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Morris Antonina Lima and Isabel Mendes

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Social Context of Adolescent's First Sexual Experience in Enugu State: Evidence from Focus-Group Discussions

Sulive M. Kawewe


Book Reviews

This is a journal of interdisciplinary social sciences specially devoted to the studies of genuine development related to basic human needs satisfaction such as socio-economic problems, political economy, politics and democracy, trade, finance, international economics, labor, economic growth, labor, migration, environment, foreign aid, sustainable development, north-South, South-South relations, health studies, technology, rural development, agriculture, demographic, human rights, third world development
ABSTRACT

This study was carried out to determine the appropriate age to introduce a peer education program on human sexuality into the secondary school system of Enugu State in Nigeria. Qualitative and quantitative methods were used to determine the social context for first intercourse, as well as the reproductive health knowledge practices, among secondary school students drawn from 15 schools in two Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Enugu state. Findings from the study show that while reproductive health programs in Nigeria have traditionally focused on improvement of knowledge in late adolescent years, girls and boys are sexually active at a very early age. In some cases some adolescents were found to be pregnant or to have had their first births before or while in their first year in secondary schools. For many of the female respondents, first sexual encounter took place in an environment of control, where they lacked the courage, power and skill to reject the advance. It is therefore recommended that in addition to knowledge and attitude education, adolescents should be empowered with necessary psychological skills to control the social contexts where many of them initiate first intercourse.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, girls' sexual maturation as measured by the onset of menarche has shown a shift towards younger ages in the developed countries. In the twentieth century, the average age at which girls reached menarche was approximately 14 (Irvin, Andrea, 2005). This trend towards earlier menarche
Adolescence is a stage between childhood and adulthood, it usually starts earlier ages 14 in males, 16 in females. While the actual assumption of adult roles may be culturally defined, and therefore vary among cultures, it is generally defined as the time when children begin to function independently and away from their parents. According to Aminzari (1993), adolescence is a critical stage in the development of generational roles, in the perception of the self, and of others. The biological and social growth which take place during this stage forms the foundation for a healthy and productive adult life of a generation. This period is marked with experimentation in many puzzling phenomena, and some are under pressure from different aspects of the population of their society either to conform with or deviate from a norm. Those adolescents, particularly females, who develop low self-esteem during this period have a more difficult time maintaining discipline and control in their social environment. Low self-esteem has been shown in numerous studies to be associated with an earlier age at first intercourse, as well as with having multiple and consensual partners. It is also linked to unwanted pregnancies during adolescence (Heise, et al., 1999; Mushindeu, et al., 2001).

In Nigeria as in many sub-Saharan African countries, many adolescents have been pressured to leave school early, or significant adults in their lives. Many boys are involved in sexual practices because of pressure from their fellow boys while girls have been pressured into sexual intercourse by boys/young men in the home where the girl serves as a domestic servant. According to Preston-Whyte (1994) sexual experimentation begins for many Nigerian youths as early as twelve years of age, before they even reach puberty. Sexual intercourse is often established soon after this. Other studies show that many people are formed as sources as a survival mechanism in exchange for goods, food, or shelter. Other reasons include...
Consequences of adolescent early sexual intercourse among adolescents. Nigerian researchers have not failed to pay sufficient attention to the context where most adolescents initiate intercourse. Such an approach will ensure that limited resources are not wasted on knowledge education alone, but should include other vital survival skills such as how to negotiate termination of sex with a loved one, or how to express an unwanted advance from older men in a culture where the young is expected to obey the old in all situations. The approach will also involve educating men to develop a sexual identity that will have respect for self and others. An empowerment in self-esteem has been shown to be an effective means of improving the reproductive health of adolescents in some African countries. In one such program, health educators in Nsukka used a curriculum based on social cognitive theory to increase young women's self-esteem and associated control of their sexual relationships. The outcome resulted in increased condom use and delaying the timing of first intercourse (Cohen, et al., 1994). Studies in Nigeria have consistently come up with a high incidence of sexual activity among adolescents, for example, in a study of post-secondary school female students in Ogun State, Nigeria, Ogboma and Amehala (1992) reported that most of the girls surveyed were already sexually active in their secondary school years. Twenty-one per cent of them said they had an unintended pregnancy, out of which 18% had had an induced abortion. In all, 51% had never used a contraceptive method, and 76% did not see any method the
These findings are consistent with Odeide, et al. (2001), who found a high level of contraception among the study group in Benin in terms of active sexual activity and also similar to Odeide & Nnabuike (1998) who reported high sexual activity among adolescents in Anambra State of Nigeria. They found that 40% of the adolescents surveyed were sexually active, yet only 36% could correctly estimate the most likely time for conception to occur in the menstrual cycle. On the other hand, only 17% of the sexually active females had ever used a contraceptive method. The study also showed that most of the pregnant school girls surveyed said their first sexual activity took in their junior secondary school classes (age range 10-15). In all the studies cited above, adolescents complained of lack of knowledge on protective devices, and expressed a desire for more information. Female participants expressed an added desire to be taught how to "say no" particularly to older men. In a culture where young girls are brought up to obey their elders, and where such elders are often the main caregivers, this lack of information is a concern.

Little information available to adolescents was obtained through popular magazines, video cassettes, movies, and peers. (Kapikian, 2000). In schools, adolescents are taught science only for their examinations while biology teachers shun away from giving much reproductive health information that will help them make informed choices. Iwobi, B. L. (2001), a sexuality education curriculum currently exist in Nigeria, but in a street study conducted by Osakwe and Amanze (2001), they found that information on sexuality was not included in what teachers were teaching. Because they themselves feel uncomfortable and inadequate to discuss sexual issues.

This paper describes a focus group discussion conducted among 390 secondary school students in two rural schools in Enugu state of Nigeria. Purpose of the study was to determine what knowledge, sexual behavior, and context for initiation of sexual intercourse in this secondary school students prior to the introduction of a peer education and counseling program in secondary schools. Findings from the focus group discussions were also used to reconfirm a questionnaire survey instrument for a 400 secondary school population study.
School System in Nigeria

School age in Nigeria starts from 6 years when children enter into the primary or elementary school system starting from primary one to six. At the end of primary six, students enter the secondary school system for another six years. The first three years is the Junior Secondary School period, popularly called JSS in Nigeria. While the remaining three years is the Senior Secondary School period (SSS). Students who have parents or guardians that can afford to pay their fees in the secondary school years (Secondary education in Nigeria is not free) will go into the secondary school system while those who cannot afford it will go into a technical vocational school to learn such skills as typing and other secretarial studies.

Study Location

The study was conducted in two LGAs (similar to a county in the United States) of Enugu State. They are Nkwo West and Enugu South.

Enugu South

Enugu South is one of the three Local Government Areas in Enugu metropolitan the Capital city of Enugu State. It is an area around the headquarters of the state administration therefore usually attracts residents from different ethnic, religious and other works of life. There are a total of twenty-four post primary schools in the LGA, out of which thirteen are public and eleven private. All the schools are co-educational, and there is almost an equal mix of boys and girls in all the classes. The area is predominantly administrative in setting and inhabited by poor civil servants and workers. However, because of its strategic position as the capital of eastern Nigeria, visitors come into Enugu for business, political and recreational reasons. This poses a threat to poor female students in the urban center who may be ensnared by money, material gifts and poverty to become sexually active.

Nkwo West

With its Headquarters at Aghara, Nkwo West is about 35 kilometers from the state capital city of Enugu. Inhabitants are predominantly farmers and traders. There is a high level of poverty in this area which exposes adolescents to...
risk of sexual promiscuity and associated consequences. There are ten secondary and five vocational schools in this LGA. Because of its rural nature, some vocational schools are not registered with the ministry of education. As a result of inadequate provision of primary school only, young female students are at an increased risk for sexual promiscuity.

Study population and selection of interviewees.

The study population comprised the entire student population in the thirty-nine secondary and commercial vocational schools in the two LGAs of the study. Estimated population of students in the area is about 4,722. A multi-stage sampling method was applied to sample selection. Four schools were selected from each of the two LGAs making a total of eight schools. Selection was by a random process of balloting with the school list from the ministry of education as the frame for sampling. Out of the eight schools selected, five were secondary schools, and three were vocational schools. In compliance with the directives from the State Education Board not to use any of the junior classes, only students in the SSS class and those in the senior years in the commercial vocational schools were used. Each of the selected schools had four classes in the final year, and each class had 35-40 students. Purpose and methods of the study were explained to all the students, and only those who were willing and comfortable to discuss the subject were included. Through this process, 320 students comprising 150 males and 170 females were selected, and their age range was generally between 15-17 years. Two focus groups were convened in each school (one male and one female), with 5-10 interviewers in each group making a total of 30 discussion groups. Interviewers were members of the research team, who were all graduates from the University of Nigeria at Nsukka and Enugu campuses. All were trained in methods of qualitative interviewing, facilitating, recording, and interpretation of responses. At the completion of each session, audio-tape recordings, transcripts, and facilitator notes were analyzed by all the researchers to obtain a general sense of the direction and flow of discussions.

There is no formal Human Subject's Review Board in Enugu state, however, consent was obtained from the State Education Board, and various school administration in the state.
RESULTS

A sample of 380 students from two classes at two LGAs of Lagos State in Nigeria with an age range of 12-17 years. More than half (52.9%) of the respondents were females. This corresponds with the ratio of males to females within the same age groups in Lagos State.

An awareness and knowledge about reproductive anatomy and physiology

General awareness about the reproductive process was high, but detailed knowledge was very low. Most of the students understood the process of conception, but lacked detailed understanding of changes in the various phases of the menstrual cycle and how the menstrual cycle works. For example, where and how many students claimed that they had the knowledge to carry out ovulation planning. More than 50%, claimed that the ovum matured in the ovaries, unless it is deposited inside the vagina. One student also, owned the knowledge about his expertise and knowledge about "ovum and ovulation," while others were unaware of the specific processes that are dependent on the female reproductive tract. However, "oovum cannot travel or walk to get to the uterus," Most of the respondents did not know that the ovum can only live for at least 12 times the reproductive tract for more than two days. Consequently, they also claimed that the ovum can only live for one day or less. They believed that "the fact is to understand your menstrual cycle and ovulation is the middle of your cycle, stop menstruating." 

Period and context when most women used the menstrual cycle and ovulation

Respondents were asked to indicate when they believe that most students during sexual intercourse. Most of the participants agreed that a high proportion of their colleagues used the menstrual cycle and ovulation in their second year of secondary school. A high number of students (51.5%) aged 12-13 years. For female discussion groups discussed extensively the context for most initial sexual...
They believe that the early exposure to the “girl child” plays an important role in the way children learn about sexual consent. However, female children from poor homes usually spend their time reading and helping with household chores. Respondents reported that many young girls are raped before the age of 11 years in the process of making petty goods. Rape, according to them, is usually associated with older men instigating young girls into a sexual act under the guise that he would buy all the goods. Such an offer usually catches young unsuspecting girls eager to please their mother by earning all the petty goods and bringing home some money. The rape category of rape victims were those from their poor families as they live with wealthy families as domestic servants or baby nurses. We found this category of respondents more in technical and secondary schools, and nearly all the female respondents in technical schools were serving as domestic help in wealthy families. According to the group, the masters of the house in some occasions would initiate intercourse with the domestic and who may still be between 8-12 years. In our study, this is what we call sexual intercourse somewhere to be stemming from both, therefore if the master threatens you with expulsion, unless you agree with him, what else can you do?” There are, however, some female students who initiate early sexual intercourse on their own, not because of rape, or forced accommodation. Such cases are usually due to bad company, or personal financial interest. Some students told us that “many girls start sexual intercourse as early as 8-10 years and that is before they get into the secondary school.”

Male students were more likely to initiate sexual intercourse between the first and second year of the secondary school period (14-15 years). The factors for early male sexual intercourse were listed as peer pressure and a desire to impress others, curiosity, and ignorance about sexuality. One male student said this to us: “when all my friends tell you that they have done it and know not, you would mention, you would feel like to do what they are doing also a man.” Adolescent students also told us that the fact we were being looked at or judged by others was also a reason and confusions render us to do it and suggestions from our peers, in many cases before.”

A high percentage (56%) of the group said that they have their first sexual intercourse during their junior years in the secondary school (usually
Knowledge about conception.

Participants were asked whether a girl can get pregnant the first time she engages in sexual intercourse. Most of the participants knew that one cannot become pregnant with first intercourse (66.6%). While 33.3% (125) participants were either not sure, or felt that pregnancy could not occur with first intercourse.

Misconception, held by many of the students include that the first intercourse only breaks the hymen, making it possible for sperm to get into the vagina with subsequent intercourse. One of the girls astounded the group when she asserted, “a girl cannot get pregnant if she has sex only once in a month.” Through the other members of the group disagreed with this viewpoint, majority of them, argued “that it is only true if it is your first time and if you space it properly.” One-third of the respondents think a girl is likely to get pregnant when sex occurs at menstruation. For them therefore, it is when a girl who is not prepared for pregnancy avoid sex. Some other respondents, however, think a girl stands a risk of getting pregnant if she engages in sexual intercourse within her ovulation period. Another group of participants could not say exactly when a girl risks the greatest risk of pregnancy. This shows that many of the students hold incorrect knowledge on the reproductive process, for example, with the exception of female students from Osunla High School (average age 14) all the participants were aware that a safe period exists in the female menstrual cycle, but do not have accurate knowledge on when it is in the cycle. This poor knowledge is higher among male students than female students. Often female students appear
to be the most knowledgeable about the rural students. One student had this to say, "A girl cannot be pregnant from intercourse because she has not lost her virginity; and therefore not fertile." Another student from Oshinwe Village, Akpugo, said, "If a girl sleeps with a man, she will not get pregnant." A boy in the same village added, "A girl cannot get pregnant at first intercourse but she can become pregnant at the second time. Although some students were able to state that pregnancy was possible with first intercourse, they were not able to link pregnancy to menstruation. For example, a male student from Maryland Boys, Akpugo said, "A girl can become pregnant at first intercourse but only if she is right inside the vagina, and not the outer section." This is a very important information that can result in unwanted pregnancies, particularly among teenagers who have no access to proper contraceptive methods.

Ways of avoiding unwanted births:

Respondents continued that there are ways of avoiding unwanted pregnancies, more than half of the respondents mentioned abortion as a method of contraception used by students. Other popular family planning methods listed include condoms, traditional methods, birth control pills, and artificial insemination. Other responses given by only a few of the respondents included socialization and Whisky in particular, "Andrew's liver salt" which is in a popular common household product in Nigeria for digestion and helps in the production of the male and female hormones. Other articles mentioned by a small number include such household products as kerosene, ash, pepper, and use of sharp objects and drugs.

Risks associated with casual sex:

Although many of the students have heard about HIV/AIDS, there was an attitude of guiltlessness among the students, particularly the male students. Majority of them believe that AIDS does not affect them because they have never slept with somebody suffering from it, and that they themselves know who is "sleeping around a lot" have developed it. Uniformly, males are hidden and protected by their family with the result that young adolescents have never seen anybody with the disease.
Incidence of forced sex and unwanted pregnancy among adolescents

About 43.6% of the adolescents interviewed have either experienced forced sex or had someone to request when she has been forced into having sex. (See Table 8). This Table shows that only about half (56.4%) of the respondents can confidently claim that they have never been involved in forced sex.

Table 9 also shows that 155 of the respondents have had babies while still in school. Out of this number, only eleven were in their senior secondary school (SSS) class when they had their babies. Majority had their babies while in the JSS (73) and SSS (73) classes. Further examination of the data shows that 43.9% of the respondents who had babies while in school were through forced sex. That is, at least four in every ten girls in the survey who has had a baby had been involved in forced sex. A high number of those students were in their junior secondary school (JSS) classes.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The major focus of this paper has been to determine the appropriate age to introduce a peer education program on human sexuality into the secondary school system of Emuakpor, Enugu State, Nigeria. To this end, a qualitative study was carried out to determine the social context for first intercourse for students, as well as their reproductive health knowledge and practices. Like similar studies in other parts of Nigeria, we found that at least one-quarter of the in-school adolescents interviewed were sexually active. That is, one in every four adolescents interviewed had sex at one time or another had sexual intercourse. This usually occurred at an early age, even before their senior secondary classes. Some had their first sexual intercourse as early as JSS, which corresponds to 10-14 years.

The context for first intercourse were for the most part different between female and male students. Whereas most boys are more likely to have initiated
Sexual intercourse under an atmosphere of peer influence and pressure, most girls
married sexual intercourse under an atmosphere of control, intimidation, and or
force. Girls were more likely to have intercourse for the first time by a much-
older man who placed on one occasion the little girls vulnerability or the other. It
will be a wonderful achievement, for girls can be kept out from hawking
goods about where they get exposure to sexual abuse. However, that will be
nothing more than an academic recommendation only. As long as families
continue to live in such poverty, the reality is that children will continue to
hawk goods to help the parents to earn more money. Therefore, we recommend
that some aspect of maternal education, age biology, as well as skill to control the
hawking environment be taught in the junior elementary school classes, which
will correspond with age 11-14 years. Such hawking and other women's groups should
become partners in the moral education of children as well as some warning signs
of danger in the hawking environment. For example, never to enter into a room
with a man even if he offers to buy all the goods. Mothers should be taught to
have some control over the environment where their children hawk food, and
monitor their selling behavior. Economically, hawking of goods by children is an
economic necessity for many families where child labor is used to augment the
family budget. However, parents need to be aware of the harmful consequences
hawking by young female children. (Oyew et. al. 2014) has found that low self-
esteem, and other sexual risk-adjustments in adult life were related to the timing
and context of first intercourse among Malian young girls. The study has also
confirmed that adolescents, especially the females, are vulnerable to forced
sex by their male peers as well. Some of the consequences as reported in UNDP
report (1994) included the sexually transmitted infections including HIV/AIDS,
apart from being victims for unwanted pregnancies, post abortion complications
including maternal mortality. The casual house hold products they claimed
were used to prevent pregnancy are actually very harmful products that can lead
to septic abortion and death. This is consistent with findings by Oto-ite et. al.
(2005) in Benin city Nigeria. Most of the girls were found to be using abortion services, but not contraception. Contraceptive services are not made
available to unmarried girls in Nigeria, and they are not taught about
contraception either at home or at school.

We recommend that peer eduction program be introduced in the junior
years of elementary schools (around 11 years). This will enable adolescents to
Unfortunately, only adolescent girls go through the agony of unwanted pregnancy, while the male partner may choose to deny any involvement, and in a country without any paternity test, proving fatherhood in an adolescent relationship is not easy. Secondly, with the shame attached to out of wedlock pregnancy, many parents will prefer an abortion to the scandal that pursuing the responsible male would bring to the whole family. It is therefore that any educational program on sexuality or reproduction must emphasize the responsibility in pregnancy. Children should be taught to see pregnancy as a joint responsibility of both the male and the female in the relationship. In our traditional village life style, each community had a traditional way of monitoring the sexual behavior of the young, and there were clear traditional ways of determining paternity and consequences in an adolescent out of wedlock marriage. However, in the modern city life style, those traditional norms and values have broken down, and society has not put a solid program in place to fulfill those traditional roles. We have neither educated our children for responsibilities in sexual behavior, with appropriate knowledge and values about the physiology of reproduction, nor tolerated them in the traditional values of what is acceptable in the culture of sexual behavior. The situation is made worse by the dearth of accurate information readily available to adolescents. In this interview, a high proportion (85.1%) of the respondents did not know that syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease. Adolescents must have increased access to correct reproductive health information. They should be encouraged and supported to make informed
Educational programs should emphasize male responsibility, and at the same time teach girls to have control over the context for unplanned sex. These programs should include the skills to respect and reject unwanted sexual advances. Programs should start from the elementary school, not stopped instead of wasting until when pupils are in secondary schools. The prepubescent interview has shown that some adolescents are sexually active when they are in elementary schools, at that age they cannot discuss with their parents, and at the same time, the school system provides no education for them. If at an appropriate and culturally competent educational program is introduced in the elementary school, a solid background for peer education would have been laid at the secondary school level. The result from this course therefore calls for redesigning the timing of reproductive health information program targeted at adolescents. Rather than wait to begin teaching them in senior classes, it is recommended that the curriculum should be re-designed to start in the elementary school years and gradually increase the sophistication of content in the secondary school years. Peer education programs should target adolescents in both secondary schools and such programs should teach boys about reproduction, as well as the expectations and responsibilities involved in sexual intercourse. Peer program for girls should incorporate self-esteem, understanding of circumstances and the context for unwanted sex, as well as the power and skill to say “no.” Any educational program that involves the old concept of “scare tactics” or excessive “sermon” will yield no meaningful outcome, because it usually does not teach adolescents the skill required to deal with real-life situations.

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