JOURNAL REVIEWS – AGENDA

Teenage fertility and desire

Reviewed by Felix-Mary Uzochi Okpechi
Department of Demography and Social Statistics
Obafemi Awolowo University
Ile-Ife
Nigeria
felixmarie2001@yahoo.com

Focus 1: When breast is not best – young women and breast reduction surgery
Authors: Tessa Lamb and Louisa Vincent

The Focus, When breast is not best – young women and breast reduction surgery, by Tessa Lamb and Louise Vincent is an interesting and articulated piece which echoes the voices of young women and their desire to achieving a body type that confirms to their understanding of youthful beauty and sexuality.

The authors reveal the extent to which the young women have a sense of agency which extends to their capacities to craft the bodies they inhabit. Thus, they infer that breast reduction surgery emerges as another stage on the continuum of body projects such as dieting, exercise, make-up regimes, clothing, piercing, tattooing,
shaving, waxing, and so on, which suggests that the physical body does not limit the realisation of chosen ways of expressing personal identity.

Drawing from the phenomenon of individualisation which characterises post-industrial society, the authors note that the individual is compelled to make him or herself the centre of his or her own life plan and conduct. Thus, for young women, there is much more at stake than seeking to be sexually attractive to men. They need to craft a positive and youthful sexual subjectivity for themselves in order for their embodied identities to perfectly describe prevailing beauty norms. However, the attainment of this desired youthful and sexy subjectivity is not without risks, among which is young women’s potential loss of the capacity to breastfeed in future. Nevertheless, the fight of the young women as noted by the authors is for the right to prioritise what their bodies look like and feel to themselves as sexual beings over the cultural prioritisation and the ideology of intensive mothering, in which context breastfeeding is considered so important.

The authors in particular point out the fact that the young women’s choice of breast reduction surgery stems from other repertories that have to do with the assumed characteristics of ideal (white) middle class femininity. In conclusion, it is important to point out that the authors observe that the young women were not alone in their decision-making, owing to the emotional and financial support they received.

**Briefing – “Gqoka ingubo yobudoda bakho” – “Put on your blanket of manhood”: Sexual debut, vulnerability and desire in the lifeworlds of South African young men**

**Authors: Erin Stern and Rethabile Mashale**

The authors, through the use of sexual biographies, emphasise the tendency of men’s sexuality to be misrepresented in research based on little consideration of its complexity. A marked change exists among men during sexual debut compared to their behaviours later in life. At earlier stages, men’s sexualities are marked by innocence. However, there is a shift in attitude which results in little or no attachment to their partners. The authors also make reference to the influence of media in shaping men’s desire for sex, although the majority of the men’s sexual acts as teens could be regarded as unexpected.

The authors report that the men felt a strong sense of achievement or masculinity for debuting sexually, but found the experience less enjoyable than they expected due to a lack of understanding and inexperience in sexual matters. It is important to note here the feelings of shame and inadequacy which characterise first sexual behaviour of men, rather than a feeling of being in control of sexual encounters. Emphasis is laid on the fact that conforming to certain dominant norms of masculinity characterised the sexual experiences of these men as they advanced in age. Their sexual acts were characterised by emotional detachment, lack of commitment, and a desire to have
sexual encounters to boost their status.

**Focus 2 – Positive pregnant: Teenage women’s experiences of negotiating pregnancy with their families**

*Author: Siza Ngabaza*

Contrary to the stigmatisation and problematising of teenage pregnancy as portrayed in literature and the stereotypical construction of pregnant teenagers as helpless, ignorant, passive and timid, the author argues that pregnant teenagers tend to negotiate their future irrespective of whether they find being pregnant a challenge. Here, Siza Ngabaza features experiences from the life history narratives of a group of pregnant school going teenage mothers in Cape Town. She reports that shock and disbelief were the first reactions among the teenage girls at the initial realisation of their being pregnant. They also faced a serious dilemma regarding the most appropriate way of communicating their new state to parents and guardians. However, in the context of this negotiation, the majority of the girls demonstrated various levels of agency and creativity to ensure peace and acceptance in their families and the social context. Furthermore, the silences around sexuality which are present in the home context made it difficult for the young women to disclose their pregnancy which was an indication of sexual activity/debut. Some of the young women discussed abortion as part of the pressure of disclosure and resolution but noted that this (abortion) was a difficult choice to make, especially due to lack of knowledge of abortion procedures, rights and resources. More so, irrespective of the provisions of the Acts that legalise abortion in South Africa, young women found it hard to exercise their right to abort due to the social stigma attached to abortion in their communities.

On the issue of strategic responses in negotiating pregnancy disclosure the author stresses that pregnant teenagers tend to confide in older relatives (especially older sisters) at the discovery of pregnancy or allow the pregnancy to continue until they are confronted by their siblings or elders. Of importance here according to the author is not only the way teenagers ‘break the ice’ to their sisters which expresses anxieties regarding their pregnancies, but also the associated disclosure of involvement in sexual activity. Such strategies, according to the author, were carefully thought through, prepared in advance and very innovative, and at the same time reveal a considerable degree of agency among the teenage girls in difficult situations, even though operating within an atmosphere of fear and shock.

**Article – Embracing teenage sexuality: Teenagers’ assessment of sexuality education in Uganda**

*Authors: Florence Kyoheirwe Muhanguzi and Anna Ninsiima*

The authors, through qualitative research among teenagers, parents and teachers,
examine the extent to which sexuality knowledge gained from home and school actually addresses teenagers’ lived sexual experiences. The authors observe that teenagers were unanimous in considering sexuality education as being valuable and saw it as an opportunity for both sexual and intellectual empowerment. However, they note that the weight and relevance of sexuality information acquired by the teenagers differ along gender lines. For teenage girls, the authors note that they appreciated information about body changes which enhanced their self esteem and reduced anxieties often caused by such experiences as menstruation and growing breasts.

The authors point out the teenagers’ awareness of dominant ideologies that structure their lessons. For instance, that the official prescription of sexuality education both at home and in school focus on heterosexuality, procreation and abstinence before marriage. More so, the authors infer that boys were concerned about the parents’ approach (especially their fathers’ approach) to sexuality education, which tends to exclusively promote chastity and avoidance of all sexual activity before marriage. According to the authors, however, teenagers reported involvement in sexual activities and that the value placed on sexual liaisons at their age suggests that sexuality education which solely focuses on abstinence and the dangers of premarital sex may not address students’ realities. The authors found that teenagers were concerned about the silence surrounding sexuality, especially about censorship of sexuality information by teachers and their neglect of the meaning of sex. Girls were especially concerned about selective provision of information and the coded warnings of threat to pregnancy and hygiene given to girls but not to boys, which leads to a lack of shared responsibility in sexuality.

The authors also note a lack of clarity in the information gleaned from various sources (school and home) which do not respond to teenagers’ lived experiences due to teenagers’ apparent concern over contradictory messages received, particularly regarding the appropriate age for sexual debut and use of safer sex practices. The authors stress that approaches to providing appropriate sexuality education must derive from the teenagers’ lived experiences.

**Perspective – Nostalgic utterances of being a teenager: A personal reflective narrative**

*Author: Mazuba Haanyama*

Mazuba Haanyama, in this personal narrative, elucidates the ways young girls find voice and expression for their sexuality in a world where sex and sexuality are shrouded in silence and secrecy, and are demonised and surrounded by disease, vulnerability and danger. For the author, it was a non-linear and difficult process coming to terms with her own sexuality, and possessing some kind of sexuality or
sexual desire was terrifying to her at age thirteen. However, the start of her menstrual cycle was ushered in with great delight for it confirmed her womanhood. She also focused on prominent changes within her body, which required and enabled changes in her lifestyle. For instance, she could now do ‘womanly things’ such as show desire and wear make-up on special occasions.

As she advanced in age (17 years), the author felt sexual freedoms and emphasised her readiness to explore her new world while trying to understand factors that attract or repel boys. According to the author, sex is something to be feared in the society in which she grew up, but losing one’s virginity represented excitement, joy and maturity (as well as fear and trepidation). The author also notes that the dichotomy of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ girls as it relates to sexuality provides a lens for us in understanding how female sexuality is conceived and policed. Teenagers often unconsciously negotiate their way daily through the maze of desire mixed with danger, lust and promise. Mazuba Haanyama acknowledges that teenagers have varying sexual debut experiences, but that the way she debuted her sexuality is certainly not the way that sexual debut is usually portrayed and that has come to represent a kind of statistic in textbooks on adolescent sexuality.

Mazuba Haanyama discusses how most women, and in particular teenagers, silence or ignore their bodies in order to accommodate dominant discourses about women’s sexuality. Drawing from the notion that desire presupposes the existence of bodily knowledge, the author stresses that teenagers make themselves sterile in a context where they learn to constrict their desires. She therefore hopes that there are spaces for young women to claim their full potential, air their desires openly, and become unafraid of not fitting into what is considered ‘correct’ forms of sexuality.

**Article – Making meaning of teenage pregnancy among school-going youth: The case of selected eThekwini Municipality secondary schools**

*Author: Reshma Sathipasad and Myra Taylor*

In making meaning of teenage pregnancy among school-going youths, the authors elucidate the attitudes and beliefs of young people. According to their findings males tend to want to demonstrate sexual prowess in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships. Although condoms were the most popular contraceptives, the majority of the youths believed that desire and having fun causes them to disregard the risks associated with sex. For these young people, the use of condoms prevented skin to skin sex and thus reduced sexual pleasure. For males in particular, risky behaviour is often considered to be the peak of masculinity. Males also feel entitled to use women for their sexual pleasure and to always remain in command of the relationship. Penetrative sex and ejaculation inside a woman is often considered by boys to be proof of masculinity, with the responsibility for pregnancy regarded as
the girl’s business. However, the authors show that girls are not simply victims of the behaviour of boys, but also act as sexual agents, making choices and engaging in consensual and coercive sexual activities.

The authors observe that many young women become pregnant through unprotected sex in a bid to please and keep their partners. They point out that, for males, the importance of having sex consists of many elements, including to please the girl and to ensure that she does not turn to someone else for sex; the same holds true for girls, who, among other reasons, engage in sex to avoid demeaning comments from other girls and feelings of being rejected and alone.

Regarding alcohol and risky sexual behaviour, the authors point out that sexual pleasure is accorded priority despite young people’s knowledge that alcohol clouds judgement.

Concrete suggestions on how to address teenage pregnancy as documented by the authors include going beyond the notion that sex is synonymous with love, delaying sexual debut, resisting pressure to have sex, completing one’s education, using freedom and rights responsibly, more support and interaction with parents, and more NGOs dealing with teenage pregnancy.

**Article: Teenage mothers talk about their experience of teenage motherhood.**

*Authors – Zarina Chohan and Malose Langa*

Focusing on two major themes – being a good teenage mother and being committed to good academic performance as an investment in the future for both mother and child – Chohan and Langa challenge the existing mainstream literature associating teenage motherhood with high rates of school drop-out, poor academic performance, and inadequate parenting skills. The authors argue that young mothers can sometimes be sophisticated and progressive in their understanding of teenage motherhood. Various challenges are identified by the authors, including concerns about the health of the teenage mothers’ children owing to the difficulty associated with decision making either to go to school or to stay and take care of the children during ill health. Although caught up in a double bind, teenage mothers often consider their child’s health and best interests. Teenage mothers are often depicted as being irresponsible in not attending school or as being uninterested in school work, but the authors argue that this is unfounded since adult mothers face similar challenges, such as worrying about children’s health, having to cope with time constraints, and so on.

From all indications, challenges of teenage mothers are often exaggerated, but here instead the authors identify positive rewards of being a teenage mother, such as having something to look forward to after school, observing children grow and develop and reaching milestones such as standing up and walking, and having a special bond with their children. These, according to the authors also contradict dominant depictions of teenage mothers as depressed and suicidal, while ignoring
their feelings of excitement, happiness and a sense of fulfilment. Furthermore, the authors’ observations completely contradict the discourse that teenage mothers lack the maturity and capacity to take care of their children.

The authors also observe that teenage mothers in the study were strongly motivated to complete their studies, often putting additional effort into catching up on missed class work. This, according to the authors, promotes a sense of mastery and agency as well as their ability to reclaim their sense of self-worth and power, but are absent in the mainstream literature, which tends to marginalise teenage mothers. The authors observe that being a teenage mother also heightened the young women’s sense of responsibility and perseverance in achieving their career goals.

The authors identified the following positive consequences of teenage motherhood: It contributes to the personal growth of the young mothers; assists in the reorganisation of their goals and life ambition; and serves as a precaution against further risk taking. Finally, the authors note that teenage mothers’ experience in talking about their situation helped in liberating and relieving them, as significant others in their lives (friends, teachers, nurses, and so on) were often only concerned with criticising them.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Felix-Mary Uzochi Okpechi is a budding demographer and social statistician. In 2005 he received an award for the best graduating student with the overall best results in the Department of Demography and Social Statistics, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. At present, he is a statistician at the National Bureau of Statistics, Abuja, Nigeria. Prior to this, he was a Programme Associate, Research and Documentation, at the Africa Regional Sexuality Resource Centre (ARSRC), Lagos, and facilitated the publication of three editions of the Sexuality in Africa Magazine and Monographs, for which he also served as an Editorial Team Member. His publications are in the areas of adolescent sexual and reproductive health, youth sexuality and maternal health. He is also skilled in data management and analysis using SPSS for Windows, STATA, Epi-Info 2000, Epi-Info 7, and CSPro. He has recently completed his Master’s of Public Health Degree in Medical Demography at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria.