



## Returning to Learn: An Exploration of Motivations Behind Adolescent Student Mothers' School Re-entry in Tanzania

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### Abstract

This paper explored the reasons prompting adolescent student mothers to return to secondary schools in Tanzania, particularly in the Mbeya region. Employing a single case study approach, the study intentionally selected 20 adolescent student mothers. Data collection involved focus group discussions and an open-ended questionnaire to gain comprehensive insights into the factors that influence adolescent mothers' decisions to resume education after childbirth. The paper is rooted in Lazarus's (1991) Cognitive Motivational Relational Theory (CMRT), which focuses on how individuals' cognitive evaluations and motivations drive their choices and actions in facing challenges. The findings highlight four primary motivations for school reentry: aspirations for career advancement, pursuit of financial independence, setting a positive example for their children and rectifying past mistakes. These motivations reflect the resilience of adolescent mothers, who perceive education as a means to overcome difficulties, improve their socio-economic conditions and enhance their children's future opportunities. The study implies a need for educational policies and practices that support adolescent student mothers, including adaptable school schedules, financial assistance and counselling services to help them effectively manage schooling concurrent with motherhood. Additionally, it recommends that educational institutions and policymakers foster inclusive environments that cater to the specific needs of adolescent mothers, promoting their commitment to education.

**Keywords:** Adolescents; student mothers; motivation; reentry; Tanzania.

**How to cite:** Mwakililo, P. S. and Magere, G. M. (2025). Returning to Learn: An Exploration of Motivations Behind Adolescent Student Mothers' School Re-entry in Tanzania. *East African Journal of Education and Social Sciences* 6(5), 49–62. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46606/eajess2025v06i05.0465>.

### Introduction

The return of adolescent mothers to formal schooling has become a crucial area of inquiry within the global discourse on inclusive and equitable education. Teenage pregnancy remains a significant barrier to girls' educational attainment, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, where approximately 28% of girls give birth before turning 18 (UNFPA, 2022). For many, this life-altering event

results in dropping out of school, limited career prospects and entrenched cycles of poverty and social exclusion (UNESCO, 2021; Lloyd & Mensch, 2008). Nevertheless, despite the various challenges associated with early motherhood, an increasing number of adolescent mothers are demonstrating resilience and agency by rejoining formal education, an action indicative of both personal determination

and evolving socio-educational support systems (Kamhala, 2020; Grant & Hallman, 2008).

In Tanzania, the re-admission of adolescent mothers into secondary schools has gained renewed attention, following the government's shift in policy direction in 2021. Previously, regulations excluded pregnant students from continuing and re-entering formal education; however, recent initiatives, such as the Education Circular number 2, have created alternative pathways for school re-entry, supported by the Secondary Education Quality Improvement Project (SEQUIP).

This policy changes aligns with broader goals articulated in Sustainable Development Goal 4, which advocates for inclusive, equitable and lifelong learning opportunities for all (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Yet, despite such policy shifts, the actual return of adolescent mothers to school remains uneven and underexplored, particularly regarding the motivations behind these young women's decisions to resume their secondary education.

The motivations driving school reentry among adolescent mothers are complex and context-dependent, shaped by personal aspirations, family influence, socio-economic conditions and perceived value of education (Chigona & Chetty, 2007; Atuyambe et al., 2005). While some return to school to improve their future livelihoods, others are driven by social support, institutional encouragement or determination to confront stigma and discrimination (Panday et al., 2009; Nangendo et al., 2023). Most of available empirical studies on school re-entry among adolescent mothers has been conducted outside Tanzania, particularly in sub-Saharan African countries, such as Kenya, Uganda, Malawi and South Africa, as well as in Latin American contexts. For example, studies in Kenya and Uganda have shown that adolescent mothers often return to school due to their aspirations for economic independence and desire to secure better future for their children (Wekesa, 2019). Research in Malawi and South Africa indicates that family encouragement and flexible school environments influence school re-entry decisions (Grant & Hallman, 2008; Chimombo, 2017). In Latin America, similar findings have been reported, with policy provisions and community support shaping adolescent mothers' return to education (Lloyd & Mensch, 2008; Binstock & Näslund-Hadley, 2017). However, despite the existence of a school re-entry policy framework in Tanzania, there is limited

empirical research that systematically investigates motivations behind school return among Tanzanian adolescent student mothers within their specific sociocultural, economic and policy contexts.

Adolescent pregnancy continues to be a significant social and educational issue in Tanzania, heavily impacting girls' ability to access and persist in formal schooling. Nyamhanga and Luoga (2025) indicates that about 27% of girls aged 15–19 have begun childbearing. Becoming a mother at a young age frequently disrupts educational paths, resulting in early school dropout and limiting prospects for social mobility and economic growth (Mkumbo, 2019; United Nations Children's Fund, 2021). Historically, pregnant students faced expulsion from schools and were barred from re-entering, which perpetuated a cycle of exclusion and marginalization (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

In response to both national and international advocacies for inclusive education, the Tanzanian government has recently revised its policies to allow adolescent mothers to continue their education. The 2019 education circular introduced options for alternative learning pathways, but impactful changes did not occur until 2021. Through Education Circular Number 2, adolescent mothers have been encouraged to either return to formal secondary schools or attend non-formal institutions, such as the Institute of Adult Education (IAE), supported by the Secondary Education Quality Improvement Project (SEQUIP) (United Republic of Tanzania, 2021). Nevertheless, the execution of these policies has varied, with some adolescent mothers being placed in formal schools while others are sent to the IAE, resulting in inconsistencies in achieving fair educational access (Miyakado & Mphuru, 2023).

This dual-track strategy has prompted important discussions about the quality, acknowledgment and inclusivity of the re-entry process. While the aim is to provide flexible learning options, the separation from conventional schooling may perpetuate stigma and adversely affect long-term educational outcomes. Furthermore, the decision to return to school is often complicated for young mothers, who must maneuver through a challenging landscape of psychological, socio-cultural, economic and institutional obstacles (Mgabo & Nyamhanga, 2020; Madeni, 2014). These difficulties are intensified by child care obligations, social stigma and occasionally unsupportive family or school settings.

Despite these challenges, studies external to Tanzania indicate that many adolescent mothers show a strong desire to return to school, motivated by the aspiration to create better futures for themselves and for their children, challenge societal norms or achieve personal academic ambitions (Kamhala, 2020; Nangendo et al., 2023). Nonetheless, there is still a lack of empirical research within the Tanzanian context that thoroughly investigates factors influencing adolescent student mothers' decisions to rejoin secondary education. In response, this study sought to fill the gap by examining motivations of adolescent student mothers to re-enter secondary education, thereby contributing to policy discussions and educational practices focused on creating more inclusive and supportive environments.

## Literature Review

Globally, research indicates that adolescent mothers are driven to return to school by a combination of internal and external factors. Various studies demonstrate that their motivation to pursue education stems from personal ambitions, institutional support and sociocultural influences (Chigona & Chetty, 2008; Binstock & Näslund-Hadley, 2017). For instance, in Latin America, especially in Brazil and Bolivia, many young mothers view education as a pathway to financial independence and improved social status (Azevedo et al., 2012; Binstock & Näslund-Hadley, 2017). Programs, such as Brazil's Bolsa Família, which link financial assistance to school attendance, motivate adolescent mothers to remain in or return to their education after childbirth (de Brauw et al., 2015). Studies highlight the significance of personal objectives alongside supportive networks. Garcia and Contreras (2019) emphasized that many student mothers in Brazil see education as a means to empower themselves and uplift their children's lives, thus helping to break the cycle of poverty. Encouragement from family and community advocates further strengthens their commitment to education, particularly when tied to gender equality. Additionally, community-oriented educational initiatives in Bolivia have diminished stigma around re-entry, inspiring more young mothers to pursue education for their children's futures and their own empowerment (Lloyd & Mench, 2008).

In North America and parts of Europe, motivations for resuming education are often enhanced by legal protections and organized re-entry programs. For

instance, Title IX legislation in the United States protects the rights of pregnant and parenting students, ensuring equitable access to education. Research shows that these legal provisions, together with on-campus childcare and academic support, empower adolescent mothers to pursue their education with determination and long-term objectives (SmithBattle, 2007; Sadler et al., 2007). In the UK, similar findings suggest that social services and educational welfare officers play a crucial role in facilitating school reintegration for motivated young mothers (Hosie, 2007).

In South and Southeast Asia, however, adolescent mothers frequently encounter socio-cultural barriers that hinder their return to education. Societal pressure to achieve economic independence or challenge gender roles often pushes them back to school (Hossain et al., 2021). Financial incentives like scholarships help alleviate economic obstacles. In Bangladesh and India, where early motherhood carries stigma and educational opportunities are limited, some girls persist in their attempts to resume schooling, driven by personal aspirations for better future for themselves and their children. In Bangladesh, for example, studies show that adolescent mothers predominantly return to education due to support from NGOs and community-based educational models (Chowdhury et al., 2002). Despite facing gender biases, many young mothers reveal strong motivation to "prove themselves" and attain independence.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, including countries like South Africa, Uganda and Kenya, research reveals how cultural, economic and policy aspects inspire adolescent mothers to re-enter school. Their motivations are multifaceted and often linked to personal aspirations, peer influence and hopes for better socio-economic conditions. In South Africa, Chigona and Chetty (2007) noted that despite childcare difficulties and societal stigma, young mothers are compelled to pursue education to secure better futures for their children and to regain their self-esteem. Similarly, in Uganda, Atuyambe et al. (2005) observed that while societal disapproval presents challenges, family support and emotional resilience strongly motivate return to education. In Kenya, many student mothers find inspiration from local role models and some benefit from government programs advocating for gender equality in education (Mudhovozi et al., 2017; Kasirye et al., 2022). Nevertheless, cultural stigmatization continues to pose challenges that

some young mothers strive to overcome through education. Grant and Hallman (2008) highlighted that many of young mothers return to school to combat negative societal views and pursue their long-term goals. Despite these motivations, such factors alone do not guarantee success. Institutional support plays a crucial role in determining if these motivations are actualized. Insufficient flexible learning options, lack of childcare, and punitive educational environments can discourage even the most motivated adolescent mothers to return to school (Panday et al., 2009).

In Tanzania, significant changes in policy and public attitude regarding adolescent mothers returning to school have occurred. Historically, expulsion was mandated for pregnant schoolgirls, effectively barring them from educational completion (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Recently, however, notable steps have been taken, especially with the endorsement of the 2021 education circular, which allows the re-entry of adolescent mothers and the Secondary Education Quality Improvement Project (SEQUIP), allowing adolescent mothers to reintegrate through formal schooling or alternative pathways like the Institute of Adult Education (IAE) (United Republic of Tanzania, 2021). Although there have been positive changes, the implementation has been inconsistent, resulting in unequal educational experiences for adolescent mothers. Some return to formal secondary schools, while others end up in non-formal pathways like IAE centers. This inconsistency reflects contradictions in re-entry policies, which ultimately affect the schooling experiences of student mothers and their access to quality education (Thwala et al., 2022). There is also an increasing concern that non-formal options may lack the necessary resources, legitimacy, or public perception to be viewed as equivalent to formal education (UNESCO, 2022). Additionally, the current re-entry framework has a structural gap due to the absence of institutional arrangements designed to address specific needs of adolescent student mothers. For example, many schools do not provide childcare facilities, leaving student mothers without practical options for childcare during school hours.

Research focused on adolescent student mothers in Tanzania has predominantly examined challenges that adolescent student mothers encounter upon returning to school. These challenges include stigma and discrimination from peers and teachers, insufficient guidance and counseling services, economic difficulties and struggle to balance

academic responsibilities with parenting (Timothy & Juhudi, 2023; Mwakililo et al., 2025). While some student mothers display resilience through various coping strategies, such as entrepreneurship or seeking support, many of these strategies prove inadequate or unsustainable, resulting in frequent absenteeism and dropouts (Mwakililo et al., 2025). Beyond academic studies, anecdotal evidence from newspaper articles and NGO reports indicates that adolescent student mothers continue to encounter significant barriers in their pursuit of secondary education completion (Mwalongo, 2023; Loshilaa, 2022). Still, a significant number of adolescent mothers in various regions of Tanzania opt to return to education. Studies indicate that in 2022, different regions in Tanzania experienced a resurgence in schooling among adolescent mothers. For example, data from Chisalu Folk Development College in Mpwapwa District, show that 29 adolescent mothers rejoined school in 2021, followed by 25 in 2022 and 30 in 2023, reflecting a steady return to education despite ongoing challenges (Asumini & Mwila, 2024).

This observation prompts an essential and underexplored inquiry into what motivates these adolescent mothers to go back to school despite the ongoing social, economic and institutional hurdles. While earlier studies primarily focused on barriers and coping strategies (Mwakililo et al., 2025; Timothy & Juhudi, 2023), there is scant information on what drives their decisions to re-enroll in secondary education.

### **Theoretical Stance**

Cognitive Motivational Relational Theory (CMRT), developed by Lazarus (1991), explains how individuals' cognitive appraisals of stressors and available resources shape their motivation. According to CMRT, adolescent mothers evaluate challenges and benefits, such as societal stigma versus educational and economic opportunities, and assess internal (for example, determination) and external resources (for example, family or institutional support) before deciding to return to school. In the Tanzanian context, where limited institutional support and socio-cultural barriers exist, CMRT provides a useful framework to understand the cognitive and emotional processes that motivate adolescent mothers to resume secondary education, addressing the gap in empirical studies on their school re-entry motivations.

## Methodology

This study employed a single case study design to explore factors motivating secondary school student mothers in to re-join school (Cohen et al., 2013; Yin, 2014). The design was appropriate because it allows an in-depth examination of a unique and vulnerable

population with complex experiences that cannot be captured through broader quantitative methods. The study took place in Mbeya region due to its relatively high number of re-admitted student mothers, compared to other regions with more than 120 cases, as seen in Table 1.

**Table 1: Student Mothers who Joined Schools after Dropping Out Due to Pregnancy as of 2022**

Region	Districts	Re-admitted Adolescent girls	Re-admitted Student Mothers	Region	Districts	Re-admitted Adolescent girls	Student Mothers
Mwanza	Sengerema	13	01	Mara	Musoma Mc	37	00
	Buchosa	41	20		Rorya	33	01
	Ilemela	73	00		Bunda DC	10	07
	Nyamagama	32	07		Bunda TC	25	01
	Magu	30	02		Tarime TC	25	00
	Misungwi	31	01		Musoma	19	00
	Ukerewe	12	02		Sengerema	30	01
	Kwimba	09	02				
Total		241	35			179	10
Manyara	Babati DC	11	01	Dar es Salaam	Kinondoni	56	21
	Babati TC	43	03		Ilala	47	07
	Hanang	45	02		Ubungo	36	17
	Mbulu DC	67	03		Temeke	22	04
	Mbulu TC	50	07		Kigamboni	19	05
	Total		216		16		
Iringa	Iringa MC	80	00	Simiyu	Busega DC	34	33
	Kilolo	36	03		Itilima DC	32	01
	Iringa DC	16	00		Bariadi TC	27	00
	Mufindi	30	03		Maswa DC	10	00
	Mafinga	26	00		Bariadi	21	00
	Total		188		06		
Pwani	Mkuranga	20	03	Mbeya	Busokelo	15	01
	Bagamoyo	27	02		Kyela	35	02
	Rufiji	05	00		Mbarali	67	00
	Chalinze	44	02		Mbeya DC	91	11
	Kibaha-Tumbi	22	01		Mbeya TC	223	42
	Kibaha DC	24	04		Rungwe	41	02
	Total		142		12		
Kigoma	Kigoma MC	30	00	Morogoro	Morogoro	26	18
	Uvinza	62	04		Kilosa	28	02
	Kasulu	23	00		Kilombero	37	04
	Kibondo	18	00		Gairo	31	03
	Kakonko	24	00				
Total		157	04			122	27
Ruvuma	Tunduru	17	05	Dodoma	Dodoma CC	50	06
	Namtumbo	28	03		Chamwilo	44	04
	Nyasa	25	04		Mpwapwa	04	04
	Songea MC	70	06		Chemba	24	03
	Total		140		18		

Source: Institute of Adult Education (2023)

This provided a rich and diverse pool of participants and insights into factors that motivates this group to re-join secondary education. While findings are

specific to this case and not generalisable to all regions (Denscombe, 2014), the approach enables a

comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under this study.

### Population and Sampling

With the help of the Regional Educational Officer, the researchers identified nine schools that had registered a reasonable number of student mothers in the selected districts (Mbeya CC, Mbeya DC and Rungwe) (see Table 2). From these schools, the researchers had to purposively select Iyunga Secondary School, Uyole Secondary School, Sinda Secondary School, Nzondahaki Secondary School and Usongwe Secondary School. The five secondary schools were selected because they had a more reasonable number of registered student mothers in the region. From the selected schools, the researchers purposively selected 20 student mothers aged 15-19, who experienced pregnancy and returned to school after giving birth, with at

least one year of experience in motherhood and schooling and who were ready to share their experiences.

In this regard, the researchers selected seven student mothers from Sinda secondary school, four from Usongwe secondary school, four from Uyole secondary school and five from Iyunga secondary school. The study involved adolescent student mothers in secondary schools due to their vulnerability to social, psychological and academic challenges, as societal expectations and cultural norms in Tanzania discourage pregnancy before completing secondary school education. Additionally, juggling school and motherhood is not typically planned because the majority are still dependent, making their experiences different from student mothers in higher learning institutions and from adolescent mothers who are not students.

**Table 2: Registered Student Mothers in Different Schools of Mbeya Region**

S/N	Name of school	Registered Student Mothers	District
1	Nzondahaki open-school	08	Mbeya CC
2	Lufingo secondary school	01	Rungwe DC
3	Kyela secondary	02	Kyela
4	Iyunga secondary	08	Mbeya CC
5	Kiwira secondary	03	Rungwe
6	Legico secondary	05	Mbeya CC
7	Ihahi secondary	01	Mbarali
8	Mbarali secondary	00	Mbarali
9	Sinda secondary	10	Mbeya CC
10	Maziwa secondary	00	Mbeya CC
11	Uyole secondary	09	Mbeya CC
12	Usongwe secondary school	11	Mbeya DC
Total		58	

**Source: Mbeya Regional Educational Office (2023)**

### Data Collection Instruments

Focus group discussions were used to collect data from student mothers; each discussion session took place in the school environment and lasted for 60 to 120 minutes. Data was collected through focus group discussions to capture the shared experiences and collective perspectives of adolescent student mothers. This method is suitable when participants share similar backgrounds and can build upon each other's views, leading to richer insights than would be possible through individual accounts (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The group setting also encouraged interaction and reflection on the social and institutional factors influencing their return to school.

### Management of Data

Trustworthiness is considered a general quality in any qualitative study (Connelly, 2016). In this regard, trustworthiness of the data was ensured through several strategies aligned with qualitative research standards. Credibility was enhanced by accurately transcribing and translating the focus group discussions, followed by member checking to verify participants' views. Dependability was supported through consistent procedures during data collection and detailed documentation of the research process. Confirmability was maintained by keeping an audit trail and engaging peers to review the coding and interpretation of themes.

Transferability was facilitated by providing a clear description of the study context, participants and sampling approach, allowing readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar settings as explained by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Braun and Clarke (2021) proposed steps for thematic analysis to enhance data credibility and reliability. Trustworthiness of the data was ensured through careful transcription and translation to maintain accuracy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data were systematically coded, categorised and analysed to identify emerging themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Credibility was enhanced through member checking while dependability and confirmability were maintained through detailed documentation of procedures and peer review of the coding process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Saldaña (2015) found that participant-quoted responses added credibility and clarity to the findings. The study's reliability was improved by triangulating data sources, doing member audits, and conducting an audit trail with peers.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was conducted simultaneously, with focus groups and open-ended questionnaire data being transcribed and analysed through thematic analysis. This procedure involved data reduction, display and making conclusions. NVivo 12 software assisted in coding, categorising and identifying themes and patterns in the dataset, making a systematic and rigorous approach to data analysis.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The study received approval from the University of Dar es Salaam's committee with a formal research clearance letter. *In addition, informed consent was obtained from participants and confidentiality was strictly maintained throughout the study.* Respect for anonymity and confidentiality of participants was ensured through the use of numbers and letters for names of schools and student mothers. For instance, SM1-SM20 was for student mothers from school A- school E. Due to its flexibility when examining data for emerging topics or ideas relevant to the research questions (Bryman, 2016), the researchers employed thematic analysis by following six steps for data analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021). The steps include familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, constructing themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report. Additionally, the study considered

participants' consent and willingness to be involved in the study.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Findings are organised around key themes from the data, providing insights into motives for returning to school. Each theme is supported by literature, emphasising both shared and distinct characteristics of the Tanzanian settings.

### **Motives for Student Mothers to Re-join Schools**

The study identified several motivating factors, including career prospects and bright future, financial independence and self-support, setting a good example for children and clearing past mistakes.

#### ***Career Prospects and Bright Future***

Results indicated that student mothers were driven by prospect of better employment chances. For many, returning to school was viewed as a key step towards obtaining qualifications required for greater career opportunities. The majority explained that completing secondary school can lead to further education and more profitable and stable career prospects. This was confirmed by the following excerpts:

As a student mother, I believe that education will transform my life. My journey is a testament to my self-determination and unwavering persistence. Despite facing the challenges of dual roles, I remain determined in my endeavour for a good future. Every moment that I spend caring for my child and late-night study sessions encourages me in my determination to succeed. I always struggle to persist in ensuring that parenting and academic goals are achieved (SM 3, School A).

Sharing a similar view, another student mother reported,

I feel determined not to repeat those bad choices. However, it is challenging because my parents do not trust that I will complete my education and pass final exams. They seem to overlook my struggles since I re-joined school. Nonetheless, I work diligently on my own, believing that education is the key to a better life for both me and my child. I feel a strong urge to prove them wrong and show them that I can overcome obstacles (SM 23, School D).

The quotes indicate that adolescent student mothers are motivated to return to school by their aspirations for better future and improved career opportunities despite various challenges they face. This aligns with the Cognitive Motivational Relational Theory by Lazarus (1991), which suggests that motivation is shaped by individuals' cognitive evaluations of future benefits that surpass present difficulties. For these mothers, the prospect of enhanced job opportunities and financial independence serves as a long-term motivator that outweighs immediate sacrifices involved in pursuing education. This phenomenon echoes broader studies emphasizing the importance of professional ambitions as a key driver for educational perseverance among adolescent mothers. For instance, Jochim et al. (2020) discovered that adolescent mothers in South Africa are spurred by career goals and aspiration for better socio-economic circumstances. Their motivations resonate with CMRT, as the anticipated future rewards offset present challenges.

Similar patterns have been observed in Latin America. Research conducted by Villatoro et al. (2020) reveals that numerous adolescent mothers in Mexico return to education primarily to acquire qualifications necessary for stable employment. These findings also hold true in Tanzania, where economic independence is crucial, particularly in patriarchal societies that often restrict women's decision-making power (Buchmann & Hannum, 2021). In contrast, differing perspectives emerge in regions, such as South Asia, where cultural practices and early marriages tend to lessen the focus on career aspirations among adolescent mothers (Nahar et al., 2019).

Unlike their Tanzanian counterparts, young mothers in some South Asian communities more often re-enroll due to family pressure or societal expectations rather than personal career ambitions (Agha & Rind, 2025). This discrepancy may arise from differing socio-cultural and economic contexts, suggesting that motivational drivers are not universally applicable but rather dependent on context. Furthermore, some research indicates that not all adolescent mothers perceive education as directly linked to career advancement. For instance, SmithBattle and Phengnum (2023) found that in the U. S., some adolescent mothers regard re-enrollment as a way to escape social stigma rather than pathway to professional success. This complexity illustrates that while many are

motivated by career opportunities, existing structural and societal barriers can significantly influence their long-term goals.

### ***Financial Independence and Self-Support***

Desire for financial independence and self-support was identified to be a strong motivator for student mothers returning to school. Results indicate that the majority of the student mothers experienced financial difficulties due to limited or unsatisfactory familial support; hence, they considered education as a way to improve their financial capabilities. They hoped to get educational qualifications to obtain better-paying employment that would allow them to sustain themselves and their families without the assistance of others. The following quoted voices support this theme:

Resuming education was a difficult decision, especially given the financial constraints I confront. But the reality is that without education, I cannot get employed or will get low-wage positions that will not meet my fundamental necessities... because I have limited family support, education is the only way I see to break the pattern and provide my child a brighter future (SM 21, School C)

Another participant demonstrated,

...I opted to return to school because I wish to get a better job in the future. I believe that with education, I will be able to find a job that will not require me to rely on anybody else. I want to stand on my own two feet and provide for my child... (SM 32, School E).

The aspiration for financial independence and self-support emerged as a strong motivation for adolescent mothers to return to school. Many view education as a pathway to financial autonomy and a way to reduce reliance on family or partners. This motivation highlights the essential role of education in improving economic prospects and fostering financial independence, especially for women in impoverished nations (Torres et al., 2020; Rhijin et al., 2016). Most participants expressed a desire to enhance their economic situation and gain the ability to support themselves and their families. This drive illustrates broader economic challenges faced by women in poor countries, where education is seen as a means to break the cycle of poverty and achieve financial security. Student mothers aspire to secure jobs that allow them to support their families without depending on others.

This sentiment aligns with findings in Sub-Saharan Africa, where young mothers consider education crucial for obtaining stable employment and overcoming economic constraints (Mushoriwa & Chitiga, 2016). Similarly, studies in Latin America, like those by Villatoro et al. (2020) show that adolescent mothers in Mexico emphasize education as a way to achieve self-sufficiency and aid their families. The Cognitive Motivational Relational Theory (CMRT) explains this motivation by analyzing the cognitive evaluation of educational benefits. For student mothers, their primary assessment involves considering whether the long-term advantages of financial independence outweigh the immediate challenges of managing school and motherhood. The anticipation of future rewards encourages resilience despite the obstacles they face. However, various structural and institutional barriers often hinder the pursuit of financial independence.

In Tanzania, while the quest for financial autonomy serves as a significant motivator, the lack of supportive initiatives, such as scholarships or income-generating programs for student mothers complicates their journey toward these goals. This scenario reflects secondary appraisals in CMRT, where young mothers assess the feasibility of their ambitions based on available resources. In contrast, in South Asia, some adolescent mothers place family obligations above career aspirations, often seeing education as subordinate to social expectations (Nahar et al., 2019). Moreover, although financial independence is a key factor, research indicates that not all adolescent mothers perceive education as a clear path to self-sufficiency. For example, Molla and Cuthbert (2019) found that in Ethiopia, some young mothers view re-enrollment mainly as a reaction to societal stigma rather than a means of achieving economic empowerment. In Tanzania, the limited availability of specialized support services restricts education's potential to provide lasting financial independence. The desire for financial independence and career prospects suggests the need for policies offering vocational training and financial support to equip adolescent mothers with both academic and economic skills.

### **Setting a Good Example for Children**

Other student mothers returned to school to serve as role models for their children. The majority of them explained to feel that finishing their education would inspire their children to prioritise and pursue educational ambitions. Some student mothers did not want their children to follow in their footsteps,

whereas others were embarrassed to admit that they dropped out of school owing to pregnancy during their secondary school years. The following excerpts support this theme:

...I re-joined school because I did not want my child to take my way and drop out due to pregnancy. By continuing my education, I wish to demonstrate that it is never too late to study and achieve your goals. I want him to understand the importance of education and strive for it without making the same mistakes I did (SM 13, School B).

Another student mother narrated,

...I felt it would be difficult for me to explain to my child that I had dropped out of school due to pregnancy. I felt ashamed and did not want her to believe that dropping out was acceptable. Returning to school was my way of demonstrating how vital education is, no matter what happens. I want to be a role model for her, showing that schooling is key to a better life (SM 27, School D).

The quotes provided highlight the significant societal influence of educated women, who not only uplift their own lives but also contribute positively to the aspirations and accomplishments of future generations. Many student mothers returned to school to show their children the importance of education, believing that by completing their secondary studies, they could motivate their children to value education and avoid dropping out. This insight reflects the findings of Manalang et al. (2015), who observed that women often pursue education as a selfless act to positively affect their children's futures. Torres et al. (2020) argued that adolescent mothers return to school to enhance their character.

In Latin America, similar trends are evident, as adolescent mothers in countries like Mexico perceived education as a pathway to a more stable future for their families. Villatoro et al. (2020) noted that these mothers often regard education as a way to create better opportunities for their children, aiming to instil a sense of appreciation for learning and academic achievement. The drive to be role models is also clear in Tanzania, where numerous adolescent mothers see education as a means to escape the limitations of socio-economic backgrounds, thus exemplifying perseverance for their children (Buchmann & Hannum, 2021).

The Cognitive Motivational Relational Theory by Lazarus (1991) provides a useful framework to understand this motivation. CMRT explains that a person's primary appraisals involve assessing their situation to determine if the advantages of their actions outweigh the challenges. In the context of student mothers, perceived benefits of setting a positive example for children, like promoting educational aspirations, serve as a strong incentive to pursue education. These mothers likely undergo secondary appraisals, evaluating their capabilities and resources for success while considering the long-term benefits their education will provide for their children's futures.

Challenges emerge, however, when structural barriers hinder their efforts to return to school. In Tanzania, for instance, adolescent mothers frequently face institutional challenges, such as inadequate childcare support, making it difficult to maintain a consistent example through their educational pursuits. Research in South Asia also reveals that although the desire to be role models motivates adolescent mothers, cultural conventions and gender expectations often impose additional pressures, limiting their chances for personal advancement (Nahar et al., 2019).

Moreover, some research indicates that not every adolescent mother perceives education as a direct route to improving their children's future. In Ethiopia, for example, Molla and Cuthbert (2019) discovered that some adolescent mothers enrolled in school due to external pressures, like societal obligations or family expectations, rather than a strong internal drive to serve as role models for their children. This underscores the idea that while the aspiration to be role models is common, motivations of adolescent mothers can differ significantly based on specific contexts and external influences. Furthermore, motivation to set a good example for their children underscores the intergenerational benefits of empowering young mothers through education. However, the stigma associated with early motherhood still presents challenges, pointing to the need for social support systems to improve their self-esteem and acceptance within the school environment.

### ***Clearing Past Mistakes***

Results indicated that in Tanzania, some student mothers returned to school to avoid stigma associated with early motherhood. The participants explained their desire to disprove community critics

and show that their previous mistakes do not determine their future. They hoped to correct their mistakes and restore respect in their communities by returning to school. The following quotations support this theme:

Returning to school was crucial for me because I wanted to correct my mistakes. I became pregnant at an early age and many in my society lost respect for me. I have been stigmatized everywhere. By completing my secondary education, I hope to reclaim their respect and demonstrate that I am serious about my own and my child's future; pregnancy came by mistake (SM 3, School A)

Similarly, a student mother from another school explained:

When I left school due to my pregnancy, I felt as if I had let everyone down, even myself. Returning to school is my opportunity to fix that error and demonstrate to my community that I am capable of accomplishing my secondary education despite the mistake I made (SM 27, School D).

The desire to rectify previous mistakes emerged as a significant motivator for adolescent mothers contemplating a return to education. Numerous participants conveyed a wish to move past the stigma of having withdrawn from school earlier, expressing a strong urge to amend their prior educational setbacks. This observation is consistent with the wider literature regarding redemption and second chances in the lives of young mothers. For example, a study conducted by Nsameng and Tchombe (2022) in Sub-Saharan Africa illustrates how young mothers perceived re-enrollment as a chance to amend past educational interruptions and achieve a sense of accomplishment that early motherhood previously denied them. This quest for redemption often intertwines with broader social pressures, where the stigma associated with being a young mother negatively impacts their self-esteem and social perception.

Similar trends have been identified in Latin America, particularly with Mexico as a focal point. Research by Villatoro et al. (2020) indicates that adolescent mothers in Mexico are frequently driven to return to school not only for financial improvement but also to eliminate the feelings of failure linked to early pregnancies and interrupted education. These mothers regard returning to school as a means to regain authority over their lives and demonstrate to

themselves and society that they are not defined by their past mistakes. The possibility of redemption through education is also evident in Tanzania, where adolescent mothers view re-enrollment as a strategy to restore their community's reputation and demonstrate their dedication to academic achievement (Buchmann & Hannum, 2021).

The CMRT elucidates this drive by introducing the concept of primary appraisal, wherein adolescent mothers interpret their past educational breaks as a loss and see re-enrollment as a method to recover what was lost. This leads to a secondary appraisal where they evaluate their personal assets and support systems that may assist in overcoming these hurdles. In the context of adolescent mothers, rectifying past mistakes encompasses both cognitive and emotional assessments, with mothers expressing a strong yearning to surmount the educational barriers that their pregnancies have imposed.

Nonetheless, obstacles remain even in light of this motivation. In South Asia, where early marriages and family pressures prevail, adolescent mothers may be compelled to go back to school for reasons beyond their own desire for redemption. For instance, research by Nahar et al. (2019) in Bangladesh highlights how societal expectations and family pressures can coerce young mothers into re-enrollment, not necessarily aimed at correcting their educational mistakes, but rather to satisfy external demands for conformity. This situation reveals how cultural contexts can shape whether the motivation to rectify past errors is internally motivated or influenced by societal forces.

Furthermore, in Ethiopia, Molla and Cuthbert (2019) found that some adolescent mothers did not perceive their return to education as an opportunity for self-redemption but rather as a requirement to meet the basic educational demands imposed by their families or communities. This indicates a crucial difference in the motivations of adolescent mothers, where personal aspirations for self-betterment may clash with external obligations to adhere to societal expectations.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

### **Conclusions**

Based on the findings, this paper underscores that adolescent student mothers' decisions to re-enter school are shaped by a dynamic interplay of personal, social and structural factors. Their

motivations are deeply rooted in aspirations for self-actualisation, economic empowerment and the redefinition of social identity through education. The findings affirm that returning to school represents not only an educational pursuit but also an act of resilience and agency against intersecting barriers of gender, poverty and stigma. Ultimately, the re-engagement of adolescent mothers in secondary education illustrates the transformative capacity of education to restore hope, foster empowerment and promote intergenerational well-being within the Tanzanian society.

### **Recommendations**

In light of these findings, the study recommends that policymakers and education stakeholders strengthen institutional and community-based support systems to enhance adolescent mothers' educational continuity. Schools should adopt flexible learning arrangements, such as adjusted timetables and re-entry policies that accommodate parenting responsibilities while ensuring access to counselling and psychosocial support services. Furthermore, partnerships between schools, local governments and social welfare agencies should be fostered to provide childcare facilities, financial assistance and mentorship programs tailored to student mothers' needs. Finally, national education policies should integrate gender-responsive frameworks that recognise adolescent mothers as a vulnerable yet capable group, thereby promoting inclusive and equitable access to education across Tanzania.

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