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## SHORT REPORT

### Teenage Pregnancy in Tambogrande, Peru: Causes, Consequences and Cycles of Violence and Disadvantage

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#### Abstract

Teenage pregnancy carries adverse consequences for health and well-being. In this paper, we investigate the perceived causes, consequences and cycles of violence and disadvantage associated with teenage pregnancy in Tambogrande, Peru using an applied anthropological approach. Data were drawn from a larger project investigating the relationship between water insecurity and gender-based violence in Indonesia and Peru. The analysis presented here is derived from 49 semi-structured interviews and 5 focus groups with local community members and stakeholders in Peru. Study participants highlighted two main factors contributing to teenage pregnancy in Tambogrande: *machismo* and religious deterrents to contraceptive use. Participants described how these factors overlapped, resulting in gendered power imbalances that increased the risk of violence, decreased educational opportunities, and reduced the economic independence of women. However, study participants stated that educational interventions targeting *machismo* could reduce teenage pregnancy and break the associated cycle of disadvantage. Future research will further investigate local social and gender norms to inform the design of a rights-based educational intervention, targeting upstream factors associated with teenage pregnancy in this area.

**Keywords:** teenage pregnancy, applied anthropology, *machismo*, religion, social and gender norms

## Introduction

Teenage pregnancy is typically defined as the pregnancy of a young person between 15 and 19 years of age (WHO 2020). It can have far-reaching adverse consequences for the health and well-being of young women and their children (Jonas et al. 2016). For mothers, these consequences include disrupting education (Akanbi et al. 2021; Arceo-Gómez and Campos-Vazquez 2014; Hao and Cherlin 2004), an increased risk of intimate partner violence (Akanbi et al. 2021; Arceo-Gomez and Campos-Vazquez 2014; Male and Wodon, 2018; Mikhail 2002) and the reproduction of intergenerational cycles of poverty (Arceo-Gómez and Campos-Vazquez 2014). In this paper, we use an applied anthropological approach to investigate the perceived causes, consequences and cycles of disadvantage associated with teenage pregnancy in Tambogrande, Peru.

## Background

A large body of research focuses on the causes of teenage pregnancy both globally (Shawky and Milaat 2000; Macleod 1999; Natividad 2013; Acharya et al. 2010) and in Latin America (reviewed in Azevedo et al. 2015). Across contexts, scholars agree that poverty contributes to, and is reinforced by, teenage pregnancy (Arceo-Gómez and Campos-Vazquez 2014). Early marriage and cohabitation, which are shaped by local gender and social norms (Macleod 1999; Natividad, 2013; Manning and Cohen 2015), are also significant contributing factors to teenage pregnancy (Favara, Lavado and Sánchez 2016; UNFPA 2012; Winter 2018). As defined by Cislighi and Heise (2019 415-6),

“Gender norms are social norms defining acceptable and appropriate actions for women and men in a given group or society. They are embedded in formal and informal institutions, nested in the mind, and produced and reproduced through social interaction. They play a role in shaping women and men’s (often unequal) access to resources and freedoms, thus affecting their voice, power, and sense of self.”

Across a range of contexts, gender norms promoting early cohabitation, early marriage and teenage pregnancy can restrict educational and economic opportunities, reinforcing cycles of poverty (Kurz 1998; Marphatia and Moussié 2013; Noreen and Khalid 2012). For example, in areas of high poverty in Peru (Favara, Lavado and Sánchez 2016), parents often arrange their daughters’ marriages to improve the family’s financial and economic standing (Pesando and Abufhele 2018). This can provide economic relief and opportunity for the family. However, it may negatively affect the lives of young women, as they may be expected to drop out of school to care for children and assume a role within the home (Birchall 2018), perpetuating a cycle of disadvantage for girls in these settings.

The research presented here was conducted in Tambogrande, a rural district in Piura, Peru. Peru has an exceptionally high rate of teenage pregnancy, at 54 births per 1,000 women.<sup>1</sup> Within Peru, the region of Piura has the third highest number of teenage births in the country

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<sup>1</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.ADO.TFRT?end=2020&locations=PE&start=1960&view=chart>

(Roundtable for the Fight Against Poverty).<sup>2</sup> A substantial body of recent research has examined teenage pregnancy in Peru (UNFPA 2016; Távara et al. 2015; Mendoza and Subiría 2013; Alcazar and Lovatón 2006; Arias and Lopez 2012; Dongarwar and Salihu 2019), drawing attention to the connections between teenage pregnancy, poverty, gender norms and early marriage (Favara, Lavado and Sánchez 2016; Pesando and Abufhele 2018; Raguz 2021).

In this paper, we use an applied anthropological perspective to examine the causes and consequences of teenage pregnancy in Tambogrande, Peru. Applied anthropologists utilise anthropological methods and theories to investigate and address real world problems.<sup>3</sup> In the case of teenage pregnancy, their work argues that attention must be directed toward the wider social setting, including *emic* ideas about pregnancy in adolescence and youth, sexuality and social expectations (Sax 2010). An emic perspective is one that utilises an insider's perspective as the starting point of analysis (Markee 2013). With this in mind, we analysed qualitative data from a larger anthropological project examining the perspectives of local women and workers in healthcare, government and non-governmental organisations on the association between water insecurity and gender-based violence in Indonesia and Peru. While teenage pregnancy was not the overt focus of the original work, it became clear during the project that teenage pregnancy was a central concern for the people with whom we worked in Peru.

## Methods

### *Research Setting*

Tambogrande is a district in the region of Piura on the northern coast of Peru. It is located in the San Lorenzo Valley and has a population of 107,495 people of which 49% are women (INEI 2021). Agriculture is the main economic activity (Municipality of Tambogrande 2020). About 63% of the population live in rural areas, which are organised into 187 communities. In rural parts of Piura, rates of female illiteracy (18.2%) and teenage pregnancy (18.1%) are high (Romero Navarro 2018).

### *Study Design and Data Collection*

As previously stated, the data we analysed for this paper came from a larger project focused on water insecurity and gender-based violence. This project was divided into two phases of data collection. In Phase 1 of the research in Tambogrande, Peru (December 2021) we conducted semi-structured interviews (n = 49) with local community members and stakeholders. Of the 49 semi-structured interviews conducted (30 men and women), 30 participants came from local governmental organisations (n=22 men and n=8 women); 8 from non-governmental organisations (n=5 men and n=3 women); 7 from community-based organisations (n=3 men and n=4 women); and 4 identified themselves as the victims of gender-based violence (n= 4 women).

Participants for Phase 1 of the study were recruited through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling begins with initial contacts who are invited to participate. These participants are then

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.mesadeconcertacion.org.pe/organizacion>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.americananthro.org/AdvanceYourCareer/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=2150>

asked to recommend other people who fit the research criteria (Parker et al. 2019). In our study, participants were first identified through contacts in local non-governmental organisations in Tambogrande and then further expanded to include adults with local knowledge of the relationship between water insecurity and women's health.

Prompts for the semi-structured interviews were drafted by the research team members (PT, SC, TR, GS) in collaboration with the UK non-governmental organisation, Oxfam, and focused on the connection between water insecurity and women's health. These prompts were reviewed and then utilised in the semi-structured interviews by the local Peruvian team (KC, LF, GS). Because gender-based violence is a sensitive topic, we worked closely with the institutional review board of Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú to guarantee that the research tools ensured the respectful and tactful treatment of participants. We also developed a protocol to respond to risky situations for participants and interviewers. This included referral services for local women experiencing gender-based violence and the decision to switch to less sensitive questions if the interviewee showed discomfort or if additional people entered the interview space while questions about gender-based violence were in process.

In Phase 2 of the research (March 2022) we returned the preliminary results from Phase 1 to the people with whom we worked and used these results to facilitate conversations about potential solutions to identified water access and gender inequality problems. This was done by hosting five focus groups. A total of 46 people (25 women and 21 men) participated in five focus groups. Four of the focus groups were held with local community members and separated by gender. This allowed for gender-sensitive topics to be discussed, following the research protocol set forth by the World Health Organization Protocol and Practical Guidance for Research on Violence Against Women (2016). These four focus groups with local community members were small and utilised workshop-style participatory prompts. The fifth focus group included local and regional representatives from governmental and non-governmental organisations, with both men and women together. This was a more formal multi-stakeholder meeting that included a PowerPoint presentation of the results, but still included small group discussion. All focus group participants were self-selected as an open invitation was extended to all participants in Phase 1 to participate in Phase 2 of the research.

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysed for this paper were drawn from the semi-structured interviews conducted in Phase 1 (n = 49) and from the five focus groups held in Phase 2 (n = 46) of the research in Peru. The salience of the issue of teenage pregnancy emerged through an inductive process (Woo, O'Boyle and Spector 2017), whereby our semi-structured interviews and focus groups, which centred on women's health and water, revealed a consistent pattern of concern with teenage pregnancy among study participants. To further understand the perceived causes and consequences of teenage pregnancy in Tambogrande, we used Dedoose ([www.dedoose.com](http://www.dedoose.com)) data management software to identify all quotes that mentioned teenage pregnancy in the primary data and then inserted these quotes into an Excel matrix. All co-authors worked from the matrix to consolidate quotes pertaining to teenage pregnancy. Through group discussion, a series of emergent themes was identified.

## Results

Participants indicated that high rates of teenage pregnancy were primarily attributable to the influence of *machismo* and religious values on contraceptive use. Machismo typically describes Latino masculine norms that include pride, responsibility for the family, sexism, aggression and hypermasculinity (Glass and Owen 2010). As a lawyer working with the local government noted, “Tambogrande is very macho [...] there is a lot of machismo from all the population”. A representative from a human rights organisation working with women, children and adolescents in the region explained machismo as a trait “rooted in the DNA of men [stemming] from grandfather[s] and even grandmother[s]!”. A participant in the women’s focus group shared that “Sometimes the mums with sons say that he should not wash or cook, raising him in that way... that is why there is still machismo”.

Local community members saw macho beliefs as being tightly connected to the Catholic religion. As one focus group participant stated, “In the faith-machismo perspective, it is considered that the woman who cooks, who looks for firewood, who does the washing, is less [than the man]”. A local religious leader in the Catholic church informed us that “God made man first, and then the woman”. As one victim of gender-based violence noted, the close links between machismo and religion in this context appear to have perpetuated a culture in which “women’s voices are not heard, only those of the male”. Local government leaders that spoke to us understood this to be problematic because as one of them explained, “women are not empowered, all [important] decisions are made by the man”.

Machismo and strong religious beliefs can reinforce pre-existing gender inequalities within the home. One regional government official explained this by stating,

"We are talking about a non-equal relationship in which women are placed below the role of the man. There is a devaluation of what she does. By devaluing what the woman does, there is also a power [inequality] that assumes that the one above, in this case the man, demands compliance with the role. In many situations, this ends in psychological and even physical violence."

Concerns about this dynamic were also expressed by other government officials in the area. One of them said, “Women tolerate violent situations because...”I don't work’, ‘I don't have any other income’, ‘I have children and I don't know how to sustain them’”. As a result, “the sexist man takes advantage of this situation and perpetuates violence”.

This unequal relationship, reinforced by strong religious beliefs and machismo, plays a significant role in decision making about reproductive health of women and family planning. As one local government worker explained, “The pastor forbids the women to take care of themselves” by discouraging women from seeking contraception. Another local government actor relayed a conversation held with a woman from his community, stating, “that she cannot take care [use birth control] because the man doesn’t want [her to]... doesn’t let her... because her religion doesn’t allow it”. A government health official described how gendered power dynamics play a role in deterring women from seeking contraceptive support, stating that there have been “women here who wanted to use family planning but would not come to the health post because they were afraid of their husbands”.

Our findings indicate that sexual violence can also result in teenage pregnancy and early marriage. A representative from The Ideas Center, a local non-governmental organisation that promotes sustainable human development in Piura, cited a study of teenage mothers conducted in 2017,<sup>4</sup> and stated, “The children under 15 who participated in the study, all had been the victims of rape”. A worker from a different local non-governmental organisation explained this in relation to cultural practices in rural communities - “families do not report [sexual violence], and the solution is to marry them [young girls] with their aggressor”. Government officials also noted that marriages are often forced and “parents allow their children to start a family at a very young age, from 12, 13 years old... [and] in the last year it has increased”.

Participants explained that gender norms and teenage pregnancy perpetuate a cycle of disadvantage for young girls and young women. One local teacher shared that “a young mother was saying she would not study because her husband would not let her”. A local community organisation leader expanded on this, saying,

"Sexual violence triggers a pregnancy and an acceptance of motherhood that we sometimes know is imposed motherhood. This causes many women, if they are adolescents, to no longer go to school. They no longer study. Their educational level is lower. And what does this cause? If they later want to join the labour market, they will always be at a disadvantage".

A leader at a local women’s centre added that often, it is “the economic factor [which] prevents them from reporting [gender-based violence]”, trapping young women in a cycle of violence.

In terms of solutions, multiple study participants articulated that educational interventions in school and at home that promote gender equality could help address teenage pregnancy. Local non-governmental organisations specified that schools were “one of the safest sites in communities to develop these types of competencies” while other participants noted the need to deploy these interventions in households. As noted by one focus group participant, it was important to educate the whole family about gender equality so that young girls can “value themselves as women” and “not remain silent” when facing violence. Study participants also highlighted the importance of educating men due to the role that machismo plays in family dynamics, violence, and teenage pregnancy.

## **Discussion**

Teenage pregnancy was a top concern reported by participants in this study of water insecurity and gender-based violence in Tambogrande, Peru. Government leaders, staff from local community organisations and local people highlighted how machismo and religious deterrents to contraceptive use were important drivers of teenage pregnancy in this area. Participants saw these factors as overlapping, resulting in gender power imbalances within the home. These

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<sup>4</sup><https://www.ideas.org.pe/libros/Se%20embaraz%C3%B3%20Mi%20Ni%C3%B1a!%20An%C3%A1lisis%20del%20embarazo%20adolescente%20en%20Piura%20y%20propuestas%20de%20intervenci%C3%B3n.pdf>

imbalances decreased women's educational opportunities, economic independence and agency over reproductive choices.

Prior research has documented how a combination of machismo and Catholicism enforce a cultural imbalance of power within the home in which women are subordinate (Simić 1983). On a global scale, religious teaching discouraging the use of contraceptives presents challenges for young women seeking family planning (Addai 1999; Dansereau et al. 2017; Iyer 2002). The larger literature on teenage pregnancy indicates that access to contraception and family planning is also limited by geographic barriers to health services and costs of contraception (Aparicio et al. 2014; Florez and Núñez 2003; Kanku and Mash 2010; Trussell 1988). Participants in this study did not highlight geographic and economic constraints as a major concern. Rather they emphasised the role of cultural and religious beliefs discouraging contraceptive use.

Our findings add to the literature on the role that social and gender norms play in teenage pregnancy (Svanemyr 2020; Hanson et al. 2014; Varga 2003; Sharma et al. 2002; Austrian et al. 2019; Acharya et al. 2010). The results also echo prior research highlighting how gender norms are embedded in, and reproduced through, institutions such as the Catholic Church (Heep 2014). Both a study in Nicaragua by Berglund et al. 1997 and our own work indicate that increasing access to contraception alone will not reduce teenage pregnancies in Catholic communities in Latin America. Rather, programmes and interventions must work within existing belief systems, possibly with an emphasis on natural family planning as supported by the Catholic Church (Ryder 1993). In addition, a focus on *caballerismo*, a more positive aspect of masculinity that emphasises emotional connectedness, may prove to be an effective avenue for intervention (Sáenz et al. 2015). Together, these emic insights demonstrate the value of using an applied anthropological approach to understanding the root causes, and potential solutions for addressing teenage pregnancy in specific cultural contexts.

In terms of the consequences of teenage pregnancy, participants in this study described how early pregnancy could catalyse a cycle of disadvantage for young women. One of the most salient concerns expressed by study participants was the link between teenage pregnancy and poor school attendance. Prior research has identified an association between teenage pregnancy and challenges in education (Rosenberg et al. 2015; Florez and Núñez 2003). Our findings indicate that teenage pregnancy can cause women to give up their studies to care for their children, a finding also reported elsewhere (Akanbi et al. 2021; Arceo-Gómez and Campos-Vazquez 2014; Hao and Cherlin 2004). Our results also highlight how the connection between teenage pregnancy and education can decrease the likelihood of engagement in the labour market, thereby reinforcing economic dependence upon male partners. Similar themes have been found in prior research elsewhere, showing how these intertwined dynamics can contribute to cycles of intergenerational poverty (Akanbi et al. 2021; Arceo-Gómez and Campos-Vazquez 2014; Male and Wodon 2018; Marphatia and Moussié 2013; Rodríguez Ribas 2021). These cycles may increase the risk of violence within the home (Flake and Forste 2006; Castro et al. 2017).

Participants in our study also indicated that machismo and teenage pregnancy could lead to gender-based violence and early marriage. The connection between machismo and aggression within the home, as well as with sexual violence against young women, is well-documented (Galanti 2003; Ingoldsby 1991; Mayo 1997; Ryder 1993). Participants in this study noted that teenage pregnancy following sexual assault could result in early, sometimes forced, marriages. In contrast, other research has found that early marriages themselves may result in teenage



pregnancy (Male and Wodon 2018; Mulumeoderhwa 2016). Given the rippling, potentially intergenerational effects of teenage pregnancy, it is vital to work collaboratively with community partners to further examine these issues. Our future research will focus on local social and gender norms related to teenage pregnancy and consider whether it is possible to design gender equality interventions that acknowledge the embeddedness of Catholic belief systems and machismo in this context. Of special relevance are interventions that utilise a rights-based approach, and which recognises the rights of adolescents and young women to self-determination and sexual health (Luk 2022) and includes comprehensive sexuality education (Berglas et al. 2014).

### **Limitations**

There are a number of quite serious limitations to this study. First, the larger project from which the data was drawn focused on water insecurity and gender-based violence. Because of this focus, we did not design our interview prompts to focus on teenage pregnancy *per se*, and we did not seek out teenage mothers as key informants. Rather, concerns about teenage pregnancy emerged naturally from speaking with local men, women and community stakeholders. Second, extensive ethnographic engagement was limited due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the research design of the larger project, which prioritised the use of semi-structured interviews and focus groups. This design limits our ability to comment deeply on local social and gender norms, a key focus for future research. Finally, the perspectives of men on key issues relevant to an understanding of teenage pregnancy were not explicitly elicited. Further examination of teenage mothers and their partners' perspectives on teenage pregnancy, and local social and gender norms, are important areas for future investigation.

### **Conclusion**

Using an applied anthropological perspective to examine teenage pregnancy in Tambogrande highlighted the role that local social and gender norms play in shaping behaviour and revealed how machismo and Catholic teaching can limit women's reproductive agency. While applied anthropology has been utilised in a wide range of settings to understand and address gender-based violence (see edited volumes by Ashburn et al. 2015; Wies and Haldane 2011), its application to the issue of teenage pregnancy remains largely limited to the USA (Schensul et al. 2004; Maes 2010; O'Donnell 2009). The analysis offered here represents a step towards utilising emic insights to understand the drivers and repercussions of teenage pregnancy in Tambogrande, Peru. But this is only the first step. Future research will use anthropological methods to further understand gender and other social norms related to teenage pregnancy, and will use this data to inform community-based recommendations in these areas. These recommendations can then be leveraged through collaborative action to address teenage pregnancy in Tambogrande, Peru and in other areas in Latin America where machismo and religious recommendations constrain women's reproductive agency.

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