

Title: Adolescent childbearing in Cameroon: an analysis of trends, determinants and health consequences

The reproductive health needs of adolescents have been largely ignored by the existing health services a long time ago in Cameroon. Since the Programme of Action adopted at the International Conference on Population and Development, held at Cairo in 1994, stresses the importance of addressing adolescent sexual and reproductive health issues and promoting responsible sexual and reproductive behaviour (United Nations, 1994), there is a need to provide such services and to undertake research in understanding adolescent sexual and reproductive behaviour. Thus, the reproductive health of adolescents is of growing concern today.

In fact it is important to recognize the growing incidence of premarital sexual activity among adolescents owing to the widening gap between age at menarche and age at marriage. As most acts of premarital sexual intercourse are unprotected, sexually active adolescents are increasingly at risk of contracting and transmitting sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including the human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS).

The issue of adolescent sexuality and its consequences is not new in Cameroon. For a number of years, there has been considerable concern about high levels of teenage pregnancy and their effects on the individual and society. The emergence and rapid spread of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) among the country's population has resulted in massive campaigns to sensitise people about the seriousness of sexually transmitted diseases and information on how to minimise the risk of infection.

In addition, young women are particularly vulnerable to coerced sexual intercourse as a result of gender power imbalances. Sexually experienced adolescents are typically unaware of the consequences of unprotected sexual intercourse and are poorly informed of their sexuality and means of protecting themselves, often leading to unwanted pregnancy and abortion.

In some regions of the Cameroon, there is a high proportion of marriage during adolescence, resulting in a high rate of adolescent childbearing. Motherhood at a very young age entails a risk of maternal mortality that far exceeds the average, and the children of young mothers tend to have higher levels of morbidity and mortality. Early childbearing continues to be an impediment to improvements in the educational, economic and social status of women. It is also known that contraceptive use among married adolescents is noticeably lower than among older women. Thus, it is important that information and services on reproductive health be made available to both married as well as unmarried adolescents.

This paper first highlights the recent trends and health consequences of adolescent childbearing in Cameroon. Differences in risks of adolescent childbearing by place of residence, marital status and level of education are also assessed.. It discusses adolescent sexually and the factors that influence their sexual behaviour. It also discusses adolescent childbearing and contraceptive use. Finally, it examines the consequences of adolescent sexuality and childbearing and concludes with a discussion outlining the scope for further research.

The analysis is based on the 1991, 1998 and 2004 CDHS. The findings indicate that more than 50% of adolescent births occur out of marriage. A higher proportion of

rural and less-educated women had a pregnancy or a child before age 20, compared with urban and better-educated women, respectively. The trend analysis on teenage childbearing shows that a substantial decline in adolescent childbearing has occurred in Cameroon, particularly in rural areas between the mid-1990s and early part of the new century. Pregnancy-related complications are also higher among teenage women relative to older women. Neonatal mortality is also found to be much higher among children born to teenage mothers than among those born to older mothers. Although Abortion Is Highly Restricted in Cameroon, It Is Not Uncommon Among urban Adolescent.

CONCLUSIONS

From the preceding analysis, it is evident that the sexual and reproductive health of Adolescents have emerged as an issue of great concern in Cameroon.

(a) The widening gap between sexual maturity and age at marriage, which results in premarital sexual activities among adolescents in many countries and areas in the region;

(b) The continuing prevalence of adolescent marriage and low contraceptive use during adolescence, resulting in a high rate of adolescent fertility. The adverse health consequences of adolescent fertility for both mothers and children include the high rate of maternal mortality and infant mortality. The vulnerability of adolescent girls to STDs, including HIV/AIDS, and early childbearing also have a negative impact on the educational prospects of girls, including pregnancy-related school dropout, thereby threatening their economic and overall development prospects.