

Policy Brief

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SUGAR DADDY" BABIES AND THEIR MOTHERS: CROSS-GENERATIONAL SEXUAL RELATIONSHIP OUTCOMES AMONG GIRLS IN ACCRA

INTRODUCTION

Generally, the adoption of the 2000 Adolescent Reproductive Health Policy in Ghana, and the inclusion of teenage pregnancy as an emerging issue earlier in the revised 1994 National Population Policy are indications of efforts being made to promote the reproductive health of young people in the country. Promotion of good reproductive health for young girls, girl-child education and campaign against HIV/AIDS provide adequate understanding of cross-generational sexual relationships in Ghana as well as its reproductive health outcomes and desirable human development implications.

Despite these efforts, risky sexual behaviour among young people remains a major concern. Girls especially, have had relatively poor sexual reproductive health (SRH) and outcomes, particularly premarital, early and unintended pregnancies. Consequently, many of these adolescent mothers drop out of school while others are forced into early marriage.

Methods

This policy brief is based on a research that is part of a larger one that examined factors associated with child care such as marital status of mothers and paternal care and the nutritional and health status of children, mostly Ewe, in Accra.

The study combined both quantitative and qualitative research approaches, including quantitative survey, in-depth interviews and life stories. It was observed among 34 young mothers aged between 15 and 24 years studied in their households and five others in a health facility and at the premises of DOVVSU.

Cross-Generational Sexual Relationship

Cross-generational sex has been defined as any non-marital sexual relation between a girl and a male sexual partner that is 10 or more years older than her. This "standard"

definition has been revised following some research findings on HIV/AIDS among young people which indicates that the prevalence rate among young people whose sexual partners are five or more years older than them is higher than their counterparts with lesser age gap between them and their sexual partners. Subsequently, a revised definition uses an age gap of five years or more (PRB 2008). Commonly known as “Sugar-Daddy” in Ghana and cross-generational sexual relationship or age-mixing in the literature, the nature of this sexual behaviour exposes young girls to the risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS as well as loss of educational opportunities and career development. It is common among students in secondary and tertiary educational institutions.

The concept seems to be new in research; and most research on cross-generational sex has been conducted in sub-Saharan Africa where HIV prevalence rates are high and where the virus has devastated families and communities, according to a review of the literature by the PRB (2008). The literature notes the motivations and the increased risks that cross-generational sex engenders. Data from DHS indicates that sexually active young girls aged 15- 17 years with partner at least 10 years older in the past year ranges from 1.7% at the GDHS to 21.3% in Nigeria at the 2003 Nigerian Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS). The results of the 2008 GDHS also show that 30.4% of all girls aged 15-19 years had their first sexual intercourse with a male partner that was five years older than them. The age gap between another 6.4% and 0.9% of the girls and their male partners were 11- 20 years and 21 and over respectively. This shows that a substantial percentage of non-marital sex among young girls is with older male partners.

According to the Luke and Kurz (2002) perspective, three reasons characterize cross-generational sex: 1) exchange of sex for money, preference of younger adolescents who are perceived to be free of HIV and decline of traditional social structures that controlled sexuality and decrease of family control over the sexuality of young people. They further argue that even if the young girls appear to be willing to engage in cross-generational sex they are vulnerable to exploitation by their male partners because of the power imbalance that characterizes the relationship.

KEY FINDINGS

Age Misreporting and Observed Impressions about the Age Gap

The ages stated by some of the mothers were inconsistent with other information on them and their children. Age misreporting was done probably to conceal the age gap.

Some Implications of the Age Gap and Associated Intergenerational Conflicts

The embarrassment about the age gap was just one of the consequences that the young girls seemed to face. They also had some conflict situations with their parents, sexual partners and others. The conflicts resulted were associated with their relationship with their sexual partners and some differences in their aspirations vis-à-vis their parents'.

The Babies, Their Needs and their Fathers

The main consequence of the impossibility of marriage between some of the mothers and their sexual partners was that the babies were not co-resident with their fathers. Lack of co-residence with father was quite high. A little over a third 35.4% of the children were not living with both parents. A quarter (24.8%) of them was living with their mother only.

The fathers were not supporting the children whose mothers were not married to them. The children were living with their mothers and they were part of the households of the parents of their mothers. Meanwhile, their mothers were not working. They had also dropped out of school and needed to go back or will enter the labour market later without any skills unless they learn some trade before doing so. There was therefore a disconnect between fathers and their children which may have affected the children psychosocial development.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The current policies that address the reproductive health of girls and young people seem to have little or no sanctions against the sexual behaviours of male partners. The complex culturally-dictated notions and prescribed responses to cross-generational sex are not captured in the policies that address reproductive health of young people such as the girls under study. Consequently, it may be expected that the challenges posed by the outcomes of the relationships may not be addressed. In view of these findings, this brief argues for three policy recommendations:

The Need for a Family Policy: The role of family support that averts the negative consequences of the outcomes for some of the girls cannot be overemphasized. The decisions of the parents of these young mothers are in line of the second of the MDGs which encourages governments to adopt policies that can allow teenage pregnant girls to continue studying, among others. While the government of Ghana and many others are yet to adopt such policies, the family will remain a major source of support for many young people. This suggests that a family policy that can contribute to human wellbeing in Ghana is long overdue.

Emphasize the human development dimension of the Adolescent Reproductive Health Policy: There is the need to stress on the human development dimensions to the

government and policy makers. This energize the political will required to address the challenges may be more readily forthcoming and sustainable. This is very important as the resources that are allocated to the achievement of human development can be undermined by the outcomes of the cross-generational sexual relations that may not be recognized as a direct determinant of human development even though it is implied by the objectives of the Adolescent Reproductive Health Policy for instance.

Conduct Large Scale Research: It is recommended that the research be conducted on a larger scale so that research evidence can be communicated to policy makers, NGOs in health and gender advocates who address reproductive health challenges of young girls. Micro level studies such as the present one are also necessary and should be replicated in various contexts (rural, urban, in-school, out-of-school, among others) to understand the depth of the issues associated with the sexual relations of the young girls and their older partners.

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