

# **Examination of Challenges Confronting Social Workers in Prevention of Teenage Pregnancies: A Case of Tabora Municipal – Tanzania**

**By**

**Johnas Amon Buhori**

**The Open University of Tanzania (OUT)**

**Email: [johnas.buhori@out.ac.tz](mailto:johnas.buhori@out.ac.tz)**

## **Abstract**

*Tanzania is confronted with an increasing number of school dropouts among secondary school girls; despite various government efforts to curb the problem, there is a steady increase in the phenomena in Tabora municipal. The study aims to examine the challenges which have stubbornly continued to prevent social workers from effectively preventing teenage pregnancies. The study had ten participants (five social workers and five education officers employed at Tabora municipal) were selected to participate and inform the study. The two focus group discussions of five members each and five key informants' interviews were used to generate information while observing the principle of saturation. This study was guided by system theory, as it considers the interdependence and interrelatedness among the sub-systems in the efforts to prevent teenage pregnancies among secondary school girls. The findings revealed that social workers are challenged with poor working environments, little recognition of their competencies, a lack of awareness of their roles and a limited budget set for their various activities. The study recommends an intensive campaign to create awareness of the role and competencies of social workers to prevent teenage pregnancies in secondary schools in Tanzania.*

**Key Words:** Child Protection, Teenage pregnancies, School dropout, Social Workers, Secondary School girls

## **Introduction**

One of the challenges facing Tanzania in achieving goal four of Nation Development Vision 2025 of "A well-educated and learning society" (URT, 2015) is the increasing incidences of early pregnancies among adolescents in Tabora Municipal Council. Teenage pregnancies pose significant socio-economic and health challenges while hastening the poverty circle at individual and household levels (URT, 2023). Despite these challenges, the government has increased access to fundamental education levels (primary and secondary school) by removing school fees and all the related contributions (Tanzania Education Policy, 2015). It is worth noting that the government's good intentions have not positively contributed to reducing teenage pregnancies. Instead, the number of girls completing primary and secondary school has stubbornly decreased

due to teenage pregnancies. For instance, the URT (2020) reported 7212 students dropped out of secondary schools; in 2021, a total of 9,192 dropped, which accounted for an increase of 1980 students (URT, 2021); in 2022, a total of 8,153 students dropped out of secondary schools in Tabora region, which accounted for the decrease of 1,039 students (URT, 2022). Cementing these assertions, The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2020) pointed out that Tanzania is among the countries with a high prevalence of teenage pregnancies, with a rate of 27% among girls. The prevalence, therefore, means that the number of girls becoming mothers before turning eighteen has steadily increased. For instance, URT (2020) recorded 3,729 girls; URT (2021) recorded 4563; and URT (2022) recorded 4159 girls who dropped out of secondary schools in the Tabora region.

Generally, teaching and learning in Tanzania, mainly Tabora municipal, is left to teachers and learners. Other stakeholders, such as parents, community members, and social workers, who are the focus of this paper, are not allowed to fulfil their obligations. For these reasons, Rwegoshora (2015) noted that children in fundamental schools should not be left with teachers alone; social workers have a significant role to play and must be seen or treated as colleagues in the exertions to protect and prevent any malpractice likely to occur in a school setup. The outcome of pregnancy to a teenage mother, such as not carrying on with studies, which hinders education attainment, the psychological and emotional stress of pregnancy, and the socio-cultural view on the family of the teenage and the child after birth are some of the constraints which perpetuate the cycle of poverty. On the other hand, Huxtable (2022) noted that developed countries have succeeded in reducing teen pregnancies in secondary school after hiring social workers. Their presence helps undertake counselling services, assess the teens' academic progress, support teens with reproductive health information, and deal with risky behaviour and aggressiveness (Ream, 2020). As indicated by Csók & Pusztai (2022), wherever social workers were recruited in an education setting, their presence reduced school dropout due to pregnancies among teens. It is from this standpoint that it can be argued that the absence of social workers in an education setting sheds light on the increase of teen pregnancies in Tabora municipal. From this viewpoint, this paper intends to examine the role of social workers in preventing teenage pregnancies in Tabora Municipality, Tanzania.

## **Empirical Literature Review**

Globally, teenagers are challenged with risky behaviour, which to a large extent contributes to early pregnancies among teenagers; as observed by Washington-Woods (2020), the problem represents a substantial public health apprehension. It is worth noting that teenage pregnancies are linked with high risks of maternal child morbidity and mortality; economic and socio-cultural were other identified challenges. It is devastating to note that teenage pregnancies are declining in many parts of developed countries. Due to inadequate knowledge of reproductive health, middle- and low-income countries, including Tanzania, have recorded, according to UNFPA (2022), 121 million pregnancies, which resulted from unplanned pregnancies among teens. On the same note, teens are challenged by the fact that 14% were expected to give birth before they were eighteen years old. These girls are not yet mature enough physically, emotionally and psychologically. Becoming mothers jeopardises their rights to emotional support as they have to do that to the newborn babies.

Pointing to more challenges confronting teens, WHO (2023) noted higher health risks of eclampsia, puerperal endometritis and systemic infections while their babies are confronted with low birth weight, preterm birth and severe neonatal conditions. The identified challenges are encountered by teens between the ages of fifteen and eighteen, which accounts for 16 million of them (equal to 14%) who give birth. Proposing the possible solution to the highlighted challenges, Zuleima and Victoria (2020) noted that the teen has to be supported by social workers to deal with the demands of infants, school dropouts, and other factors related to socio-economic.

Drawing attention from the experience of the United States of America, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022) reported that, despite the remarkable improvement in reproductive health education, which has contributed to the decline in teenage pregnancy rates over the past twenty years; teens are still challenged with a sex education program in schools, and access to reproductive health services. Despite the recorded achievement, there are still disparities among diverse ethnic and socio-economic groups. Pointing to the decline, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021) noted that in 2020, 165 148 births were recorded among adolescents aged between 15 and 19. It translated to the birth rate of 15.3 per cent per 1,000 women in the indicated age group. Commenting on the role of social workers in dealing with the highlighted challenges, Sawhill and Guyot (2019) pointed out that school, family and medical social workers contributed significantly to the decrease. Social workers in the USA

usually conduct a massive campaign on behavioral transformation and participate in the creation of teenager/youth-friendly reproductive centres. Through these facilities and services, teenagers and youth access quality services conveniently.

Similarly, UNICEF (2020) noted that in regions or countries where the government invest less in reproductive health programs, teens are likely to be confronted with sex education, inaccessibility to contraceptives and the poor establishment of a robust health system which prioritizes youth reproductive-centered services, the rate of teen pregnancies is generally high. Contrary to the proposition, Odrowąż-Coates and Kostrzevska (2021) noted that the rate of fertility was recorded at 10.9, which is the lowest than the global average of 40.8%. Commenting on the role of social workers in the reduction and prevention of teenage pregnancies, Odrowąż-Coates and Kostrzevska (2021) noted that their work usually intends to empower teenagers to challenge peers, families and community on the stereotyping related to the phenomenal of teenage pregnancies.

Pointing to the stubbornness challenge of teenage pregnancies in Sub-Saharan Africa, Mekonnen et al. (2021) revealed that the rates are alarming in the regions. The prevalence of teenage pregnancies is recorded at 91 per cent among women. The increase is closely related to limited access to reproductive health education, inaccessible youth-friendly health services, early marriage and socio-cultural factors, to list but a few. Various regional governments have strived harder, while supported by numerous Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), to end the problem; however, no changes have been registered yet. Additionally, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2023) noted that, in 2022, the birth rate for girls between the age of 10 -14 was estimated at 1.5 per cent per 1000 women, with higher rates of 4.6 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa. Regarding the role of social workers in reducing teenage pregnancies, Afolabi (2021) opined that during the recruitment of other civil servants, social workers have to be prioritized as they have the necessary skills and competencies to deal with all factors related to teenage pregnancies.

According to NBS (2022), Tanzania, like many other countries in Sub-Saharan and East Africa, has a youth population of 30, 257,196 between the age of 0-17, estimated with a proportion of 49%. From this view, Iddy (2021) revealed that, due to teenage pregnancies, many girls who are lucky to complete primary school fail to complete secondary school, making teenage pregnancy a critical national challenge with the revealed critical concern around the education and future of

girls in Tanzania. While considering the social worker's core function, Rwegoshora (2015) noted that they must be involved in educational activities in Tanzania. The case management skills and competencies among social workers would help identify challenges related to sex education and reproductive health confronting teenagers (Skobi & Makofane, 2017).

Revealing the rates of childbearing among teenagers, UNICEF (2020) noted the varying rates across regions, where 5 per cent was recorded in Mjini Magharibi – Zanzibar and 6 per cent in Kilimanjaro region as the lowest to 45 per cent in Katavi and 43 per cent in Tabora regions respectively. Moreover, NBS (2022) noted that the proportion of the youth population is higher in the Simiyu region at 57.8 per cent, while the Tabora region stands at 55.4%, with only a difference of 2.4 per cent. Varying challenges among teenagers compound the propositional of the youth population in the Tabora region. It is for this reason Care (2013) pointed out the challenges encountered, namely, child sexual abuse, early marriage, and rape, among others, as some of the challenges which were on the increase and affecting teenagers. When employed, social workers have to deal with such issues affecting girls.

The effort of the Tanzania government to address and stand for the child's best interest was noted when the Law of the Child Act (CAP. 13 R.E. 2019) was promulgated. The Law assigns the duty and obligations of ensuring a child's best interest, Care and protection to community members, parents, guardians or relatives. These stakeholders, in the interest of a child, are authorised to report any infringement related to child denial and neglect, which can lead to the end of education for the child. Further, the Written Laws (Miscellaneous Amendment) (No.2) ACT, 2016, section 60A prohibited marrying or impregnating a primary or a secondary student. Section 60A "commits an offence and shall, on conviction, be liable to imprisonment for thirty years (URT, 2016). However, Tanzania and Tabora regions continue to witness an increasing number of school-going girls dropping out of secondary school, and social workers are only involved at the edge of the intervention.

The government of Tanzania also employs social workers in the Local Government Authorities and the Tanzania Police Force, specifically at the Police Gender Desk. The social worker implements numerous strategies, programs, and policies aiming at preventing and reducing teenage pregnancy rates. Some of these measures include the Law Child Act of 2019, Parenting, guidance and Child Protecting of 2020, the Education and Training Policy (2014) and The Five-year National Plan of Action to End Violence against Women and Children (NPA-VAWC

2017/18 – 2021/22). In recognition of the vital roles of social workers, the LCA (2019) assigns the duties of summoning the person against whom the report was made to discuss the matter concerned with children. That officer shall decide on the child's best interest. Other duties are safeguarding and promoting the child's welfare within its jurisdiction, such as access to education. In addition, social workers are primarily expected to provide case management in all matters related to the child's best interest.

Despite the government's recognition of the roles and responsibilities of social workers, it is worth noting that social workers are not generally employed in educational settings. The child needing the social worker's services can only access them through the police gender desk or when the matter has been taken to court for hearing (URT, 2023). There are numerous challenges related to teen pregnancies which social workers need to address. For instance, poor performance, absenteeism, truancy, violence in school and at home, school phobia, poor health, and teenage pregnancies are some of the challenges facing teens in Tanzania. The school setting demands the presence of a social worker; however, this reality is ignored (Huxtable, 2013).

Referring to the function of social workers in addressing any social problem affecting teens, Rwegoshara (2015) noted investing in the prevention of the problem; when it fails, the correct measures for responding to it should be taken. In the case of the current study, the roles of social workers around the increased trend of school dropout among secondary school girls have to be dealt with using social work perspectives. It may include the creation of awareness among girls and their families on the importance of education, conducting community outreach campaigns, and assisting family members, such as females and young people, to form groups to access available government loans from the local government. Further, social workers are expected to participate in forming school-based clubs where reproductive health issues can be addressed well.

School dropouts in the context of Tanzania are still steadily increasing; in 2017, 2,338,457 girls were enrolled in secondary school; later on, 4.2 per cent, equal to 98,949, dropped out. Of the stated number, 48 440 were boys, and 50 509 were girls; at primary school, the dropout rate was 1.6 per cent (PO-RALG, 2020). From this view, the current study focuses on secondary school dropouts. In the Tabora region, secondary school dropout is a social problem that invites specific attention; in 2019, 8.9 percent of secondary school students dropped out. Of the total number, 3,483 were boys and 3,729 were girls (URT, 2020).

Pointing to the government retention mechanism of teens, in 2018, of the 23,425 enrolled students in Form One, it is only 15,655 students completed Form Four in 2021. From the presented records, it can be argued that between 2018 and 2021, 9,192 (4629 boys and 4563 girls), equal to 39%, dropped out of secondary schools in the Tabora region (URT, 2021). Moreover, social workers are generally employed in educational settings to provide support, and students may demand it. In the first position, the government has remained silent about possibly employing secondary school social workers. Despite the invisibility and title recognition of the social worker's skills and competencies in the educational setup, they are still implementing numerous strategies, programs, and policies which address the school dropout among secondary schools (URT, 2023).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The systems theory is efficient in this work as it recognises different interdependent and interconnected sub-systems related to child protection (Hutchinson and Oltedal, 2014). These sub-systems in the context of teenage pregnancies are families (parents and family members), school teachers, peers, social workers, and the community at large. Although social workers are not employed in schools, they are only visible when the child is ready to get pregnant. In this context, social workers are not given access to execute their first and paramount function of prevention (Rwegoshora, 2015). Hence, for the system to work well, it demands the sub-system to undertake their obligations; for instance, parents have to protect their children, teachers as much as they are employed for teaching, have to provide guidance and reproductive health education, the community members, have to enforce the available laws which protect the rights and welfare of children. The child has to constantly interact with all the sub-systems while communicating well with each sub-system.

The theory recognises each sub-system's significance and its helpful role in complementing each other. No sub-system can fully function independently; they need each other to achieve the intended goal. However, the sub-systems must constantly interact to achieve the intended goal (Lai & Lin, 2017). Further, the theory focuses on the relations among its components or sub-system parts. Each component has to be connected and related well with others. The organisation, interaction, and relationship are key factors determining the system's effectiveness and efficiency (Chikere and Nwoka, 2015). The theory does not look at the individual in isolation from the surrounding environment but at their constant interaction and how they influence each other (Robbins, 2012).

The System Theory helps inform this work to understand social workers' role in preventing teenage pregnancies. For instance, the URT (2023) noted that social workers have to constantly interact with school children so that they can understand their challenges related to reproductive health. However, they are not employed in school; they have to wait at the office for the case to be reported to them. Further, social workers are expected to create awareness at individual and community levels on the prevention of teen pregnancies. It can be argued that the lack of social workers employed in school setup is a setback towards all efforts in place which are implemented to prevent teen pregnancies.

### **Methods and Material**

Tabora region is among the other five regions in Tanzania with a high rate of teenage pregnancies. The current study has chosen the location to examine the position and involvement of social workers in the prevention of teen pregnancies. Further, the study adopted a cross-sectional descriptive design (Cresswell, 2004) to explore the involvement or the role of social workers in the efforts to prevent pregnancies among teens. The design allows the application of focus group discussion and key informant interviews, where five social workers and five municipal secondary education officers were selected out of twelve social workers and ten education officers, respectively, at the municipality level. The design allows the researcher to collect data until the saturation point of data is achieved (Rubin & Babbie, 2011). The researcher had to go on with interviews until the participants generated no new information during the discussion.

The study employed a qualitative research approach. The approach was adopted as the study sought insight and understanding (Burrow, 2020) on social workers' role in preventing teen pregnancies in Tabora municipality. There are numerous issues related to teen pregnancies; however, as Tashakkori & Teddlie (2003) pointed out, the qualitative research method allows the study to deal with particular issues in more detail. It is from this point of view that the study focused on the position of social workers to prevent teen pregnancies. Additionally, Krueger & Casey (2009) noted that in a qualitative study, participants can be selected purposefully to meet the study's goal. However, the criteria for selection of participants should be set to guide the selection process.

For this reason, this study selected ten (10) participants with the following features. The criteria used were: the social workers and secondary school officials were supposed to have worked in their position for at least five years; have close ties with the police gender desk; have handled at least five to ten cases of teen pregnancies in the last ten months; and have attended the seminar/workshop of the ways to reduce teen pregnancies among secondary school girls. Further, data for this study were collected for two months, from March to May 2023; the study was completed in six (6) months, from January to June 2023.

Additionally, Creswell (2003) and Rubin & Babbies (2011) stated that data can be generated from participants using focus group discussions and documentary reviews. From this point of view, since the study intended to yield the experience of social workers on the roles in the prevention of teen pregnancies in the study area, the reason to employ the two methods of data generation is that Four (4) FGDs were conducted, each comprising five participants. With the same number, five were further selected for interviews. Moreover, the data analysis technique utilised content analysis due to the rich information generated from the study participants. Its advantage is that it allows the familiarisation and correct interpretation of the information collected from the participants (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Rubin & Babbies, 2011). The generated information was correctly interpreted as per the content analysis requirement.

## **Results**

### **Social workers' working environment**

The focus group discussion held with education officers at the municipality level noted that in the school setup, there are teachers who are competent to deal with issues of psychosocial support in school; unfortunately, they have a lot of duties on their shoulders to the extent that they fail to provide adequate time to children with specific challenges, teen reproductive education mentioned to be one of them. The position of secondary education officers was further supported by an officer who narrated that,

*There is still a limited number of teachers in secondary schools, and employing social workers to provide counselling and psychosocial support is a waste of resources which could be used to improve the working environment of teachers in secondary school.*

The presented observation revealed, in one position, the reasons for the social workers not being employed in education settings; on the other side, it holds the strong position of educational officers on seeing social workers in secondary schools. The two positions presented outline a

social worker's problematic working environment when employed in an education system in Tanzania.

### **Limited allocation of budget for social workers' activities**

During the focus group discussion, it was noted that social workers in Tanzania still do not have their own department; they are housed under the health department. The allocation budget is always given to health-related issues; social welfare-related matters are not a priority in the context of limited resources. Further, since they are not employed in secondary schools, even in the event of limited budget allocation, it could be impossible to conduct school visitation and community outreach to create awareness of teen pregnancy prevention. Key informant with one of the social workers, she narrated,

*As social workers, we would like to be very effective in the prevention of teen pregnancies; however, no budget is allocated for it. The issues of teen challenges remain a school-based problem until the girls fall pregnant, thus where a social worker is involved. Social welfare officers and teachers in secondary schools work like islands.*

Social workers in Tanzania, Tabora in particular, are confronted with multiple issues; some are structural, which impedes their visibility and recognition. No budget is allocated for their activities, as priority is given to health-related issues. Hence, the social welfare of children is compromised by a lack of awareness of the roles of social workers in the prevention of teen pregnancies.

### **Lack of awareness of social workers' role in prevention of teen pregnancies**

The focus group discussion with both social workers and education officers agreed that the role of social workers in the prevention of teen pregnancies is not known. It is assumed that teachers are competent enough to handle all issues affecting secondary school students while in the school environment. The skills and competencies of social workers to address the welfare of students are not only compromised by structural and budget limitations but also by a lack of awareness of the significant role that social workers can play in preventing or reducing teen pregnancies. The observation asserted here was further narrated to the social worker and education officer as follows,

*Social workers have not done enough to create awareness among the planners and policymakers of their significant role in preventing teen pregnancy; I am very sure no government would like to see teen pregnancy carry on while denying the right to education among girls. Further, the education officers have to work together with social workers*

*to create the needed awareness of the government decision-makers to recognise the role of social workers in the prevention of teen pregnancies.*

The role of creating awareness has to be championed by all the education stakeholders; seeing the increasing number of girls dropping out of school every year, it calls for all of us to stand up and do whatever it takes to employ social workers in secondary schools. Provided, the right to education among girls can be realized.

### **Little recognition of social workers' competencies in the prevention of teen pregnancies**

The focus group discussion revealed that due to little recognition of social workers' competencies, secondary school teachers and officers, judicial organs, and police gender desk decide on social worker issues. Numerous laws recognise social workers, for instance, the Child Law of 2009 RE 2019, the Local Government Authority Act of 2019, and the JCR of 2016. All these laws allow social workers to interact with judges, magistrates, police officers, teachers, secondary school officers and many other stakeholders related to child protection. However, due to little recognition of social workers' competencies, they are not allowed to exercise their competencies when it comes to the prevention of teen pregnancies. One of the social workers further narrated,

*Social workers typically work with various government officers and social welfare stakeholders such as judiciary organs, police gender desk, one-stop centres, and education sections, to list a few. These interactions are done daily; it is to my surprise that when it comes to teen pregnancies, we are excluded. It hurts seeing the increasing number of teen pregnancies and social workers with required competencies being left aside.*

The presented arguments lead to a puzzle in the sense that if a social worker works with the identified stakeholders, one would ask what makes them not be allowed to use the acquired competencies to prevent teen pregnancies.

### **Discussion of findings on the challenges confronting social workers in the prevention of teen pregnancies**

The discussion of the findings is guided by five critical aspects of the challenges encountered by social workers when preventing teen pregnancies;

#### **Social workers' working environment**

It is worth noting that, despite the poor working environment among social workers in Tanzania, in developed countries such as Australia and New Zealand, social workers are recognised as working in a well-established and supportive environment. They are employed in the education setup and are instrumental in addressing the challenges threatening students' learning (Lloyd & Gray, 2022). It is unfortunate for social workers in Tanzania that the recruitment of secondary school staff does not

consider them among other professionals. The social workers are left to work with educational stakeholders such as parents, teachers, and school administrators, where a specific problem confronting a student demands a social worker's attention. It is ubiquitous when the education stakeholders are confronted with challenges, such as poor student attendance, student dropout, bullying, and aggressive behaviour, which is when social workers are consulted (URT, 2018). Further, social workers are members of various committees related to child protection and development; however, the Education Act of 1978 excludes social workers in the secondary school board committee and district and regional levels (URT, 1978).

Moreover, the working environment for social workers in Tabora municipality is not different from other parts of Tanzania; they are confronted with a poor working environment, with minimal resources allocated for daily activities to provide social welfare services as required. Even though they work with diverse educational stakeholders to implement numerous programs, strategies, guidelines, rules, and policies to reduce dropout among students, they are only employed at local and regional social welfare offices, vocational training, and children and elders' homes (URT, 2022). From the argument presented, it can be deduced that social workers in Tanzania work in a very frustrating environment where the officers are not conducive and supportive to providing counselling and psychosocial support services. Their working environment has little furniture, and other facilities are required in a regular office setup.

### **Limited allocation of budget for social workers' activities**

In Sub-Saharan Africa, social workers' activities are not the priority; their working conditions are deplorable, encapsulated by a lack of materials and financial resources to support and carry out various activities. Due to limited or no budget for social welfare, they often lack basic office supplies such as telephones, stationery, computers, and transport to undertake field visits. Further, due to little recognition, visibility and awareness of their roles towards the prevention of teen pregnancies, they are less paid though working longer hours and having heavy caseloads to deal with every day (Rushwaya, 2022).

The situation of social workers in Tanzania is not different from that of sub-Saharan Africa; they are frustrated with a limited budget and working in an environment lacking necessary official supplies. It is a regular practice for more than four social workers to share an office where other colleagues have to walk out during one-to-one sessions. Further, their offices have no chairs for themselves and clients, computers, stationery, or own offices (URT, 2012). In the current study context, social

workers in Tabora municipal are challenged with the same situation related to budget constraints (URT 2023). They are noted for other sub-Saharan countries and Tanzania generally. Drawing attention from the planning and budgeting of the 2022 – 2023 financial year, Tabora Municipal had allocated TZS 23,000,000 from its source collection, and only 7,500,000 were released to implement social welfare-related activities. The planned and budgeted activities included a campaign on early marriage, school dropout, field visitation, supportive supervision, transport, construction of safe homes, stationaries and other office supplies (URT, 2023).

### **Lack of awareness of social workers' role in prevention of teen pregnancies**

It is generally recognized in developed countries that social workers are employed in a school set up to handle all the constraints affecting children's learning. They work to deal with any limitations that could prevent children from completing their education at the respective level. Some of the limitations dealt with by social workers in schools may include absenteeism, physical and mental health problems, drug use, adolescent pregnancy, and learning problems (Huxtable, 2022). Despite the remarkable achievement noted in developed countries to reduce the rates of teen pregnancies which is carried out by social workers, in developing countries, Tanzania in particular, social workers are still underutilized and marginalized as none of the decision makers of planners are interested in the social welfare activities, welfare and wellbeing of students in particular (Sherman, 2016). In the context of resource limitation, the social welfare services are considered as ruining other departments which are contributing to the income of the council or municipal while themselves (social welfare) do not generate any income.

In Tanzania, Tabora, in particular, social workers are employed at the regional secretariat, local government authorities, vocational training, and children's and elders' homes. However, they are not employed in primary and secondary schools, where numerous challenges affect school completion among learners (URT, 2022). Social workers have to work closely with other stakeholders and interested parties in child protection to create awareness of their competencies in prevention and rehabilitation services, which are needed in schools in Tanzania. It can be concluded that delaying employment in school due to any factor contributes negatively to the achievement of Tanzania Vision 2025 on the goal of an educated and learning nation and Sustainable Development Goal of 2030 on strengthening accessibility and retention of children in school.

### **Little recognition of social workers' competencies in the prevention of teen pregnancies**

In America (USA and Canada), Europe (Germany and Great Britain), Asia (Hong Kong and Japan), and Africa (South Africa), social workers are extensively involved in family welfare, where specific attention is given to children. All issues affecting children's learning are dealt with early to avoid immeasurable harm to the child (Huxtable, 2022; Reyneke, 2018; Rosicky & Northcott, 2010). Despite the little recognition and visibility in Europe after the Second World War, the situation has changed, as they are instrumental in monitoring and transforming students' behaviour. They have also created awareness on reproductive health, reducing teen pregnancies in Europe (Rosicky & Northcott, 2010) and South Africa, where they have introduced a campaign in secondary schools to reduce school dropouts (Reyneke, 2018). In these countries where teen pregnancies have been reduced significantly, there is a good working relationship between teachers and social workers; their professional relationship is significant in planning successful campaigns to reduce school dropout and providing psychosocial support to students, family members and teachers.

In the context of Tanzania, Tabora, in particular, social workers work very closely with education officers, judicial officers, police gender desk and community development officers to ensure the best interest of every child. Despite the stated reality, social workers are still not involved in secondary school setup; they are only visible and recognised when a teen is at risk of dropping out. For instance, in 2022, the social worker cooperated with teachers, police gender desk, religious leaders and other stakeholders to rescue 23 girls who were about to be married while still secondary school students (URT, 2023).

The arguments presented do not surface on the little recognition of social workers' competencies; they are involved in various student welfare activities. The challenge identified is that there is little awareness of the prevention campaign and where it should be done. Waiting until the child is exposed to a risk of dropping out of school is dealing with response. The government and other stakeholders should be aware that employing social workers in schools is investing in prevention, which is cost-effective.

### **Conclusion**

The government of Tanzania has to invest in prevention measures, which entails the employment of social workers in schools if the alarming rates of school dropouts are reduced. Further, the prevention of teenage pregnancies involves several stakeholders, and each of them has to be allowed to play their role while creating a facilitative working environment.

## Recommendation

Seeing the increasing number of girls dropping out of secondary schools, it is high time for the government to reconsider employing social workers in secondary schools. Waiting to involve them during the responding phase instead of the prevention is more costly as it cannot restore wasted time and resources.

The identified challenges facing social workers have to be adequately addressed by the government if Tanzania wishes to end teenage pregnancies in secondary schools. The government also has to prioritise budgeting social welfare activities at council levels. Further, more comprehensive research should be conducted in other locations with high school dropout rates to assess social workers' challenges; it can then be used to generalise the findings and better inform government planners and policymakers.

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