

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Gender socialization and adolescent pregnancies in Togo

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to understand the significance of the gender socialisation of adolescents and its impact on sexuality. This socio-anthropological study is based on qualitative surveys conducted as part of two action-research programmes implemented between 2018 and 2022 in Togo. The empirical data comes from individual semi-directed interviews, group interviews and life stories relating to the themes of sexuality, early pregnancy and gender-based violence. The results show that in these patriarchal societies, the socialisation of adolescents is structured around gender relations. The social construction of masculinity is based on a position of decision-making power for young boys, while that of femininity inculcates submissive behaviour in young girls. In these contexts, many young girls, even if they do attend school, find it difficult to express their opinions on matters of love and sex. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2024; 28 [8s]: 93-98).

Keywords: Gendered socialisation; social construction; teenage pregnancy; Togo

Résumé

L'objectif de cet article consiste à appréhender la prégnance de la socialisation des adolescents.es et son impact sur la sexualité. Cette étude socio-anthropologique s'appuie sur des enquêtes qualitatives conduites dans le cadre de deux programmes de recherche-action mis en œuvre entre 2018 à 2022 au Togo. Les données empiriques sont issues d'entretiens individuels semi-directifs, d'entretiens de groupes et de récits de vie relatifs aux thèmes de la sexualité, des grossesses précoces et des violences basées sur le genre. Les résultats indiquent que dans ces sociétés patriarcales, la socialisation des adolescents.es est structurée sur des rapports de genre. La construction sociale de la masculinité s'établit sur une position de pouvoir de décision des jeunes garçons tandis que celle de la féminité inculque aux jeunes filles des conduites de soumission. Dans ces contextes, de nombreuses jeunes filles, bien que scolarisées éprouvent des difficultés à exprimer leurs avis sur les questions amoureuses et sexuelles. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2024; 28 [8s]: 93-98).

Mots-clés: Socialisation sexuée ; grossesse d'adolescente ; Togo

Introduction

Teenage pregnancies are some of the important development issues because they have harmful consequences on the lives of adolescent girls who experience them¹. According to the WHO, every year, 21 million girls aged 15 to 19 become pregnant in developing countries². In Togo, the phenomenon of early pregnancies is significant, and those within schools are notable and commonly discussed. Between September 2020 and March 2021, more than 1,200 cases of pregnancies were recorded in public secondary education establishments in Togo³. Various causes have been cited in research to justify these early pregnancies, including the lack of information on sexual and reproductive education

within families and educational establishments, poor knowledge of contraceptive methods among many adolescents, the difficulties they experience in accessing reproductive health services, and violations of the sexual and reproductive rights of adolescents, etc.^{4,5}.

However, we rarely question the family socialization of girls and boys and the impact it could have on the sexual behavior of adolescents and the fact that this could also promote the occurrence of early and unwanted pregnancies. Indeed, socialization has been described as “*the set of processes by which the individual is constructed, (...) formed, modeled, fashioned, manufactured, conditioned, by the global and local society in which he/she lives*”⁶. During this process, the individual

integrates values, norms, beliefs, and rules to form his own social personality and thus allow him/her to adapt to the group in which he/she lives^{7,8}.

Taking this comprehensive approach, this article questions the modes of sexual socialization and the implication of these aspects on the occurrence of pregnancies among adolescent girls in Togo.

Methods

This article uses qualitative data sources from two action research projects: “multi-sectoral approaches to prevent early pregnancies in colleges in Togo_PGPC” (2018-2021) and “Preventing gender-based violence and violations of sexual and reproductive health of adolescent girls to reduce early pregnancies in Togo” (2019-2022).

For the first project, the objective of the research was to produce a database, making it possible to deepen the knowledge of girls and boys, men and women, on early pregnancies, in particular their determinants and their consequences. Data collection for the baseline study took place from May to June 2018 and that for the final evaluation took place in November 2020 in fifteen localities in Togo. The criteria for choosing these localities include the high prevalence of early pregnancies in these regions and the fact that they have secondary educational institutions, including General Education Colleges (CEG). In total, 54 focus groups and 81 semi-structured individual interviews were carried out.

For the second project, the objective of the research was to understand the links between gender-based violence and the occurrence of teenage pregnancies in Togo. Qualitative data collection was conducted in four locations across the country. A total of 40 focus groups, 55 individual interviews and 4 life stories were carried out. The inclusion criteria for participants in the study were as follows: being aged 10 to 19 for adolescents, being an educator or trainer of adolescents, being a leader looking after young people and mastering the customs and local customs linked to gender-based violence (GBV) and teenage pregnancies. Other criteria include being parents, teachers, community and religious leaders, being a resource person working on a similar theme in the state, and being an Non Governmental Organization or an association in the localities of the study.

As a prelude to the data collection phase, the protocols for this research received ethical approval from the Bioethics Committee for Health Research (CBRS) of Togo authorizing their implementation (No. 11/2018/MSPS/CAB/SG/DGAS/DPML, dated June 14, 2018, for the PGPC project, and No. 034/2019/CBRS, dated October 3, 2019, for the VBG project). Informed consents were signed obtained from the participants, while for minors, the head of the establishments and the parents of the students also gave agreement by signing the minors' consent forms. Individual and group interviews conducted in French or local languages (Éwé/Mina, Kabyè and Ifè) were audio-recorded and transcribed into French. The data were analyzed using the cross-sectional thematic content analysis method⁹.

Results

When the confinement of girls to domestic work reinforces male domination...

The analysis of the data highlights the fact that adolescents have a relatively separate vision of the roles of girls and boys within households.

“...When the boys wake up, they don't do any housework. But the girl, when she wakes up, has to sweep the house, do the dishes, prepare the meal and if there is other work she does it. But the boys have been walking around since they woke up. It is only at night that they come back to eat. The daughter alone does the housework. » (a 17-year-old teenager, 3rd grade)

We note an inequality in the differentiated educational principles with regard to boys and girls. Unlike “boys [who] don't do anything” at home, most girls are responsible for domestic chores before going to school. Some of them arrive in class very tired to the point that they struggle to follow the lessons. When the boy returns from school, he has time for his leisure and studies his lessons, while the girl still has to do domestic chores before learning her lessons. Some focus group participants highlighted the better academic performance of boys compared to girls:

“At home, girls don't have time to study. And until they finish the housework, they are tired and can no longer study. This is not the case for boys. They learn

when they want. Which means that when it comes to homework or quizzes, boys get the best grades. » (a teenager, 14 years old, 4th grade)

The difference in socializing practices of girls and boys follows a logic of preparing adolescents to assume their future role in society. It is therefore common, according to our interlocutors, for parents to hold positions sometimes accompanied by comments promoting the role of “care” for the daughter.

Socialization at home or at school emphasizes the differential esteem of the sexes. The social advancement offered by school benefits the boy by keeping him in a position of superiority compared to the girl.

“In the society here (Tové) where there are pre-established prejudices which devalue women, this lack of esteem which the community introduces very early into the heads of young girls means that the young girl is in an inferior position compared to her peers. the man. These prejudices and all these ideas impact the young girl's life. And the result is all that we know and automatically all that we have in terms of sexual and gender-based violence. For example, it is preconceived that a young girl's education is not important and that her place is at home. These comments mean that the idea of rising among the leaders of society and being able to fight is abandoned by the girls. » (an actor in a Non-Governmental Organization, 55 years old)

In essence, social logics reinforce a sexual identity that places girls in a subordinate position and boys in a dominant position to the point that they think they are superior to girls. These social practices influence their behavior regarding sexuality. We deduce from this that adolescent girls have little decision-making power when faced with forced and unprotected sexual relations, hence the occurrence of early pregnancies.

When imitating the role of “provider of resources” grants boys a position of superiority

The construction of masculinity and femininity is also achieved through imitation. Thus, by imitation of the fathers of families who have the role of providers of resources, boys adhere (and girls too) to

this role of provider of economic resources and impose it in the context of relationships of seduction and sexuality.

“Financially, I noticed that boys have more money than us girls. They share crops or help people transport goods to get money. In addition to this money earned, they have pocket money that their parents give them, which means they have more money than us.” (a teenager, 15 years old, 3rd grade)

Economic privileges fall more on the boy than on the girl. Like their fathers, boys are seen by some girls as providers of financial resources. As a result, they start looking for money very early. This allows them not only to empower themselves, but also to offer gifts to the girls they want. The girl, more docile, submissive, has little autonomy and weak decision-making power vis-à-vis the boy. As a result, by receiving small gifts she ends up giving in to their sexual advances, which sometimes result in unplanned pregnancies.

Furthermore, the socio-cultural logic around the role of man as economic provider leads certain parents to encourage their daughters to be seduced and maintained by a man capable of offering them money and material goods. Some mothers think it is normal to educate their daughters so that they can be taken care of by the men who court them. It is among these men that they can find a husband and thus become a wife, a socially valued status for women. When a girl accepts gifts from a man, he expects to have sex with her. Economically vulnerable, girls are often tempted to accept these gifts from others and have to submit to their sexual desires. The socialization of girls implies their vulnerability and potential victims of unwanted pregnancy.

When adolescent sexuality is subject to unequal control depending on gender

If sexuality remains a taboo subject around which discussions are rare between parents and their children in the Togolese context, it should be noted that, compared to the boy, the girl benefits from advice and supervision from her parents. This advice occurs during adolescence and is reinforced until the child enters into a marital union. On the other hand, the boy's sexuality seems to be free:

“...At home, our parents give us more advice about sex than they give boys. They tell us to behave well and take care of ourselves, (...). However, they do not give this advice to our brothers” (a teenager, 16 years old, 3rd grade)

“(...) it’s complicated to discuss these subjects [sexuality] with my parents. The only time my mother raised this issue with me was to ask me about the activities we are doing within the school committee to combat early pregnancies in schools” (a teenager, 15 years old, in 3rd grade).

These interview extracts highlight the unequal socialization of girls and boys with regard to their sexuality. Furthermore, this unequal socialization relating to sexuality maintains the superiority of the boy who thinks that he is less responsible when an unplanned pregnancy occurs and that it is his partner who is the most at fault because she is supposed to control his cycle.

“In my opinion, it is girls who are at fault for early pregnancies, because girls are supposed to know their menstrual cycle and a girl who does not want to get pregnant must use birth control or demand that her partner protects (...) Even if a boy cheats on you, at the last moment, you are free to go or not to go. In my opinion, if you go there and there are these consequences, the responsibility falls more on the girl” (a teenager, 14 years old, in 4th grade)

These interview extracts question the possibility of negotiation for girls who are victims of teenage pregnancy. Girls are taught to be submissive and sexually available. This makes their decision-making power weak within sexual relationships. It is difficult for them to convince their partners to have sex they do not want and unplanned pregnancies can occur. We can assume that they have little room for maneuver in refusing sexual relations or negotiating the use of a condom during sexual intercourse.

Discussion

In Togo, from birth to adolescence, girls and boys receive from their parents a transmission of good manners, interpersonal skills and know-how according to their sex and in accordance with social expectations relating to each sex^{10,11}. As the young boy grows up, he learns to demonstrate his strength,

his duty as a leader and later as head of the family. As for the girl, she is educated to be “a good wife” submissive and obedient to a man. These are the precepts of the patriarchal system. This influence of the cultural system¹² on gender relations intersects with the perspective of Delphy¹³ who believes that in societies with strong patriarchal morals, institutional and structural sanctions that are put in place by deeply patriarchal social norms and rules maintain the domination of the female sex by the male gender.

These patriarchal conceptions are observed in relationships of flirting and sexual desire. Generally speaking, girls expect boys to meet some of their material needs. These expenses, sometimes considered “insignificant” by girls, are not so for boys who see it as a manifestation of acceptance of their sexual expectations. Everything happens as if it were an “advance for requested service”. Worsened financially by the social system, girls thus “go into debt” by accepting help from boys, out of similarity to Marcel Mauss’s theory of the gift¹⁴. Indeed, in the practice of giving, the recipient falls into dependence and accountability. Thus, these adolescent girls who seek help from boys are often, willingly or by force, involved in often unprotected sexual relations which sometimes result in early pregnancies.

In addition, according to our interlocutors, the socialization of children is gendered in the locations of the study. However, according to Tossou¹⁵, allowing both boys and girls to benefit from the same education based on equality would make boys *more aware of the responsibilities of the casual sexual act which could cost an unwanted pregnancy (including him, would obviously shamelessly dissociate itself) which would compromise the well-being of the abandoned mother-to-be, now unjustly laughed at by society.*”

The honour sought by the family of the girl, who become nubile without a pregnancy outside of marriage, explains the focus of parents’ advice on adolescent girls¹⁶. Conversely, the absence of advice for the boy leads to an imbalance in the relationship between spouses after marriage. “We condition girls to aspire to marriage but we do not condition boys to aspire to marriage, and so there is already a terrible imbalance at the start. The girls will grow up to be women preoccupied with marriage. The boys will grow up to be men who are not preoccupied with marriage. The women marry those men. The

relationship is automatically uneven because the institution matters more to one than the other.”¹⁷

Furthermore, this lack of discussion between parents and their boys on sexuality would explain their poor knowledge of sexual and reproductive health and rights, thus reflecting their lack of involvement in questions of sex education and family planning in adulthood¹⁸. Indeed, in couple relationships, men often have the last word and impose their opinions to their advantage. The traditional domination of men and the inferior status of women remain major obstacles to communication about family planning within couples and to the ineffective involvement of men and boys in preventing pregnancy risks¹⁹.

The analysis of the data reveals the determining influence of the gendered socialization of adolescents on the permanence of the phenomenon of pregnancies in schools. As a principle governing the transmission of norms and values in Togolese society, the gendered educational system appears as a process by which adolescents (girls and boys) are modeled, shaped and conditioned by families into male subordination and female resignation¹⁵. In this social system where marriage and motherhood are valued and rewarding statuses for women, these ones are less resistant to temptation and the occurrence of a pregnancy, even if involuntary, appears as a springboard^{20,19}.

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