

## Original Studies

### Reproductive Health in Nigeria

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**Abstract.** *Background:* Adolescents have special reproductive health needs, but these peculiar needs are often unmet in many cultures and countries.

*Methods:* A cross-sectional study involving adolescents in three secondary schools in a northern Nigerian setting. Demographic characteristics as well as reproductive health issues (adolescent sex, abortion, sexual experience) among the students were surveyed.

*Results:* Of the 1070 students that fully participated in the survey, 539 (50.4%) were girls and 531 (49.6%) boys. They were aged 10 - 27 years (median 16 Years). Five hundred forty three (50.7%) were Christians and 499 (46.6%) Muslims. Nine hundred and four (84.5%) of the students knew about abortion. On their view about reasons why adolescents indulge in premarital sex, 574 (53.6%) felt it was to please boyfriend/girlfriend, 391 (36.5%) to experiment with sex, 312 (29.6%) to test fertility and 239 (22.3%) felt it was to stop painful menstruation. One hundred thirty five (12.6%) have had sex and 15 - 19 years age group were more likely to be sexually active. Twelve (1.1%) of the girls had been pregnant once - four times before and all had an abortion. Children of civil servants were significantly more likely to be sexually active compared to other groups of children ( $p < 0.05$ ). All the respondents knew one or more complication of abortion to include inability to get pregnant in future 682 (63.7%), abdominal pain 589 (55%) and painful menstruation 427 (39.9%).

*Conclusion:* Adolescents are unique in every way including issues of reproductive health. The age at sexual debut in this setting is early. There is a need to include reproductive health education in the curriculum of secondary schools. This should help the adolescents to obtain the correct information from the right source.

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**Key Words.** Adolescents—sexual debut—premarital sex—abortion—beliefs

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#### Introduction

Nigeria has a population of 140 million people, and adolescents constitute about 20%, or one fifth, of the total population.<sup>1-5</sup> This has important reproductive implications because it means a large proportion of the future adult population needs to have the correct information about reproductive health.

Adolescents have special needs as regards reproductive issues because they are often ill informed, exploited, and prone to various complications.<sup>6-8</sup> About two fifths of teenage pregnancies in Nigeria are believed to end in induced abortions, with the majority being carried out by untrained personnel and in unsafe environments. They thus constitute the majority of cases of abortion-related complications admitted in Nigerian hospitals.<sup>8-9</sup>

In most cultures it is rare or even a taboo for parents to discuss reproductive issues with their adolescent children, leaving adolescents to obtain such information by themselves. Such information is then obtained from friends, the media, older siblings, and any other available informants.<sup>10</sup> Most of these sources are wrong and often misleading. The need to establish the frequency of sexual practices, including intercourse and related issues, among secondary school students and thus the need for reproductive health education is the objective of this study.

#### Materials and Methods

Three secondary schools were sampled from a list of secondary schools in Zaria, Northern Nigeria. Written permission was obtained from the school authorities to allow the study; one of the school authorities turned

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**Table 1.** Age and Sex of 1070 Students Involved in the Survey

Age (years)	Gender		Total (%)
	Male	Female	
10–14	99	126	225 (21.0)
15–19	410	409	819 (76.5)
> 19	22	4	26 (2.4)
Total (%)	531 (49.6)	539 (50.4)	1070 (100)

down the request, and another school was sampled to replace it.

We administered 1070 semistructured questionnaires to students of the sampled schools to obtain information about their demographic characteristics, their sexual experience, their knowledge about abortion and the complications of abortion, and their sexual debuts. Issues relating to contraception were not included in the study because that would have made it impossible to receive permission from the school authorities to proceed with the study.

The questionnaires were administered by the authors and were analyzed using statistical package for social sciences version 15.0. The *P* value of  $\leq 0.05$  was considered significant.

### Demographics

There were 531 (49.6%) boys and 539 (50.4%) girls aged 10 to 27 years (median 16 years) (Table 1). Of them, 183 (17.1%) were in junior secondary school, and 858 (80.2%) were in senior secondary school; 29 (2.7%) did not indicate their class (whether junior or secondary school).

In the group of students, 499 (46.6%) were Muslim; 543 (50.7%) were Christian; 4 (0.4%) were of other religions; and 24 (2.3%) did not specify a religion. The group included 323 students (29.9%) of the Hausa/Fulani tribe; 148 (13.8%) of the Ibo tribe; 126 (11.8%) of the Yoruba tribe; and 476 (44.5%) of other tribal groups.

**Table 2.** Reasons for Adolescent Premarital Sex as Perceived by Respondents\*

Reason	Yes (%)	No (%)	Not Sure (%)
To please boyfriend/girlfriend	574 (53.6)	254 (23.7)	242 (22.6)
For monetary gain (sex for money)	507 (47.4)	280 (26.2)	283 (26.4)
Due to peer pressure	418 (39.1)	336 (31.4)	316 (29.5)
To experiment	391 (36.4)	358 (33.5)	322 (30.1)
To test fertility	312 (29.2)	399 (37.3)	354 (33.1)
To stop painful menstruation	239 (22.3)	489 (45.7)	342 (32.0)

\*N = 1070

**Table 3.** Knowledge by the Respondents of What Abortion Constitutes

Definition	Religion (%)		Total (N = 1042 (%))
	Muslim (N = 499)	Christian (N = 543)	
Termination of pregnancy	329 (65.9)	396 (72.9)	725 (69.6)
Killing of baby	53 (10.6)	103 (19.0)	156 (15.0)
Combination of above two	17 (3.4)	10 (1.8)	27 (2.6)

According to the students' responses, 658 (61.5%) had fathers who were civil servants; 226 (21.1%) had fathers who were self-employed; 122 (11.4%) had fathers who were skilled; 90 (8.4%) had fathers who were unemployed; and 96 (9.0%) did not state their fathers' occupations. Of the students' mothers, 517 (48.3%) were civil servants; 207 (19.3%) were self-employed; 114 (10.7%) were full-time housewives; and 232 (21.7%) had other occupations.

### Reasons for Adolescent Sex

The responses of the students to the question that asked why they thought adolescents indulged in premarital sex are summarized in Table 2 (they were allowed to choose as many responses as they wanted to from the options given in the questionnaire). The reasons given included to experiment with sex, 391 (36.5%); to please a boyfriend/girlfriend 574 (53.6%); to test fertility 312 (29.2%); because of peer pressure 418 (39.1%); for monetary gains (sex for money) 507 (47.4%); and to stop painful menstruation, 239 (22.3%).

A significantly large proportion of the group between 15 and 19 years of age chose pleasing boyfriend/girlfriend as the reason for premarital sex as compared to other age groups ( $P = 0.019$ ).

Significantly more Christians than Muslims chose peer pressure and sex for money ( $P < 0.05$ ).

**Table 4.** Perceived Reason for Seeking Abortion Among Adolescents\*

Reason	Yes (%)	No (%)	Not sure (%)
Not ready to become parent	805 (75.2)	96 (9.0)	169 (15.8)
To avoid disappointing parents	762 (71.2)	81 (7.6)	227 (21.2)
Too young to be parents	647 (60.5)	162 (15.1)	261 (24.4)
Society abhors pregnant adolescents	545 (50.9)	224 (20.9)	301 (28.1)

\*N = 1070

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