

# UNIQUE EXPERIENCE OF EARLY PARENTHOOD OF YOUNG GIRLS FACING ACADEMIC CONSTRAINTS IN UNIVERSITIES IN SOUTHERN BENIN IN 2023

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**Abstract:** Teenage pregnancies are a major concern in many universities in Porto-Novo due to the large number of cases recorded each year. The general objective of this research is to analyze the effects of motherhood on the academic performance of students at universities in Porto-Novo. The research is of a mixed nature carried out with 136 student mothers, 12 health center midwives, 22 teachers and 05 executives from the Ministry of Higher Education. It was carried out with the subjects using the questionnaire and the interview guide. Following the analysis and analysis of the response elements, various results revealed that pregnancies in the university environment are due to the lack of control over the use of contraceptive methods which negatively influence the academic results of student parents. It is necessary to strengthen educational actions aimed at supporting student mothers, in order to promote their academic success.

**Key Words:** motherhood, early parenthood, academic success, universities.

## 1. INTRODUCTION :

Millions of girls around the world, particularly in Africa, face enormous challenges in schooling because of their gender (Plan International, 2021). According to Moussodo (2015), poverty and discrimination make these young girls more likely to drop out of school. A 2014 study revealed that school dropout rates are high in the early primary grades due to overcrowding, gender disparities, lack of classrooms and the quality of teaching in educational institutions (Bernard, 2014). In Africa, the fertility rate for girls aged 15 to 19 was 98% between 2010-2015 (Tabutin & Schoumaker, 2020). Although much progress has been made in several countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, some gender disparities continue to be recorded in the field of education. Despite the considerable improvement in school enrollment rates in almost all southern countries, the occurrence of certain phenomena such as sexual harassment and teenage motherhood continue to force many school-age girls to drop out of school to take charge of themselves (Dagnogo, 2016). These various situations have a major impact on their academic results. In African communities where educational values are promoted, unwanted teenage pregnancies and early motherhood are current events with the challenge of reducing their occurrence. In order to meet these challenges, governments, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations are concerned about the medical, psychological, social and economic consequences associated with teenage motherhood (Toudeka et al., 2022). Indeed, estimates have revealed that in 2020, nearly 12 million girls aged 15 to 19 give birth each year, representing more than 10% of global births, mainly in developing countries (Bankole et al., 2020). In West and Central Africa, the adolescent fertility rate is the highest in the world: 129 per 1,000, compared to 109 per 1,000 in East Africa, and significantly lower rates in other regions (INED, 2022). According to Badou et al. (2021), early sexual relations, misperceptions about the use of contraceptive methods and early marriage remain major causes of this early parenthood observed among young girls. In 2023 in the Republic of Benin, research estimated that 80.1% of pregnancies were unplanned among adolescents and young girls aged 15 to 19 (Mintogbé et al., 2023). The phenomenon of early pregnancy therefore has negative impacts on the schooling of girls (N'Guessan et al., 2023) in

both rural and urban areas. Policies are put in place to protect the education of adolescent girls during their pregnancy, but the lack of follow-up and support after childbirth remains problematic (Ngo Mayack, 2014).

In some universities in Benin, there is a significant number of student mothers, therefore students who already have children in their care. They combine family responsibilities and studies with the major challenge of passing their exams, even though it is sometimes difficult (Gbaguidi, 2019). Although teenage motherhood is not prohibited by law, these young mothers are very often victims of stigmatization and have difficulty continuing their academic careers. The phenomenon of teenage pregnancy raises important questions that require in-depth research with demographic, health and socio-economic implications. This research is part of the dynamic of educating young girls in responsible sexuality for a successful academic trajectory. These various observations lead to a main question: "What are the impacts of early parenthood on the academic results of young mothers in universities in southern Benin?" » To answer this question, the present study set itself the general objective of analyzing the effects of early parenthood on the academic performance of female university students in southern Benin.

## 2. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

### 2.1. Framework and type of research

This is an analytical cross-sectional study carried out within universities in southern Benin. These are private and public universities in Porto-Novo recognized by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research.

The target population consists of parents of children and supervisors of the center. The sample of one hundred and thirty-six (136) student mothers selected according to the accidental selection technique. The volunteer selection technique was used to select the sample of twenty-two teachers (22), twelve (12) health center midwives and five (05) executives of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MESRS). They were chosen because they are the people who, due to their professional position, can provide information on early parenthood in a university environment

### 2.2. Data collection techniques and tools

For data collection, a self-administered questionnaire addressed to student mothers and an interview guide for teachers, health center midwives and executives of the Ministry of Higher Education made it possible to understand the explanatory factors of early motherhood and its effects on academic results. An Infinix brand mobile phone was used to record the interviews. Data collection lasted five months from May to September 2023 with the support of investigators trained by specialists in quantitative and qualitative data management.

### 2.3. Data processing

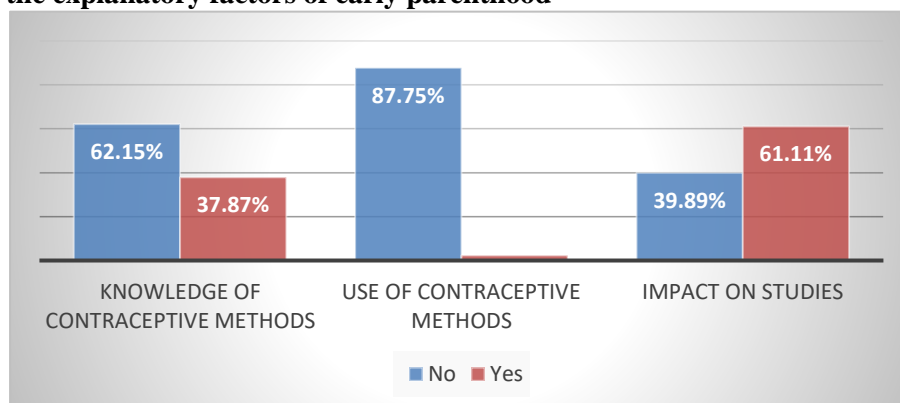
After the quantitative data collected had been analyzed, they were processed using IBM SPSS software (Version 21). The interviews after transcription based on the items contained in the interview guide were processed from an analysis followed by a thematic grouping for the comparison of the responses obtained with the research hypotheses.

The more or less identical responses are classified by center of interest. Indeed, after attentive listening to the recordings of the interviews, the units of meaning were noted in order to give content to the themes and sub-themes that emerged from all the interviews according to the objectives and hypotheses.

## 3. RESULTS

The quantitative and qualitative results were presented.

### 3.1 Description of the explanatory factors of early parenthood



Graph 1: Explanatory factors of early parenthood in universities in southern Benin (n = 136), 2024

This graph shows that 62.15% of student mothers are aware of contraceptive methods. Only 12.25% use these methods. This graph also reveals that 61.11% of student mothers surveyed said that early parenthood had a negative impact on their studies

During interviews, a midwife surveyed on duty at the Ouémé Departmental University Hospital (CHUD-O) expressed herself in these terms:

Frankly, teenage motherhood is no longer rare. Being a mother early often has a negative impact on the academic performance of these young girls. It should be noted that several factors explain early parenthood and the most important among these factors are the lack of knowledge and non-use of contraceptive methods. (Midwife D.A, May 2023).

It is possible to deduce that one of the causes of teenage motherhood among most young mothers is the low use of contraceptive methods. In the same vein, one of the executives of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MESRS) confided:

You know, students like to have sex without protection. They do not use contraceptive methods. This is what justifies the high pregnancy rate in universities and therefore school dropouts (MESRS Executive C.J. April 2023).

All the teachers surveyed had the same opinion on this subject of early parenthood. They generally stated that despite the awareness sessions held in universities by teaching staff during classes, the pregnancy rate continues to increase with very often negative consequences for these young student mothers. One teacher explained:

The problem is serious at the moment with the multi-partnership that is gaining momentum. Everything is divine providence, because despite the precautions taken by some students, they start motherhood very early. Very often, they cannot cope with the pressure of the courses. Imagine the fate of a student enrolled in the sports institute. Hmm, that's a shame (Teacher at A.P. University June 2023)

This verbatim reflects the many socio-cultural and academic challenges that students in early parenthood face. The various precautions taken by the latter do not always spare them from early parenthood.

### 3.2 The effects of motherhood on the academic performance of student mothers in southern Benin

The graph below shows the areas in which motherhood has influenced young mothers.

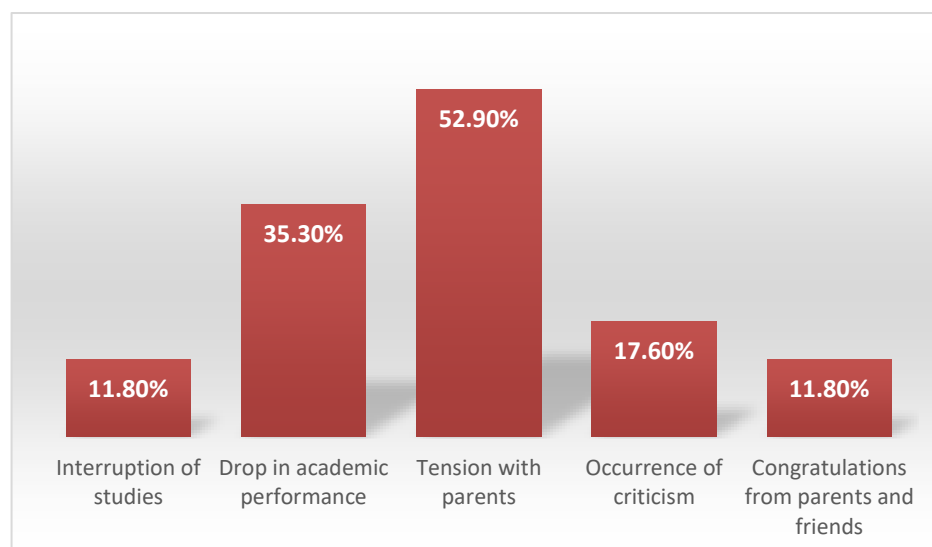


Figure 2: Impacts of motherhood on young mothers

Motherhood affected young mothers in many ways. They mentioned several impacts of their early motherhood on their studies. These include tensions with parents (52.90%), a drop in academic performance (35.30%), the occurrence of criticism (17.60%), interruption of studies (11.80%) and congratulations from parents and friends (11.80%).

Almost all midwives stated that cases of pregnancies recorded at university are sometimes desired by themselves and/or in agreement with their partners. They stated that cases of unwanted or unexpected pregnancies are increasing. One midwife confirmed this result in these terms:

The extent of teenage motherhood in universities is really worrying because many young female students get pregnant these days during their university studies. Sometimes for some it is because they had the desire to get pregnant, while for others the pregnancy was completely unexpected (Midwife T.D, May 2023).

The teachers interviewed stated that motherhood leads these young students to situations that they cannot always manage. The more they find themselves in precarious situations because of the low monthly income of their parents, the

more they are victims of insults, criticism and end up abandoning university education for a given period for some. Seeking the opinion of the executives of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, one of them confided: pregnancy negatively affects the academic results of these young mothers. Some drop out of school to take care of their children, others miss classes, and for those who make the effort to go, they are not always able to revise properly once they are home. It is therefore difficult for the students concerned to achieve the objective of moving up to the next grade. (MESRS H.A Framework; August 2023).

There is therefore a direct link between early parenthood and dropping out of school. Student mothers who manage to cope with the pressure of classes and exams are not always able to ensure attendance at university. Cases of absenteeism observed at their levels are frequent because of certain responsibilities related to motherhood that compromise the concentration of the people concerned in preparing for the completion of tutorials and practical work and exams.

## 4. DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Explanatory factors of teenage motherhood and contraceptive methods

According to the information, it is noted that more than half of the student mothers questioned know about contraceptive methods, but the majority do not use them during their sexual acts. It should also be noted that early parenthood has negatively impacted the studies of the student mothers surveyed. In a given social environment, some young women who pursue higher education tend to delay marriage and motherhood, seeking to maximize their academic and professional potential before committing to family responsibilities (Rivière, 2016). However, this desirable situation can be put to the test in a university environment where social pressures and opportunities for romantic relationships continue to increase. In some households, the various disruptions related to family relationships play a significant role in the early nature of sexual relationships and the occurrence of unwanted pregnancies among adolescents and young girls. The precocity of sexuality observed among these adolescents and young girls is linked to the fact that they most often grow up in a family environment marked by single parenthood, divorce, or unstable relationships between parents (Guy & Vozari, 2019). In the case of this research, student mothers, often in search of affection and stability, very often seek to fill an emotional void with romantic relationships that sometimes lead to early motherhood.

The lack of open communication and support at home increases the risk of unwanted pregnancies, especially in a context where sex education is almost non-existent. A harmonious family climate, where parents are involved in their children's lives, contributes to better decision-making regarding sexuality and contraceptive use (Badou et al., 2021). The lack of use of contraceptive methods among many female students can thus be interpreted as a consequence of this tension between educational aspirations and the realities of social life at university.

Furthermore, young women from disadvantaged backgrounds, economically, socially and culturally, are particularly vulnerable to early pregnancy (Joncas & Roy, 2015). Inaccessibility to information on sex education, sexual and reproductive health services, and the economic resources needed to protect themselves are factors that increase the vulnerability of the student mothers surveyed to unplanned pregnancies. Many female students are often less prepared to face the challenges of attending classes, passing university exams while managing motherhood. Not always being able to meet these challenges, they see their educational path disrupted, thus reinforcing cases of marginalization and their poor financial situation. These situations of vulnerability are aggravated by social pressure and lack of resources, leading young women and especially those in class situations to abandon their studies to assume their new life as mothers.

### 4.2 Effects of motherhood on their academic performance

The results reveal that motherhood in a university environment has an impact on the academic performance of young mothers. The desire for pregnancy was expressed by more than half of the women surveyed. According to the statements of the students surveyed, motherhood, whether desired or not, had consequences on the continuation of their studies. In this research, tensions with parents, decreased academic performance, various criticisms, interruption of studies, and mixed reactions from parents and friends appeared as impacts of motherhood on young female students.

Motherhood negatively affects female students on several levels. Authors have revealed that some young mothers often have poor academic performance even before they are pregnant (Defer et al., 2019). Motherhood further aggravates the difficulties experienced by these young girls, making the continuation of their studies even more difficult. Whether motherhood is wanted or not, it constitutes a break in the academic path of these young students. This situation most often leads them to drop out of school, as noted by various studies (Jacquemond et al., 2020; Pandiella et al., 2024).

Early motherhood makes it difficult to complete a college or university degree. It should be noted that schooling continues to play an important role in mitigating the negative effects of teenage motherhood in the search for employment. The interruption of academic studies, often caused by motherhood, can have lasting repercussions on the life trajectory of the student mothers surveyed. A low level of education associated with teenage motherhood facilitates

the reduction of professional choices and future economic prospects (Roux et al., 2017). The interruption of studies therefore limits the prospects of financial autonomy and professional development for these young student mothers. However, Charpenel et al. (2008) revealed that teenage mothers without a high school diploma are more exposed to professional inactivity. An integrated approach taking into account these different dimensions is essential in the prevention of unwanted pregnancies. It is important to strengthen educational actions for student mothers, to maximize professional opportunities and earnings based on their qualifications, skills and various experiences.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Early parenthood is a major concern in the university environment. This research aimed to analyze the effects of early parenthood on the academic performance of female university students in southern Benin. The results revealed that even though female students know about contraceptive methods, they do not always use them. This behavior explains the regular occurrence of pregnancies in the university environment which impacts on the educational trajectory in higher education. At this level, pregnancies are often desired but increase the risk of dropping out of school because of the new responsibilities of fathers and the financial situation of parents. The hypothesis that early parenthood has a negative impact on the academic performance of female university students in southern Benin is confirmed in view of the results from the data collected. Therefore, it appears necessary that solutions start from universities and are implemented by actors in the educational community. In this context, it is appropriate to implement sexuality education actions in order to obtain positive effects on the behavior of young people. New research can focus on the monetary ecosystem of these students in a context of resistance to multi-partnership or romantic relationships in universities in light of sexual and reproductive health rights.

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## DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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