



AFRICA REGIONAL SEXUALITY
RESOURCE CENTRE

Understanding Human Sexuality Seminar Series 3

DISCUSSANT

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Comments on

Empowering Youths Through Sexuality Education: The Challenges and Opportunities

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Introduction

Empowerment has assumed a household name especially when talking about unequal power relations between people who otherwise ought to share powers equitably in matters that affect their lives and future endeavors. We are living in a society where power is shared unequally in favor of the privileged over the under-privileged; the rich over the poor; the men over women; the parents over their children; and adults over the youth. Empowerment is expected to transform the unequal power relations to equitable power sharing in favour of the less powerful. This is the reason why we hear phrases such as women empowerment, gender equality and equity, women and adolescents' sexual rights, Convention on the Rights of the Child, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. The phrases point to the reality that some groups in the society are at the receiving end of unequal power relations among which are the youths.

What is Youth Empowerment?

Youth empowerment refers to the processes by which youths gain inner power to express and defend their rights and gain greater self confidence, self identity, self esteem, and control over their own lives, personal and social relationships. Empowerment is the process by which unequal power relations are transformed into equitable power sharing in favour of those with less power. A related question then is: Who are youths? According to the WHO, youths are persons aged between 15 and 24 years, while adolescents are persons aged between 10 and 19 years. Young people are persons between 10 and 24 years

The next question is: Why is it necessary to empower youths?

To answer this question it will be necessary to have an understanding of their status.

Population Status of Nigerian Youths

According to NDHS (Nigerian Demographic and Health Survey 1999)

- Children aged 0-15 account for 40-45% of Nigerian total population
- About 56% are under 20 years
- About 63% are under 25 years
- About 30% are between 10 and 24 years.

So, Nigeria's population is a youthful one.

Sexual Activity of Nigerian Youth

Based on data from the 1999 NDHS:

- Over 25% of adolescents in Nigeria have had their first sexual intercourse by age 15 years.
- By age 18 years, over 60% of adolescents have had sexual intercourse.

So we can say that many Nigerian youths are sexually active.

Knowledge, Use of Contraception

According to the 1999 NDHS:

- Knowledge of any method of contraception was 6.4% for males aged 15-19 years
- Knowledge of any method of contraception was 14.9% for males aged 20-24 years.
- Knowledge of any method of contraception was 3.2% and 7.9% for females of corresponding age group
- Over 80% of adolescents and young people, male and female, aged 15-24 do not use any form of contraception

Therefore majority of young people in this age bracket engage in risky sexual behaviour.

Sexually Transmitted Infections

According to the (HIV/AIDS Sentinel Survey, 2000):

- Sexually transmitted infections are most prevalent among young people
- They are commonest among the 20-24 year old range; followed by the 15-19 year old range
- In some zones the prevalence among the 20-24 year old range is almost 10%
- In 1998 alone, 60% of the 20,334 AIDS cases documented were among young people aged 15-24 years.
- The proportion of HIV infections increased from 1.8% in 1990, to 3.8% in 1993, to 4.5% in 1995, to 5.4% in 1999 and 5.8% in 2001

So we can say that the youths are the most affected by the STI & HIV/AIDS pandemic and they are the most vulnerable group. If the issue of their vulnerability to HIV infections is not addressed now we may face the danger of having a generation of youth wiped out by AIDS

Next Steps

The answer seems to be Empower them! With what? With Sexuality Education !

This is the focus of this present discourse. This discussion will therefore examine:

- The nature of human sexuality
- The goals of comprehensive sexuality education
- The relationship between sexuality education and sexual health

This paper will attempt to provide answers to and provide answers to the following questions: Does sexuality education lead to positive and responsible sexual practices? Does sexuality education promote promiscuity? How will sexuality education empower youth? What are the challenges facing promoters of sexuality education in Nigeria? What are the available opportunities that can be explored to promote the acceptance and implementation of sexuality education in Nigeria?

Prof. Madunagu by adopting the WHO definition in her paper describes sexuality as:

“A central aspect of being human throughout life, encompassing sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy, and reproduction being experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships”. The definition also notes the influence

and interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical, religious, and spiritual factors.

She affirmed that this definition clearly shows that sexuality, contrary to the general misconception, goes beyond the abstract action of sexual intercourse to cover the totality of who we are as human beings, male or female.

Madunagu also looked at sexuality from three parameters which are: a person's relationship with himself or herself; his relationship with others; and with his community; and that these relationships are explored and demonstrated by the way we show care; passion; affection and love.

She also noted that the way we express our sexuality is influenced, dictated and shaped by social attitudes, expectations, norms and taboos. This would probably explain partly the myths, the misconceptions, the negative reactions toward, and the politicization of human sexuality and sexuality education.

Prof. Madunagu made a connection between sexuality and sexual health. by adopting the WHO definition again, she describes sexual health as :

- a state of physical emotional mental and social well-being related to sexuality
- not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity
- requiring a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships
- including the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, that is free from coercion, discrimination and violence
- Sexual health makes it possible to have a safe and enjoyable sexual life

For sexual health to be attained and maintained, she said the sexual rights of people must be respected, protected, and be fulfilled.

Sexual rights according to her include the rights of all persons free of coercion, discrimination and violence to sexuality education, and reproductive health care services, among others.

Sexuality education according to Prof Madunagu would guide young people into having a healthy and responsible sexuality and sexual life.

This is because through sexuality education young people would acquire factual and accurate information about sexuality, they would form attitudes , beliefs, and values about their identities, they would learn about sexual development, reproductive health, interpersonal relationships, and acquire skills to communicate effectively and make responsible decisions. In essence therefore comprehensive sexuality education will and does promote the sexual health of young people and empower them to live responsible and sexually healthy lives.

Now to address the question: Does sexuality education lead to positive and responsible sexual practices?

From various research conducted by the WHO in connection with sexuality education the following results have emerged:

- Sexuality education results in either delayed sexual activity or decreased overall sexual activity
- There is increased adoption of safer sexual practices among the sexually active youths
- Access to counseling and contraceptive services did not encourage earlier or increased sexual activity

It has also been found that: Sexuality education is positively correlated with:

- Increase in sexual knowledge and personal comfort with sexuality
- Increased tolerance towards behaviours and personal values of others
- Delay in the onset of sexual intercourse and increased likelihood of using contraception when intercourse is initiated
- Increased communication with parents about sexual matters leading to more responsible behaviours
- Increased self-esteem and decision-making skills.

To further support the WHO findings, the Department of Policy, Strategy and Research of UNAIDS reviewed 53 studies that evaluated specific interventions. Out of these 53 studies:

- 27 studies reported that sexual health education neither increased nor decreased sexual activity
- 22 studies reported that sexual health education either delayed the onset of sexual activity, reduced the number of sexual partners, or reduced unplanned pregnancy and STD rates
- Only 3 studies reported increase in sexual behaviour associated with sexual health education.

From the above findings, there is very little evidence to support the contention that Sexuality education promotes promiscuity. Rather the findings above indicate that sexuality education contributes to higher levels of abstinence; later initiation of sexual activity; greater use of contraception; and fewer sexual partners;

The Challenges

Prof Madunagu mentioned some of these challenges in her presentation.

These include the politicization of Sexuality and Sexuality Education resulting from the fear of providing information that would address the core of patriarchal exploitation of women. Denial of the use of the term sexuality is seen as part of patriarchal power control and socio-cultural norms reinforced by religious injunctions to suppress the free expression of sexuality in girls and women. This control is expressed through rites such as widowhood rites and female genital mutilation.

She also noted the negative reactions to the concept of sexuality resulting from its misconception, amongst others.

Opportunities for Promotion of Sexuality Education

Prof Madunagu in her paper recommends the continued use of the approved curriculum to disseminate accurate information and build the skills of in and out-of-school youths. She also advocates the creation of more youth-friendly services at state and local government levels, and in schools and institutions of higher learning. She recommends

Peer as well as parent education programmes and collaborative partnerships between NGOs, Government and private organizations to set up youth centres and recreational facilities. Such facilities, she argues, will provide opportunities for sexuality education training and interactions between the young people and adults after school, on weekends and during vacation .

Conclusion

If young people are allowed to have access to sexuality education, it will promote their sexual health and help them to have sexually healthy lifestyles with corresponding reduction in the rate of STI /HIV /AIDS infections, teenage pregnancy, abortion, and thus, mortality rates would also drop. By allowing our young people access to sexuality education we are empowering them to take full control of their lives.

If on the other hand we continue to condemn sexuality education with our promiscuity and immorality theory, deny the sexual activity among the youths, and consequently restrict them from having access to sexuality education by our action and attitude, then we should be prepared to face the consequences of our actions.

What do we want? Youth access to sexuality education in order to save lives. We must think of the future today and take action to preserve it

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