

Teenage maternity: life's new meaning?

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Abstract

Objective: To identify transformations arising from teen pregnancy from the perspective of young women.

Methods: Study of qualitative and descriptive approach with 34 young women of low socio-economic strata that gave birth in the year 2010 as teenagers. The data have been collected through semi-structured interviews with questions about life before and after maternity, explored through content analysis.

Results: The life of the teenagers before pregnancy is heterogeneous in social, work and schooling aspects. After maternity, the freedom of being is re-configured, bringing losses related to the abandonment of studies, to the reduction in social life and to the stigma of teenage maternity; the gains from resignification of lifestyle, the abandonment of illegal and criminal conduct, increased self-confidence the reduction of exposure to violence inside the family, accompanied by new responsibilities, from the reconciliation of study and work or the abandonment of one of these activities.

Conclusion: Maternity generates a feeling of satisfaction brought about by the experience of being a mother, with a new social identity.

Key words: pregnancy in adolescence, life changing events, social change.

INTRODUCTION

Becoming a mother during adolescence is not a recent fact in society. For many decades, marriage and motherhood were the only possibilities envisioned by women to integrate into society¹. With the sociocultural changes, women of the twentieth century gained greater autonomy, allowing them to expand their personal and professional achievement². However, in this phase of intensive capacity development, the experience of maternity may cause the interruption of relevant aspects in their lives³.

These transformations in the lives of young mothers, associated with young age, to assume the responsibilities arising from maternity, can lead them to experience this new context as difficult and unsatisfactory^{3,4}. Unfortunately, this situation requires them to remain at home due to family dependency, which can be understood either as a prison or as something protective

and comforting⁵. In a comparative study on young people from two different socioeconomic groups, it was found that, for young people of average economic class, pregnancy represented the abandonment of plans for the completion of their studies and for their qualified professional integration into the labour market. For young people from disadvantaged economic strata, pregnancy is the natural destiny and a form of personal fulfilment⁶.

In marginalized social classes, becoming a mother remains a relevant alternative in the search for a status and social identity¹. However, this understanding can perpetuate the cycle of poverty, since young people with low family socioeconomic status who become mothers, tend to continue in this condition, aggravating the exclusion process⁷⁻⁹.

Given that 13.3% of the population consists of adolescent and young women¹⁰, therein lies the relevance of this study, which aims to identify the changes arising from maternity in adolescence in the lives of young women.

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METHODS

This study follows a descriptive qualitative approach, developed in 2014 in a city in southern Brazil. It was performed using the data of the “Perinatal Study 2010: Reassessing the Service Conditions for Pregnancy and Childbirth in Rio Grande”, developed as a community census of 445 teenagers, aged between 10 and 19 years who became mothers.

From this group of teenagers, selected further selection was made of those who were from the underprivileged economic class and currently were aged between 15 to 23 years, the stage considered to be youth by the World Health Organization¹¹. A total of 106 individuals were eligible, of which current contact details were not found for 46. The interviews were initiated by applying the criterion of data saturation for closure, i.e. when the answers start to become repetitive. Therefore, the final sample was constituted of 34 young mothers who were interviewed in their homes from July to December 2014.

Data were collected by the application of semi-structured interviews, containing sociodemographic characteristics and questions that give a glimpse of the lives of young people before and after maternity. For the treatment of the data, the content analysis proposed by Bardin¹² was used. The first step in this method was an initial reading of the transcriptions and the identification of registration units – terms that contain the meanings expressed in the interviewees’ responses. Later, the data were categorized according to their similarities and differences, and then regrouped according to common features. During the exploration of the categorized material, a correlation was sought between the findings and the scientific literature on this topic.

The research followed the Brazilian resolution 466/2012, and was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Health Area (STRAINS) of the Federal University of Rio Grande under No. 90/2011. Interviews with the young people were held after the signing of and their legal guardians. The interviewees are identified by the letter “M”, referring to “mother”, followed by a number in ascending order.

RESULTS

In this study, the participants were on average 19 years old, had eight years of schooling, average household income of R\$1,900.00, average income per capita of R\$485.00, 59% were white, 77% did not work and 75% had a partner.

In this sociodemographic context, the testimony of the young people demonstrated heterogeneity with regard to emotional aspects and way of life before discovering their pregnancy and after maternity. These elements emerged from the analysis of the data, and are described in the categories: Teen Life, Being Free and Life Changes.

Teen Life

Some of the young people described the period before becoming mothers as permeated by convenience

and lack of responsibility. Many were characterized with the study, even among those who had no burden of other activities:

A life of a preppy, I didn't have to do anything. I just used to study, to come home and sleep [...]. (M21)

I had no occupation, I only used to go to school, the rest of the time was for nothing. (M15)

On the Internet, teenage life, I used to do nothing, I didn't know what getting up early was, I didn't know what having responsibility was. (M17)

I was studying. In fact, I was not studying, I used to say I was going to class, but I was not, I hung out with friends [...] teenage life. (M5)

These statements show not much responsibility related to studying, although it is shown as their only task. The reports highlight the importance assumed by social life before motherhood:

I used to listen to music, to go to school, to go out at night. (M12)

My life was a teenage life: going out, enjoying myself, chatting with friends, drinking, smoking. So that was my life. At the weekends, parties. (M20)

Also recorded in the set of testimonies, are reports of young women with a higher level of comfort and inactivity than demonstrated so far, noting that both work and study were not part of their lives prior to maternity:

I used to stay only at home, I had already finished high school. (M16)

I was not studying, I was not working, I was just at home. (M13)

However, not all young women had the same kind of lifestyle before motherhood. Some reconciled student activities with work, accompanied by routine informal tasks, such as the care of the house or siblings:

I used to study in the morning and to work in the afternoon, nothing else. (M24)

I used to study, to do some casual work, to help my mother at home. (M18)

I used to work, study, take care of the house [...]. (M8)

I used to study, to go out with my friends and take care of my brothers [...]. (M3)

Freedom of being

The experience of motherhood in youth comes with gains and losses, granting significant new forms of freedom in social life. Regarding losses, a few lines show how the needs or consequences of maternity led to privation in their social life:

You lose everything you had: freedom, chat with your friends, parties, all [...]. It's such a responsibility. (M20)

Everything changes for a girl of 15. You cannot go

out, cannot do anything, I had to be alone taking care of her. (M4)

It is also evident that relationships with members of the social environment in which the mother belongs suffer interference arising from the experience of pregnancy and motherhood. This aspect seems to be associated with the understanding of the woman herself in relation to her social image.

Most friends walked away. Then, I didn't wanna go to school and I just stayed at home, I didn't even want to leave home. I was ashamed of getting pregnant. [...]. (M28)

Despite being responsible for the types of losses noted above, motherhood in youth also offers the possibility of gains for the mother to give up certain behaviours, such as the use of licit drugs, associated with losses in sociability:

Before, when I had money, I used to think about buying drink or smoking. Today, I don't smoke, don't drink. (M20)

The experience of motherhood represented also the abandonment of illegal or criminal conduct, providing a way of reframing life for women and their peers.

Before we used to steal things that we didn't have. We think better, now [...]. (M7)

It was not very good, really not! My husband used to use drugs, to disappear from home, spend all the money he received. (M27)

The freedom of being is also detected in the statements from the moment a perception of trust and self-confidence as a woman is noticed:

Everything changes. I'm more confident. (M23)

It changed a lot. My mother never snubbed me, never stood against me, never hit me, and I was not afraid of anything, I faced it head held high. (M19)

The following statements allude to the question of maternity gains realized in relation to reducing the exposure of young people to family violence, whether physical or psychological. Reducing exposure to violence, together with self-confidence, seems to be influenced by the establishment of the marital relationship.

It was terrible because my mother used to disappear from home, she was away for up to a month, no matter whether we had anything to eat or not, or if my brothers were well or not. When she appeared, she used to hit us and leave again. After I got married, everything got better, I started to get attention for me, I got to know how the life of a teenager was.

I do not regret having married early. (M29)

I used to be always being hit, as a slave to my mother, to my brothers [...] I used to work, to study, to take care of the house alone [...] I was an un-

happy person, totally, I lived on the street crying, all the time. (M19)

Life changes

Motherhood brings changes to the lives of young people, with important effects on the elements that make up their day-to-day life. When asked about the implications of motherhood, some young mothers highlighted the need to reconcile work and study and the difficulty of maintaining studies:

I had to start working, now I have to combine study and work [...]. (M1)

Changed [...] having a child complicates things a little more, you do not have all that time to study. (M11)

Nothing has changed. It's still the same, I just stopped my studies. It was something I wanted to continue and I didn't [...]. (E30)

Nothing has changed. It remained the same, the only thing that changed was the study I stopped [...]. (M31)

It did not prejudice me at all. Of course, I stopped studying, but just that. (M24)

The need to prioritize childcare at the expense of other activities seems to justify the abandonment of study and work. The focus is, most often, something natural for them:

Certainly it changed everything. But [...] I chose it. I had to stop studying because I had to stay with him. But I kept thinking: I would, I wanted to, I'll take care of him. (M33)

As I was only taking care of her, I had to stop working to give her more attention. But I always went out with her. It never stopped me from doing anything, I used to bring her everywhere [...] she always made me very happy. (M9)

Also, there is a priority to meet the child's needs at the expense of their own, accompanied by the feeling of increased responsibilities. They know that there is now someone who depends on them:

Everything is different, instead of thinking about yourself, you have to think about them first. So everything changes in your life after you have kids. They come first, and then I come. (M20)

Much more responsibility in many things, commitment. Because we no longer think about ourselves first, we always put the child first! Before buying something for me, I buy things for her. (M26)

Everything changes when you have a child. You care more about the child, not so much about yourself. If you're sick, you don't care. When the child is [sick], you do everything to help him. (M25)

Changes in emotional aspects are also revealed, showing that the motherhood experience gives a new

meaning to life arising from the status change from “adolescent” to “woman” and “mother” and the subsequent responsibilities:

My thinking changed completely, after I had her I was not willing to do the things I did before. I did not believe it would happen, but I think like a mother now. All I wanted was to take care of her. (M4)
Because today, if I did not have him, I might be on drugs [...] getting pregnant at 15 is a lesson on life [...]. (M20)

The reports also reveal that the child is perceived as company, resolving a feeling of loneliness. The child seems to fill an existing void in their lives:

Now I go out with my daughter, we are company to each other. (M13)
Now I have him, I occupy my mind always with him. Before, I was always thinking bullshit, now my concern is all on him. I worry about his life, his wellbeing. Before, I felt very alone. After I had him, I did not feel alone anymore. (M8)
My life without him was alone, I did not have much to do. And alone, or we study or we stay at home [...]. (M11)

■ DISCUSSION

The data analysed gave surprising results by presenting significant dissonance in the reflections of young mothers, both regarding life before motherhood, and on the experience that motherhood has brought to everyday life.

Different elements characterize adolescence before motherhood from the perspective of participants, having highlighted the absence of responsibilities, the convenience and inactivity in the lower economic classes. These aspects seem to counteract the view that permeates common thinking that young people belonging to this class would enjoy less convenience and would have more responsibilities, such as the need to contribute to the upkeep of the house.

The literature shows that youth is characterized by increased autonomy associated with greater participation in public spaces¹³, which seems to differ from the findings of this study, in which young people are in a position of comfort and apathy. Leisure and socializing, use of the Internet and even the use of licit drugs are also listed in the description of adolescence. These aspects, coupled with the absence of responsibilities, seem to describe a teenager profile referred by one of the participants as “preppy”. The sample leads us to believe that adolescence in a low socio-economic context is characterized as extremely accommodated with no prospect of achieving a better future.

These aspects are transmuted due to maternity, culminating in an increase in responsibilities, as found in other studies^{4,5,13,14}, it transposes into the loss of freedom, especially in social life, which seems to be associated with

the need to provide the care of the child. The reduced participation in social spaces emerges because of the reduction in¹³ autonomy that is curtailed by increased responsibilities. This transformation can also be derived from the conceptions of the young people about the expected behaviour of a mother, permeated by the harm of social life.

Another aspect influencing socializing after maternity relates to self-perception, as the social image reveals that the experience of motherhood during youth is still accompanied by intense social stigma, interfering with social and student daily behaviours, which makes this experience conflicting and painful. This leads to behaviours of social isolation and restriction of socializing in the family group¹³.

The literature indicates that the negative consequences of teenage pregnancy are not only due to the age itself, but also to the precarious socioeconomic situation in which the young woman was in before pregnancy¹⁵⁻¹⁸. In contrast, the data show that becoming a mother, in some cases, allows the acquisition of self-confidence arising from the status change from adolescent to woman and parent who reconfigures her role in society and in her family space. This aspect seems to predominate in women who perceive motherhood as a choice, as a way to gain status and recognition in the community as well as the reaffirmation of femininity and the removal of life perspective⁸.

Such dissonance may also be associated with the family and marital context experienced by the young, planning and acceptance of the situation and changes arising from motherhood every day. In this sense, if she can count on the respect and support of family and spouse, the exercise of motherhood will occur more smoothly, because of the positive reception and acceptance, even while identifying that the experience of motherhood can hinder her life and bring new responsibilities¹⁹. Nevertheless, the literature reveals that the social role of women from disadvantaged social classes regarding the internalization of patriarchal ideology with the rigid division of gender roles reinforces the definition of female identity through the family, in a context where the role of a woman is to be a mother¹.

Another element perceived by this study is the process of changing the social role played by women and the changes in family contexts, associated with the acquisition of self-confidence as influencers in reducing the exposure of young people to family violence, and reducing psychological distress. Motherhood at this stage of life can have a protective effect on the environmental risks associated with neglect, violence and the use of drugs present in the daily lives of many young women^{20,21}. The relationship between women and their parents tends to improve with the experience of motherhood, with greater identification among them²². However, it is inferred that the rejection of motherhood by the parents of the young women may trigger conflicts between them, which can motivate women to live with their spouse.

Loneliness before motherhood seems to be remedied with the arrival of the child, giving them a feeling of fullness, possibly stemming from the daily tasks, care and responsibility, together with the presence and constant

dependence of being a mother. This develops a sense of belonging. The presence of the feeling of loneliness contrasts with the description of the young with regard to intense socializing and constant interaction with friends, demonstrating that participation in social spaces does not meet their emotional needs.

Performing work tasks, whether formal or informal, also appears in the description of adolescence both before and after maternity. However, with the arrival of the child, there seems to be a greater responsibility for housework⁵. The access of young people to the labour market and their activities as financial providers due to motherhood is heterogeneous, and for some, an element that influenced the abandonment of studies, while for others, had a low impact on student activities.

Studying, a common activity among participants, also seems to have little importance to some who, before maternity, prioritized socializing and were absent from the student environment without the knowledge of their parents. In this sense, a global survey that evaluated the occurrence of motherhood during adolescence, found that girls who stay in school longer are less likely to get pregnant²³.

After motherhood, the changes brought to studying in daily life prove to be less significant for women than changes to socializing, which shows the little importance given to student activities when compared to their social life. In this understanding, a study shows that 54% of young people who experienced motherhood did not study, pregnancy is the main reason for avoiding study²⁴.

It should be noted that the lack of interest in education and truancy are constant in the maternity context in youth, since the young people do not envision schooling as a way of breaking the cycle of poverty through a fa-

vourable professional future¹. In general, these teenagers do not hold the study culture, or have a promising future or a comfortable level on the living situation, as their fate would be equal to the environment where they live, with an understanding and belief that motherhood will not interfere in her life and will not cause her harm.

One of the limitations found in conducting this research is that some young people do not expand much in their answers to the questions. Another limitation was the fact that it was conducted in a city in the south of the country. However, it should be noted that although the study involved a single municipality, it is believed that the results are important in the field of public health, because they demonstrate the need for the integrated efforts between social fields, professionals in formal education and professionals in adolescent health, promoting effective educational activities focused on their realities, providing opportunities for dialogue on contraception and safe sexuality and empowering them so that they can be assertive in making choices to fully realize their potential.

■ CONCLUSION

The transformations following motherhood reported by most teens were the loss of amenities and reduced social life caused by increased responsibilities for the child's care. However, the study also showed that motherhood in youth, for these young people from disadvantaged economic backgrounds, provided gains from the acquisition of self-confidence, the suppression of feelings of loneliness, abandonment of illegal and criminal acts and the reduction in family violence, giving them the perception of satisfaction and well-being.

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Resumo

Objetivo: Identificar as transformações oriundas da maternidade na adolescência na perspectiva de jovens mulheres.

Método: Estudo de abordagem qualitativa descritiva com 34 jovens de estrato socioeconômico baixo que tiveram parto no ano de 2010 enquanto adolescentes. Os dados foram coletados quatro anos após o parto por meio de entrevista semiestruturada com questões sobre a vida antes e após a maternidade e explorados por meio da Análise de Conteúdo.

Resultados: A vida das adolescentes antes da gravidez é heterogênea nos aspectos sociais, laborais e estudantis. Após a maternidade, reconfigura-se a liberdade de ser, trazendo perdas relacionadas ao abandono dos estudos, a privação da vida social e ao estigma da maternidade compreendida como precoce; e ganhos oriundos da resignificação do modo de vida, abandono de condutas ilegais e criminosas, aquisição de autoconfiança e da redução da exposição à violência intrafamiliar, acompanhado de novas responsabilidades, da conciliação do estudo e trabalho ou do abandono de uma destas atividades.

Conclusão: A maternidade acarreta um sentimento de plenitude trazido pela experiência de ser mãe, com uma nova identidade social.

Palavras-chave: gravidez na adolescência, acontecimentos que mudam a vida, mudança social.