenage mothers and the factors which influence their decision-making abilities. Factors such as parental support, family love, and external support mechanisms play a critical role in shaping the agency of teenage mothers and ensuring their well-being and the well-being of their children, with about 52.3% of fathers making the family decisions as compared to only 32.5% who can access counseling services.

Table 3: Association between support systems and teenage mothers' agency

Variable	Most Common Category	% of Respondents	X ²	p-value
Parents' support/association	A lot	43.0%	35.211	<0.001
Family love for your child	Yes	77.8%	105.556	<0.001
External/Internal support	Counseling	32.5%	381.047	<0.001
Family Decisions	Father	52.3%	180.83	<0.001
Participation in decision	No	66.1%	222.053	<0.001
Faced Family Conflicts	Denied to go school	38.0%	90.018	<0.001
Biggest Challenges Faced	Harsh Parents	45.6%	194.754	<0.001

4.4 Correlation between family structure and teenage mothers' agency

The correlation matrix revealed generally weak linear relationships among the variables family structure, strong family bonds, lived in multi-generational household, family love for your child, external-internal support, and

future support. Family structure had a slight negative correlation with strong family bonds (-0.065) and a moderate negative one with lived in multi-generational household (-0.242), while showing a weak positive association with family love for your child (0.173), external-internal support (0.056), and future support (0.039). Strong family bonds exhibited negative

correlations with most variables, including lived in multi-generational household (-0.065), family love for your child (-0.114), external-internal support (-0.097), and future support (-0.114), suggesting an overall inverse trend. Lived in multi-generational household was positively related to family love for your child (0.054) and future support (0.127), but negatively related to external-internal support

(-0.070). Family love for your child had a weak positive correlation with external-internal support (0.180) but a slight negative one with future support (-0.047). Finally, future support showed minimal associations with all other variables.

Table 4: Correlation between Family Structure and Teenage Mother’ Agency

Variable	Family Structure	Strong family bonds	Lived in multi-generational household	Family love for your child	External-Internal support
Strong family bonds	-0.065				
Lived in multi-generational household	-0.242	-0.065			
Family love for your child	0.173	-0.114	0.054		
External - Internal support	0.056	-0.097	-0.070	0.180	
Future support	0.039	-0.114	0.127	-0.047	-0.054

4.5 Discussion

The research results offer detailed knowledge about the ways in which family structure together with support networks and communication methods affect the agency of teenage mothers within Kanungu District in Uganda. Family structure proved to be the most widespread form in the area but the research showed that family type as a single factor did not demonstrate a significant relationship with agency. The research findings contradict Richter et al. (2012) because they demonstrated that structured paternal involvement along with engagement leads to increased adolescent self-confidence and agency. Our research backs McDonald, (2009) who showed that physical residence in the home does not automatically mean emotional involvement or practical assistance.

The study demonstrated that teenage mothers' agency correlated more strongly with open communication and emotional bonding than with the family structure they lived in. The research findings align with McGregor & Arditti, (2023) who demonstrated that emotional closeness combined with daily family interactions such as sharing meals helps adolescent mothers develop resilience. The existing family traditions in the study did not automatically result in decisions that included everyone. The study by Neal et al. (2020) supports our findings by showing how adolescent mothers in Sub-Saharan Africa have restricted

autonomy because fathers control most household decisions in patriarchal societies.

The results of our research match the results of Mohr et al. (2019) who discovered that early pregnancy leads to decreased educational success and social isolation. Teenage mothers who experienced weak family support showed high rates of repeated pregnancies according to Govender et al. (2020) who discovered that mothers who received harsh parenting and insufficient support were more likely to become pregnant at an early age. According to David & Kong, (2024) harsh parenting creates feelings of shame which leads girls to lose their ability to pursue education and autonomy which aligns with our findings about education restrictions for teenage mothers and their financial dependence on family members.

Our research supports Ochen, (2015) because it demonstrates that the quality of family interactions through emotional support and shared responsibilities matters more than family structure for adolescents. Our study shows that family structure demonstrates little relation to agency which supports this conclusion. Emotionally supportive families create conditions where individuals feel comfortable asking for help because family love strongly correlates with external and internal support systems according to World Health Organization, (2011) which studies adolescent mental health and development.

Our research findings match both Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and Long et al., (2021) by showing that family along with peer groups and institutional factors strongly influence adolescent agency. The teenage mothers in this research demonstrated active interest in vocational training and educational re-enrollment which shows their drive toward independence when they receive proper support. The findings demonstrate that emotional and social interventions together with structural changes are necessary to create empowerment opportunities for teenage mothers beyond their traditional family boundaries.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The findings of this study emphasize the influence of family structures, support systems, and demographic characteristics on the agency of teenage mothers. Most teenage mothers were found to be between the ages of 18-19, unmarried, and with a single child, having experienced early pregnancies typically between 16-17 years of age. Significant portions had only completed primary education and were not living with their parents, highlighting their early transition into independent adulthood without adequate support. The data further revealed that teenage mothers embedded in nuclear families with clear family roles and traditions such as shared meals and daily communication reported stronger family bonds and a higher sense of agency. However, where teenage mothers faced family conflicts, lack of participation in family decisions, or emotional distance, their ability to exercise autonomy and make meaningful choices weakened significantly.

The study also illustrated that both internal (family love and involvement) and external (counseling and community support) mechanisms play a crucial role in strengthening teenage mothers' confidence and decision-making ability. Positive family communication, emotional support, and shared caregiving roles were associated with increased resilience and empowerment. Equally, the presence of step-siblings, absence of family breadwinners, and denial of education due to family conflict were linked to lower agency. Correlational analysis confirmed that emotional factors like family love had more positive influence on agency than simply living in multi-generational households, which did not always ensure strong family bonds. Generally, the study highlights the urgent need to enhance family support, open communication, and access to youth-friendly services to foster the well-being and agency of teenage mothers, particularly in resource-limited settings.

5.2 Recommendations

- i. The improvement of teenage mothers' agency and well-being in Kanungu District requires interventions that focus on family communication and bonding rather than family structure changes. The main obstacle to teenage mothers' autonomy proved to be their lack of participation in household decision-making processes.
- ii. The introduction of community-based family support initiatives with home visits and counseling sessions should begin to educate families about the need for young mothers to participate in family decisions.
- iii. The essential services of mental health support and life skills training and parenting education for adolescent mothers should be provided through partnerships between NGOs and faith-based organizations and health facilities.
- iv. The implementation of specific programs must focus on preventing education denial and reducing repeated pregnancies. The programs should offer school re-enrollment support together with flexible learning choices and vocational training to provide economic empowerment for young mothers and decrease their dependency.
- v. The government needs to extend social protection programs to include teenage mothers under the Parish Development Model and additional youth and women empowerment initiatives. The recommendations based on statistical evidence and observed correlations offer a complete solution to tackle the various difficulties teenage mothers encounter in the district.

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