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Factors inhibiting educated mothers in Kenya from giving meaningful sex-education to their daughters

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Abstract

Public health studies advocate the education of women, especially mothers, stating that educated mothers are highly likely to pass on their education to their children, as well as enforce in their homes healthy practices thereby protecting entire families from disease. Whereas this is usually true in regard to most infectious diseases such as influenza, it is not usually the case when it comes to sexually transmitted infections (STIs) such as HIV/AIDS. The research is based on a survey focus group discussion with high-school students (aged 17–19) and interviews with 10 high-school teachers in 1996. In 2003, data were collected from a focus group with fourth-form students and interviews with 4 teachers and 15 mothers whose daughters were in high school. The findings indicate that most educated mothers in urban Kenya experience socio-cultural and religious inhibitions which hinder them from providing meaningful sex-education to their pre-adolescent and adolescent daughters. This paper discusses these inhibitions and the steps educated mothers take to ensure that their daughters receive some form of sex-education.

Keywords: Kenya; Adolescent girls; Christianity; Sex-education; Educated mothers; Focus-group discussions

Introduction

Dr. James Kwegyir Aggrey, a famous Ghanaian educationist and philosopher of the nineteenth century, stated that if you educate a man, you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman, you educate a family (village, nation). This philosophy holds true in matters pertaining to most infectious diseases such as such as influenza, pneumonia and tuberculosis—all of which are preventable through improvements in immunization, nutrition and (personal and environmental) hygiene. Indeed, most educated Kenyan mothers have their children immunized against childhood diseases, and they usually take care of their own hygiene and nutrition needs and teach their children and members of their household to do the same. Unfortunately, most Kenyan mothers do not teach their children about sex or sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS. Since these mothers are knowledgeable about HIV/AIDS, why do they fail to give meaningful sex-education to their daughters?

This paper answers the above question by discussing the socio-cultural and religious impediments that hinder educated mothers from giving meaningful sex-education to their own daughters. The paper is divided into five parts, namely: (a) a discussion of the background to this study, which reviews literature on sex education and socialization

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of young people in African countries, especially Kenya; (b) methodology; (c) brief narrative of my own sex-education; (d) discussion of socio-cultural barriers to meaningful sex-education; and (e) discussion of the steps taken by educated mothers in the sex-education of their daughters.

Background to the study

Kayongo-Male and Onyango (1984) note that one of the most striking characteristics of socialization in the traditional African family was the large number of socialization agents. These included parents, older siblings, as well as aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. Apart from the immediate and extended family, children were socialized by the whole community, hence the African saying, "It takes a village to raise a child." As children grew older, their immediate families socialized them for adult role responsibilities. However, parents did not give them sex-education. Instead, extended family members gave the limited sex education that took place within families, and this was done along gender lines. Kayongo-Male, and Onyango (1984, p. 20) note

> Grandparents were instrumental in introducing young people to more sensitive topics such as husband–wife relationships and sexual behavior, as well as the larger societal roles, values and traditions. They relied on story-telling, proverbs and songs as techniques of socialization. After the age of ten or so, grandmothers were more closely involved with female grandchildren and grandfathers with male grandchildren.

The key reason members of the extended family, rather than the immediate family, gave sex-education to youth was because most African ethnic groups forbade sex discussions between parents and their children. It is noteworthy to mention that although sub-Saharan Africa has thousands of ethnic groups that have varying cultural norms, one common norm observed by most of them is this taboo against sex discussions between adults and their immediate juniors. For many ethnic groups, it was taboo for those who had undergone the adult initiation rites (such as circumcision) which demarcated their transition from childhood to adulthood, to discuss matters pertaining to sex with the uninitiated because the latter, irrespective of their age, were considered children.

The adult initiation rites, which took place when youth reached puberty, usually lasted three to six months. During this period, the initiates stayed together in secluded huts where they received meaningful sex-education by specially trained older men or women referred to by various names, such as sponsors. Unlike other adults in the society, sponsors were permitted, and mandated, to give comprehensive sex-education to the initiates. They gave them candid sex talks, and to reinforce these talks they also taught them songs that contained sexually explicit language. Because the initiates danced to these sexually explicit songs that they were learning, dancing became another channel through which sex-education was reinforced. The initiates were married immediately after undergoing the adult initiation rites, which meant that the gap between sexual maturity and marriage was very short. They were married off that quickly to ensure virginity and prevent unwanted pregnancies (Kayongo-Male & Onyango, 1984; Kenyatta, 1978; Molnos, 1973).

Among the Kenyan ethnic groups that forbade any pre-marital sexual activities, such as the Luo, Turkana and Somali, girls were brought up under very strict supervision and were sometimes married off before they reached puberty. At marriage, these girls were expected to show proof of virginity, and if they failed to do so they received severe punishment (Kayongo-Male & Onyango, 1984; Molnos, 1973; Njau, 1993). All ethnic groups were not as strict with their adolescent girls. On the contrary, some allowed various outlets of sexual expression among the initiates before marriage. The Kikuyu, for example, forbade penetrative sex before marriage but permitted the initiates to practice *Ngwiko*—non-penetrative stimulation of the sexual organs prior to marriage. To prevent pregnancies during *Ngwiko*, girls wore leather skirts between their legs where the young men ejaculated (Kenyatta, 1978). Though on the surface this may suggest that the Kikuyus were largely free of moral restraint, they were required to conform to a moral order, and any initiate who transgressed it (for example, by having penetrative sex) was severely punished (Ahlberg, 1994; Kenyatta, 1978). This not notwithstanding, it is noteworthy to mention that in some African ethnic groups, sponsors gave the initiates sexual demonstrations. Sometimes these demonstrations involved actual sexual intercourse between these young initiated girls and young men aged between 15 and 18, or with an older male referred to as the hyena (Molnos, 1973; Rangeley, 1948; Singhateh, 2004).