

**ADDRESSING WOMEN AND YOUNG GIRLS' SEXUALITY IN AFRICA
CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES AND STRATEGIES
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CONTEXT

- Sexuality in Africa is still shrouded in mystery and discourse around it is linked to only sexual intercourse, all within the purview of recognised relationships between women and men (i.e. marriage).
- There is a shift towards more fundamentalism and conservativeness in looking at sexuality and sexual relations in Africa. This is as a result of new waves of Christianity, especially the Pentecostal movements exported from the United States that have now been firmly rooted in Africa as well as with Islam.
- While sexuality have been expressed in different ways, and to fulfil different needs (albeit not always recorded except in oral history) in Africa, the new elements of conservatism are becoming more and more vocal and organised in ensuring laws and practices on how sexuality can be legitimately expressed or not.
- This has implications for the sexuality and sexual health of people, and in particular, young women and men.
- Despite all the advances made in women's education/economic empowerment, empowerment, young women continue to be at the most risk of HIV/AIDS, STDs, unplanned pregnancies, risk of mortality and morbidity from unsafe abortions, FGM, child marriages, sexual abuse etc.

CHALLENGES

- Unequal power relations between women and men now again being reinforced by fundamentalist religious movements (women must submit to men, only men are equipped to take decisions about sexuality, seeking information about sexuality and exercising sexual rights is a sign of a 'bad' woman, virginity tests, HIV/pregnancy compulsory tests before marriages in churches etc.) This put girls still in difficult positions – refuses to seek sexual health information and put their sexual needs at the mercy of men who also do not know, have low contraceptive prevalence rates and high unsafe abortions (have sex but pretend not be having it by not seeking information and not using contraceptives because that would indicate that you are having sex and so a 'bad woman').
- Lack of comprehensive sexuality education grounded in rights in schools, religious institutions and homes. Sexuality education remains equated with sexual relations and there continues to be wide spread belief that once young women and girls know about sexuality, they will start to engage in sexual relations. And gender relations deem sexuality knowledge inappropriate for unmarried persons, especially girls and women. The definition of 'young' in most of Africa is linked to marriage. If you are unmarried, then you are 'young' and should not be having sex and no matter your age, once you are married, you are an 'adult'. This has implications for the provision of sexuality education and in particular in promoting the sexual rights of women and girls.

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- A nearly universal acceptance of child marriages for girls in Africa. In Sahelian West Africa, about 40% of girls are married in the rural areas by the time they are 16 years old. And marriages of girls of between the ages of 12 – 18 are the norm rather than the exception in most of Africa. The principle behind both child marriages for girls and FGM are the same – control women’s expressions of sexuality so that they do not become ‘bad’ before marriage.
- Inability or unwillingness to separate sexuality from reproduction. This is evidenced in laws that equate safe abortion with murder, and in some ways, being pregnant and having babies even when not ready as punishment for the ‘sin’ of having sex before marriage for young women. Laws against homosexuality etc.
- The lack of sexuality education for men that focuses on interpretations of masculinity of equality, shared responsibility, respect for women’s bodies and their sexual choices and autonomy. Gender stereotypes of men as superior, providers, decision makers etc are still being reinforced in schools, religious institutions that makes young men confused especially since young women are much more empowered and continuing to contribute to the abuse young women face in their relationships with men.
- Sexual and gender based violence targeting young girls and women is increasing. And there is no passion for dealing with it by policy makers, religious institutions etc. The outrage and organising to oppose laws and policies by key religious leaders, parliamentarians, community leaders etc that promote safe abortion, or decriminalise same sex activities and relationships are totally absent when it comes to sexual and gender based violence and abuse that particularly target young girls and women. This increases impunity as law makers often then feel that this is not an important issue.
- SGBV/coerced sex – as the main key of control of women, especially young women. Nearly half of women surveyed in Nigeria and Kenya for example claimed that their first sexual initiation had been forced or done under the threat of violence. Violent conflicts and displacements remain a threat for young women. Domestic violence or threat that makes women unable to take decisions concerning their sexuality.
- Trafficking in young girls for domestic help and often preyed upon for sex – high unmet SRHR needs, violence, sexual abuse – illiterate, most girls often as young as 9, no family and very completely dependent on the families they stay with, and often illegally
- Most SRHR laws in Africa are antiquated, dating back to colonial times and have not been reformed. Attempts to reform have often been met by well organised groups led by the Church, always been SRHR policies are not passed – to create access for services especially to young people, to allow for safe abortion as a reproductive right, right to information, for sexuality education, budget not enough and critical agreements at international levels are not implemented.
- Restrictive abortion laws, getting more restrictive as evidenced with the new Constitution being proposed by Kenya (human life begins at conception, making Kenya the only 4th

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country in the world to declare this if the clause is not removed in the Constitution and it is passed, and the first in Africa). Floodgates of other conservatives using the Kenya Constitution to push for such changes in their countries in Africa.

- Laws that criminalises same sex activities, sex work and HIV transmission.
- Sexual health services that do not specifically target young people and in particular young women. This includes trained young people to provide services, information that is appropriate and not judgmental and rights based, centres that target young people and are discreet being built into the public healthcare systems.

OPPORTUNITIES/STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGEMENT

- Young women continue to organise and build movements to resist the conservatisms and fundamentalisms that put women's lives and wellbeing at risk. One strategy used by IPPF in Africa for example is increasing women in decision making within its service centres as a cornerstone of its work. To provide opportunities for young women to lead these MAs and provide guidance on how best to address young women's needs.
- Youth Friendly services led and run by young volunteers, including women and using women to reach out to other women in communities.
- Integrating SGBV support and counselling within service delivery to understand the root causes of violence against women and girls.
- Feminist movements in Africa – challenging patriarchy and the unfair advantages and denial of rights for women that compromises their
- Promoting young men's involvement and taking responsibility for their sexual health as a way of protecting young women.
- Supporting multi thronged approach to integrating sexual and gender based violence with the provision of SRHR services – (i) raising community awareness on sexual violence and using it as a strategy for supporting communities to talk about VAW and let women know they can seek help/support in IPPF SRHR Clinics; (ii) working with young men to challenge inequalities as a way of reducing impunity; and (iii) supporting medical personnel who provide SRHR services to produce evidence for persecutions as well as provide referrals for women and girls seeking legal assistance
- Strengthening of women's, in particular, young women's networks and organisations.
- Supporting countries emerging from armed conflict to have comprehensive policies and actions to target young girls/women who were traumatised by acts of sexual violence. To improve evidence based research and develop post trauma interventions.

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- Scaling up access to services specifically targeted for deaf and physically challenges/differently-able young women.
- Comprehensive sexuality education aimed at reviewing school curriculum to include sensitive topics on safe abortion, gender based violence, and sexual diversity.
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Focusing SRHR programmes on particularly vulnerable young women as follows:

- Young married women/girls – newly married, 1st pregnancy, 1st post partum, *(child marriages, lack of education, no peer support network, very low decision making, no mobility, dependence on older family members, husbands)*
- Women/girls living with disabilities *(low sexual image, vulnerable to SGBV because of perception that they are asexual and should be grateful for any sex, not all services are appropriate, lack of access, poverty – lower educational attainment depending on level of disability)*
- Women/girls living with HIV/AIDS *(stigma, right to sexuality, to have children or not, to enjoy highest level of sexual health, to take cognisance of ARV and interaction with contraception, cervical cancer screening)*
- Young women/women/girls working as domestics *(high level of sexual abuse, total lack of access to information, no control over resources, not documented so cannot report any violation, usually at the cusp of adolescent when they first start working, mostly trafficked)*
- Women, young women, girls living in urban slums *(high SGBV, low access to SRHR, usually abused for child labour, high levels of poverty, low or infrequent schooling, high intergenerational and transactional sex, high incidences of abortion)*

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