

Youth reproductive health and economic outcomes in South Africa

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Abstract

Adolescence is a period of transition and which is further shaped by societal context. South Africa's labour force participation is low in comparison with the global average, especially among females and youths. There is a high prevalence of risky sexual behaviour resulting in adverse reproductive health outcomes. This study estimates the association between reproductive health outcomes, educational attainment and labour force participation among youths using 2016 South Africa Demographic and Health Surveys and the South Africa labour force survey (2009-2019). Changes in employment during 2009 and 2019 are decomposed using the probit estimations. Logistic regression was used to examine the association between teenage pregnancy and labour force participation. Teenage pregnancy and early fatherhood were found to be a powerful predictor of employability for both males and females. Reduced unwanted pregnancies can lead to an increased proportion of working-age people within the population, with positive outcomes for economic growth.

Extended Abstract

There is some evidence that early sexual debut leads to school underachievement. The mechanism through which this occurs could be through pregnancies that may result in high dropout rates or sexually transmitted infections that could lead to lower time spent in school or reduced concentration in educational activities. It has also been established risky sexual behaviours may lead to emotional problems, such as depression and low self-esteem which could ultimately influence educational attainment and labour force participation.

It is based on this that economists, epidemiologists and other social scientists are consistently trying to understand the way young people make decisions regarding their health. Different behaviours during the adolescent life course have different health effects. For instance, unhealthy eating habits may result in underweight or obesity among youth while substance abuse may result in mental health problems later in the life course of youth. There is a lot of campaign about the risks associated with these behaviours, but some youth continue to engage in risky behaviours. This has led to a growing number of studies aimed at understanding why young adults engage in

behaviours that would jeopardize their health outcomes (Psaros et al., 2018; Sivhabu & Visser, 2019).

The sexual behaviour of youth is of interest in this discourse because the consequences of risky sexual behaviour affect youth throughout their life course. For instance, fertility declines are associated with an increase in women's health, earnings, and participation in paid employment (Canning & Schultz, 2012). A reduction in teenage pregnancy can lead to an increased proportion of working-age people within the population, with positive outcomes for economic growth. This is why it is important to understand how risky sexual behaviours such as early sexual debut and reproductive health outcomes such as teenage pregnancy influences female labour force participation and educational attainment, especially in the context of South Africa.

Youth bulges have become a global phenomenon and South Africa is no exception to this trend. This has implications for their health and the health of the entire population. This is due to the demographic dividend which is currently underway in several countries. In 2018, Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) estimated the size of the country's youthful population (14 to 35 years old) to be 20.1 million, or 36% of the total population. In South Africa, the youth bulge presents several challenges for both the youth and the country. Youth represent the most abundant asset South Africa has or will have over the near future. This cohort presents both opportunities and risks for South Africa in terms of its potential contribution to economic growth and stability.

Nonetheless, there have been a considerable number of surveys conducted and reports and studies published that invariably conclude that there are persistent risks and challenges faced by South African youth.

Ascertaining policies that have worked in addressing youth unemployment in South Africa is quite difficult considering the incredibly high and rising unemployment rate—and at least 52.4% of the youth are unemployed (Statistics South Africa 2018), the highest in the world. It is therefore unclear how any intervention in the country has helped reduced unemployment rate. Different programs have been introduced in South Africa with the aim of reducing unemployment among youth in South Africa. For instance, the Employment Tax Incentive (ETI), was designed to increase the demand for a young labour force and the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP), specifically targets youth and incorporates various programmes from the private and civil

sector to ensure youth employment. However, these collective efforts from various stakeholders have not been successful in reducing youth unemployment. What could be the reason for this?

It is based on this evidence that this paper hypothesizes that the same mechanism through which risky sexual behaviours influence educational outcomes could hold true for female labour force participation. This paper suggests that the risky sexual behavior of young people may be associated with their economic outcomes especially in the context of South Africa.

Theoretical Underpinning

Data and Methods

The present study used data from the 2016 South Africa Demographic and Health Surveys (SADHS). The survey collected information on various demographic and health indicators, including individual characteristics, marriage and sexual activity, knowledge and use of family planning services, as well as HIV/AIDS-related knowledge, attitudes and behaviour. The sample for this study comprised of 2,514 young adults aged 15-24 years resident in all the regions of the country.

Measures

Outcome Variable:

The dependent variables for this study are; labour force participation among young adults in the sample and educational attainment measured as whether an individual has currently dropped out from a particular grade. This is a binary variable measured as “0” not working and “1” working.

Key independent variable

Early sexual debut, teenage pregnancy and early fatherhood are the key independent variables for this study. Other demographic and socio-economic variables that have been found in the literature will also be controlled for in the analysis.

Methods

Following technique of Contreras, De Mello, and Puentes (2011), the canonical model of participation is derived from a utility-maximization process, according to which individuals

choose whether or not to work. They compare the utility derived from both actions and choose the one with the highest utility. The utility functions can therefore be written as

where k is equal to one, if the individual decides to work, and zero, otherwise.

Equation 1 defines a random-utility model. Only the final outcome is observed by the econometrician, instead of the utility levels for the different participation statuses. As a result, a probit model is conventionally used on the basis of data on actual participation rates. Parameters β_0 or β_1 are not observable either; the econometrician can only estimate their change from a participation status to another. The same model can be used for estimating the employment equations. Therefore, the determinants of labour force participation and employment are estimated for male and female youth aged for 2009-2019. The regressions are estimated by probit, because the main variables of interest – participation and employability – are binary and may therefore be expressed in terms of probabilities.

Ethical Consideration

The South African DHS can be downloaded from the website and is free to use by researchers for further analysis. Request for the labour force survey data was made online and provided by Statistics South Africa.

Conclusion

The youth are, and will remain, a significant share of South Africa's population for the foreseeable future. Developing and implementing appropriate strategies, policies and programmes to mitigate the risks and challenges they (the youth) face must be much more of a priority for the government than it currently is. Any failure to provide appropriate opportunities for this large segment of the population could have enormous economic, political, cultural, and social consequences. Engaging the youth population fully is therefore no longer a choice but an imperative in the development process. This paper advocates for, and analytically discusses, strategies for engaging the youth through empowerment, education, and employment.

References

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