

# Youth, Sexuality, and Reproductive Health: Current Events, Issues in Abidjan (Ivory Coast)

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**Abstract:** According to the results of the March 2022 school statistics of the Ministry of National Education and Literacy (MENA) of Ivory Coast, the pregnancy rate is 5,833 cases including 233 cases in primary and 5,600 cases in secondary. This increase in cases, despite the 2013-2015 accelerated plan to reduce school pregnancies and the "zero school pregnancies" campaign, which led to convincing results of reduction in 2014, prompted further reflection. This contribution is based on a literature review of data, based on the assumption that school-based pregnancy involves the responsibility of both youth and society in its institutions and its transmission of values. Therefore, the objective of this contribution is to determine the explanatory factors by identifying the representation of sexuality among young people without concealing the responsibility of parents and society in general. The methodology, essentially based on a content analysis in an interpretative approach, leads to results that address the persistence of the leakage of parental responsibility, the positioning of social networks as a source of information and the issue of gender-based violence related to school pregnancy rates.

**Keywords:** Reproductive Health, Youth, Sexuality, Social Networks, Pregnancy, Ivory Coast

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## 1. Introduction

Youth is perceived as a social category that, although objectified by biological age, remains dependent on social productions related to social situations but also to the perception of individuals and their relationship to the body [8]. Thus, «assimilated, at first, to an age group related to school, youth becomes a stage of transition to adulthood». Indeed, according to Galland (opcit), the lengthening of school training induces a lack of preparation of youth to enter adulthood. This leads to a form of individualization of this transition». The identification of the individual as a young person is now henceforth based on experimentation. This transition from identification to experimentation leads young people to give meaning to their lives, by escaping role constraints in order to achieve a certain authenticity of their identity. Youth considered as a social category emphasizes secondary socialization, which allows actors to push the limits set by primary socialization [3], especially when it comes to sexuality. Indeed, young people in their transition to adulthood experience various transitions which, for the most part, translate into identity difficulties sometimes

induced by risky behaviours in the context of sexual experience. Thus, since 2000, Ivory Coast has been confronted with the phenomenon of sexual precocity of young people, who make up 30% of its population (Ivory Coast's National Comprehensive Sexual Education Programme 2016 – 2020). Indeed, the age of entry into sexuality of this segment of the population has shifted to 9-10 years (pre-adolescence) instead of 18 years as in the 1970s with an early fertility rate of 23% (Statistical data from the Ministry of National Education and Technical Education, cited by Ahuie et al [1]). Thus, the 5,076 cases of pregnancies in primary and secondary education according to the 2012-2013 MENET survey rose to 5,833 cases (233 cases in primary and 5,600 cases in secondary) for the year 2021-2022, according to the results of the March 2022 school statistical data from the Ministry of National Education and Literacy (MENA 2022). This increase in pregnancy cases in 2021-2022 is a paradox in the context of the "zero school pregnancy" campaign launched since 2013. Indeed, based on the findings that 6% of girls already have a child or are pregnant before the age of 15; 12% are in union before 15 years; 77.6% of children aged 11 to 15 are affected by the

phenomenon of unwanted pregnancies with a peak from the CM1 class to the 3rd grade class; 6718 cases of sexually transmitted infections for which the “région des lagunes” is one of the regions of prevalence (Accelerated School Pregnancy Reduction Plan 2013-2015, P 2), it proved necessary to implement an accelerated school pregnancy reduction plan. The objective of this plan is “to contribute to improving the quality of education by strengthening the integration of population issues including sexual and reproductive health into the education system in Ivory Coast (Accelerated School Pregnancy Reduction Plan 2013-2015, P3). To achieve this, seven (7) strategies have been put in place, including: creating a favourable environment for the zero school pregnancy campaign at the administrative, social, media and legal levels; inform, educate and communicate with students about SSR for behavioural change; use arts, culture and sports to promote SSR; strengthen the SSR service offering in schools; reduce the vulnerability of girls in school; Coordinate, monitor and evaluate the zero school pregnancy campaign (Accelerated School Pregnancy Reduction Plan 2013-2015, P 4-6). If this campaign has borne fruit in its launch with a reduction of 33.53% of cases from 2012-2013 (5076 cases) to 2016-2017 (3374) according to a point made in 2019 by the Minister of National Education Kandia Camara, we need to recognize a resurgence of cases in 2021 – 2022.

What explains this resurgence in school pregnancy cases?

What is the representation of sexuality among young people? What is the impact of gender-based violence on the increase in the rate of pregnancies among young people? The objective of this reflection is therefore to determine the factors explaining the resurgence in school pregnancy cases. The specific objectives are to identify the representation of sexuality among young people and to show the correlation between gender-based violence and the increase in pregnancy rate among young people.

As a research hypothesis, the resurgence in school pregnancy cases is linked to individual and collective responsibility in sexual and reproductive behaviour.

As secondary hypotheses, sexuality is perceived among young people as much as the manifestation of a certain power as the submission to that power. In addition, the issue of sexual harassment and the “droit de seigneur”, as well as the early entry into household of some young girls, are at the root of the increase in pregnancies among young people.

## 2. Methodology

The methodology used is a content analysis in an interpretative approach (Drisko and Maschi, 2015) based on a general reflection on the sexuality of young people in relation to the latest statistical results of the Ministry of National Education and Literacy (MENA, 2022). The aim is to seek the meanings that can be extracted from the present data in terms of sexuality among young people in Abidjan.

## 3. Contributory Development

The analysis of the present data brings out several points including the cliché of parental disengagement but also the upsurge of a form of education via social networks with the figure of coaches and influencers (male and female). It also highlights the issue of power through the faces of “sugar Dady<sup>1</sup>” and “petits-pompier” (little fire fighters) but also that of gender-based violence within the school (harassment, droit de seigneur) and outside the school (forced marriage).

### 3.1. Parental Disengagement and Secondary Expertise

According to Durkheim cited by Gombleu, the function of parents involves in a universal way ensuring the survival and health of their child, participating in his development and transmitting to him the values and standards [9]. As Thollembeck reminds us, “socialization refers to the process by which we learn and internalize cultural models, the norms and values that allow us to integrate into society [13]. This therefore supposes that for a good interaction of the child with his environment, he must acquire a cultural heritage which contributes to his integration but above all to his coherence as a part of the whole. Thus, the child apprehends, in a first phase, the world through the parental educational contributions. Thus, as Parsons [12] quoted by Cadolle (2009) shows, the model of the family is this:

«Family of the first modernity where the marriage of love and the provider/housewife couple are democratized and whose specific function is no longer the economic survival of the family group but the socialization of the children. The mother carries the affective and educational function and the father the instrumental function and authority. (...) the coherence of this system allows parents to represent before their children, an orderly and stable world which guarantees them an authority, softened by the importance of affection, but real.» [6]

Even if this model is presented as that of the family of the middle classes of the twentieth century in France, it must be recognized that it also took place in Africa and more particularly in Ivory Coast. However, with the industrial revolution, modernization and its share of urbanization and mutation, including the strengthening of the power of school; changes within the family materialized by the rights of children and their respect, gender equality in the couple... impact social relationships and practices. Thus, family planning, the emphasis on the vulnerability of the child and the need to protect him, the criticisms of the autocratic authority of the parents, move the child from the context of being subjugated by his parents to the psychological subject whose feelings and skills must be taken into account. As a result, and as Gibran (1925) quoted by Cadolle [6] indicates, the child's right to protection implies that parents respect the child while remaining attentive to him and taking into

<sup>1</sup> Sugar dady: these are wealthy men ready to finance the studies of young female students in exchange for moments of tenderness. The phenomenon was born in the United States in the form of a dating site and has spread. Since 2020, the phenomenon exists in Ivory Coast

account his desires. All things which furthermore lead to a gradual loss of the authority of parents which is reinforced by the economic crises (1980, 1999, 2000, 2011 in Ivory Coast) and their unemployment rate but also health crises and particularly that of 2019 around the world with COVID-19). In addition, the deconstruction and remodeling of the family in multiple forms tolerated, accepted or in the process of acceptance (single-parent family, civil partnership, GBLT, etc.), certain rights granted to adolescents, such as the right to freedom of information, expression, freedom of religious conscience, the right to respect for one's privacy completes the demonstration that "the will of the minor has become preponderant and even exclusive of parental authority (...) for all that concerns the areas of sexuality (...) reproduction, motherhood and even health" (from the age of 15) as Cadolle reveals [6]. In an African and particularly Ivorian context, sex education, although taboo for parents, was culturally constructed with the establishment of mechanisms: preparation, by designated people in the community, of the young girl for her role as mother and marriage from puberty so that entry into sexual activity takes place within the framework of marriage and to respect the procreative vision of the act. Thus, within the restricted framework of the family, parents initiate contact with sexuality in young people, at the time of the first menses in girls, or when there is suspicion sexual activity in boys, in the form of threats to the risks of pregnancy, sexually transmitted infection and the risk of interrupting studies and dropping out of the school system. With the importance of new information technologies as well as the liberalization of the internet even on smartphones and other androids offered to young people, parents find themselves deprived and overwhelmed.

Faced with this educational void in terms of sexuality, peers take over with the support of social networks. Indeed, for "young people motivated by curiosity, desire and the search for pleasure, peers can be considered as groups with the same aspirations, the same life course, which is why peer education (EP) has entered the field of health interventions [2], cited by Le Stum [11]. It is a necessity for the young person to identify, integrate and assert himself as a member of a "family of peers". To do this, he must "fit into the norm", accept this socialization which will be for him, source of well-being, the group representing in this context, in the construction of the young adult, a capital support [10]. The strength of this second family lies in the fact that it has a driving effect that can have positive and negative consequences. Positive because it is a space for exchanges where the young person acquires a certain confidence that leads him to open up to the reality of his experience, to share his feelings, to ask questions to better understand what he is experiencing (wet dreams, first periods, first feelings of a lover, identity of the lover, first kiss, desire to enter sexual activity, first sexual act with some supporting details, pregnancy test result, desire for abortion, doubts, fears...). This space of exchange becomes a palliative of the lack of communication with the parents and a source of relief. Negative, because they are peers as a person of the same age,

same social context, function, education or experience), therefore not necessarily more mature, whose experience is based on experimentation [2]. It is therefore not uncommon to see that the advice given among themselves is a consequence of a "call for help" [11] that may be the basis for sexual violence, risky sexual intercourse (Spika et al, 2018, cited by Le Stum (ibid))... in one word of self-endangerment (Le Stum, (ibid.)). This state of affairs is underpinned by the reference of these young people, especially the Internet and the "miracle of power" that gives them the ability to self-educate on issues of sexuality. The absence of parental control on smartphones and other androids, the hyper digitization of information with the existence of all kinds of sites whose access is often facilitated by the acquisition of a pass, put young people in the presence of information or ways of doing things via internet dating sites, sometimes impacting the issue of reproductive health. This state of affairs is underpinned by the reference of these young people, in particular the Internet and the "miracle of power" which gives them the ability to self-educate on issues of sexuality. The absence of parental control over Smartphones and other Androids, the hyper digitalization of information with the existence of all sorts of sites, access to which is often facilitated by the acquisition of a pass, put young people in presence of information or way of doing things via dating sites on the internet, sometimes impacting the issue of reproductive health.

However, if a decade ago young people discovered sex accidentally, through entry to porn sites or by mimicry through association with peers or older people, the year 2020 has revealed men and women called coaches, influencers who set themselves up as advisors or who present themselves as models of success through their relationship to the body, money and/or sex. These men and women, who have acquired a certain notoriety in the media world or even who have been categorized as such by the "flowers" and other likes with thousands or millions of views, become for the youth references, models, the ideal to reach. However, their evolution policy is "the buzz", which are unfiltered life stories. Everything goes there: love life, professional life, mental and financial health... the messages conveyed by coaches and influencers are sometimes tendentious, as was the case with the show "Allo Caviar" by coach Hamon Chic Caviar on Life Tv (Ivorian private television) during which a young lady was being advised by the coach to have more ambition by attributing her pregnancy to a sugar daddy instead of the taxi driver who is the real author. On social networks, the message is clear for some female influencers: "beauty, curves..." In a word, the relationship to the body are ways of getting out of it, of succeeding. This results in hyper-sexualization of young girls and even young people with a representation of sexuality as a form of power.

### ***3.2. Depiction of Sexuality and Gender-Based Violence Among Youth***

Sexuality is a cultural construct in relation to a social logic, so it cannot be limited to a biological drive [5]. Indeed,

sexual and romantic behaviors as well as representations of sexuality in society are indicative of social relations and especially gender relationships. As a result, changes in attitudes and practices regarding sexuality are an integral part of the social processes working in the construction of these attitudes and practices. This construction reveals to us that sexuality, seen as an intimate space, then as a place of birth control, goes beyond the traditional order where it is strictly identified with procreation within heterosexual married couples. Thus, the decline of traditional institutions, the loss of the values of marriage and religious morality, leads to an evolution of the sexual act based on equality between men and women, especially among young people. This new form of sexuality induces in young people, a lowering of the age at first intercourse (9-10 years old), an increase in the number of partners, an extension of the sexual life and a vulgarization of sexuality. Thus, according to MENA data, in 164 cases, pregnant women are 12 years and older, while 36 cases concern girls under 12 years of age. This precocity of sexual activity is to be put to the credit of the power of sexuality as described in advertisements, clips... everything is sensual and attractive. This sexualization of the audiovisual environment induces forms of relationship or reinforces existing forms of power.

Paradoxically, the school that we want to set up as a space of equity and equality is a space where inequalities are reinforced because of the school environment. According to the Department of Strategies, Planning and Statistics (DSPS), in its statistical analysis report on the Ivorian education system for 2020, the school environment is defined "as being the set of conditions in which school learning takes place and which are likely to impact its quality" (P 85). Thus, the data from 2018-2019 to 2019-2020 show an increase in the number of cases of sexual violence suffered by young girls in both primary and secondary schools. Indeed, over the two academic years, 209 girls were victims of harassment, 504 girls were victims of fondling and nearly 126 were raped in primary schools. The figures are more alarming in the first cycle of secondary schools where 467 girls were victims of harassment, 514 of fondling and 646 of rape [7]. These figures refer here to the exercise of a certain power in connection with sexuality either by peers, or by educators (teachers, administrative staff) or by adults outside the institutional framework but who have an impact on the school performance. In this sexualized view of the social environment, young girls develop a relation with the body which, sometimes feminizes them more and makes them vulnerable to the pressures of the male gender. This power of sexuality experienced by young girls takes the form of forced marriage in a cultural context. As a result, for the same years mentioned above, 18 girls were forced into marriage in primary schools and 161 in the first cycle of secondary education. These girls therefore enter into sexual activity in spite of themselves and often with older people, who sexually abuse them, causing public health problems related to reproductive health. Reproductive health refers to the ability of people to have a satisfying and safe sexual life, with the

ability and freedom to decide whether or not to conceive children, if they wish and when they desire it (WHO).

While replacing the notion of "maternal and child health", it now includes sexual health and the regulation of fertility [4]. It concerns the health of mothers and children as much as that of adolescents, menopausal women and that of men (Idem) and goes beyond the strict medical framework to raise the question of individual and collective responsibility in sexual and reproductive behaviors. Thus, these forms of violence against young girls are mainly at the root of the increase in the rate of pregnancy in schools.

If this sexual power is suffered by young girls, the representation of sexuality as a means of acquiring material goods, social positioning or obtaining grades erects some young girls as "predators" without distinction of age or level of education. Thus, and particularly in secondary school and in universities, they play on their charm to obtain grades. However, and depending on the difficulties they encounter, they may have sex with more than one teacher, despite the risks of sexually transmitted infections. In a context of widespread impoverishment reinforced by the corona virus health crisis with its share of unemployment, the "sugar dady" phenomenon has grown. Here, the phenomenon does not make young girls mere escorts but real sexual partners, who are ready to satisfy the desires of these men to realize in return their dream of possession and social positioning. In this context, sexual power is held as much by young girls as by men. Thus, the sexual exchange becomes a bargaining for mutual and consensual power. Sexuality thus becomes a form of individual construction dissociated from procreation. It brings the girl into a dimension of provider of goods in her family and ensures her a certain financial independence which allows her to leave the family cocoon to acquire a space and a lifestyle. This acquisition power leads these young girls not to have only one sugar dady. All things which, moreover, can induce unwanted pregnancies or intended pregnancies but at risk because early.

## 4. Conclusion

At the end of the analysis of the increase in school pregnancy rates based on statistical data from the Ministry of National Education and Literacy (2022), it appears that the persistence factors are plural. Indeed, pregnancies are as much linked to the individual attitudes of young people (mimicry, risk-taking by early entry into sexual life but also by multiple partnerships, the sexual power of young people as a means of acquiring goods) as to those of adults evident in the disengagement of parents, the emergence of new forms of social pressure with sugar daddies, the persistence of the *droit de seigneur* and forced marriages. The Ivorian youth is therefore confronted with new forms of identity which remain overwhelming for a youth not yet in adulthood and yet precipitated into this world without real sexual education or at least through a sexual education discovered and reinforced by the figure of male and female influencers, who are themselves caricatural models of a sexual education that

is not always affirmed. This reality has the effect of maintaining the pregnancy rate in a context of increase at the base of the upheaval of the biographical and social trajectory of the actors with the consequence of sexual and reproductive health problems.

Indeed, entering sexual activity without real preparation exposes young girls to early pregnancies with the consequences of cases of fistulas or even maternal and infant death. It should also be noted the difficulty that some of these young girls have in maintaining their sexual health after childbirth, all things likely to reinforce the problems of maternal death that Ivory Coast is experiencing.

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