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The changing context of sexual initiation in sub-Saharan Africa

Prepared by Barbara S. Mensch

The magnitude of the AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa puts young women at particularly high risk for HIV infection and calls for a better understanding of reproductive behavior, including sexual initiation and premarital sex. During the past 20 years, substantial reductions have occurred in the proportion of young women in sub-Saharan Africa who marry as teenagers.

A recent policy report (Cohen 2004) on adolescent reproductive behavior asserts that an increase in premarital sex is an inevitable consequence of later marriage in the developing world, if for no other reason than that the period during which girls are sexually mature and unmarried is prolonged when marriage is postponed (Alan Guttmacher Institute 1998; Bongaarts and Cohen 1998). Where teenage marriage has declined, has the proportion of young women reporting premarital sex risen in turn? Or, has the decline in the proportion of young women who marry early had little effect on premarital sexual behavior? Even if the proportion of young women engaging in premarital sex is increasing, is one consequence of the postponement of marriage a rise in the overall age of sexual initiation among the current generation of young people?

In light of potential differences between the nature of sexual activity within marriage and before it (Clark 2004), program planners also need to consider how a change in

the context of sexual initiation affects the risk of HIV infection among young women. One potential consequence of a rise in premarital sex is an increase in unwanted fertility. A rise in the proportion of girls who engage in sex before marriage is also likely to lead to a higher rate of induced abortion, which in this region is frequently illegal and often unsafe. Furthermore, even if sexual activity is greater among married than among unmarried adolescents, and even if those who are married engage in more unprotected sex, unmarried girls are more likely to have multiple partners, and more of these partners are likely to overlap. Both of these circumstances are risk factors for sexually transmitted infections, including HIV.

Examining the links between age at marriage and premarital sex

A recent Population Council project investigated the links between changing age at marriage and premarital sexual behavior in 27 sub-Saharan African countries. The analyses were based on data from Demographic and Health Surveys conducted between 1994 and 2004. After documenting the decline in early marriage over an approximately 20-year period, researchers addressed the question of how reductions in the prevalence of early marriage affect the likelihood of initiating sex by age 18 as well as

Table 1 Percent of women surveyed at ages 20–24 and 40–44 who reported being married and having had sex before age 18, 27 sub-Saharan African countries

Country and survey year	Married before age 18 ^a		Had sex before age 18 ^a		Had premarital sex before age 18 ^b		Married before age 18 without prior sex ^b	
	20–24	40–44	20–24	40–44	20–24	40–44	20–24	40–44
West/Middle Africa								
Benin 2001	36.7	43.6	63.5	61.0	38.8	24.0	24.7	37.0
Burkina Faso 2003	51.9	59.0	65.3	68.2	22.7	12.7	42.5	55.5
Cameroon 2004	47.2	57.2	70.3	76.5	35.1	28.8	35.2	47.7
Central African Republic 1994–95	57.0	64.6	81.0	81.5	42.3	30.4	38.7	51.2
Chad 1996–97	71.4	77.9	77.3	81.4	14.8	10.5	62.5	70.9
Gabon 2000	33.6	41.0	81.0	83.9	62.3	60.2	18.7	23.7
Ghana 2003	27.9	37.7	46.4	56.3	24.3	27.1	22.0	29.2
Guinea 1999	64.5	68.5	77.6	78.5	24.4	15.5	53.2	63.0
Ivory Coast 1998	33.2	49.7	75.8	78.1	54.7	41.3	21.1	36.8
Mali 2001	65.4	66.0	79.3	77.2	26.0	17.6	53.4	59.6
Niger 1998	76.6	89.1	79.1	89.8	4.5	2.7	74.5	87.1
Nigeria 2003	43.3	65.1	57.0	74.0	19.0	12.5	38.0	61.5
Senegal 1997	36.1	61.9	43.7	65.8	9.8	3.9	33.9	61.8
Togo 1998	30.5	40.4	65.0	59.5	47.4	29.9	17.6	29.6
Southern/East Africa								
Comoros 1996	29.7	54.5	34.8	63.6	9.6	10.8	25.2	52.8
Ethiopia 1999	49.1	79.4	51.6	81.4	7.5	6.7	44.1	74.6
Kenya 2003	24.6	37.2	50.3	65.9	36.9	43.8	13.4	22.1
Madagascar 1997	40.4	49.5	65.8	68.3	40.5	31.8	25.3	36.5
Malawi 2000	46.9	55.7	65.4	68.8	31.7	25.1	33.7	43.7
Mozambique 2003	55.9	55.9	81.2	73.5	48.1	34.5	33.1	39.0
Namibia 2000	9.8	15.8	49.1	39.8	42.2	26.5	6.9	13.4
Rwanda 2000	19.5	21.5	26.9	26.8	10.2	7.0	16.7	19.7
South Africa 1998	7.9	15.1	55.3	45.8	50.1	35.4	5.2	10.4
Tanzania 2004	41.4	45.2	63.4	63.3	37.4	28.3	26.0	35.0
Uganda 2001	53.9	59.5	73.5	78.5	35.9	35.5	37.6	43.0
Zambia 2001	42.1	59.7	66.0	74.6	38.9	23.9	27.1	50.7
Zimbabwe 1999	28.7	39.4	38.9	52.1	17.2	21.9	21.7	30.2

Note: Boldface type denotes significance at $p < 0.05$ based on a t-test for equality of means.

^aComputed from single-decrement life table.

^bComputed from multiple-decrement life table as competing risk for "Had sex by age 18." Column 3 = column 5 + column 7. Column 4 = column 6 + column 8.

Source: Tabulations of Demographic and Health Survey data.

the likelihood of initiating premarital sex by the same age. They also investigated whether younger women experience a faster or slower transition to marriage following sexual initiation. Presumably, the longer the interval between sexual initiation and marriage, the greater the risk of an unwanted pregnancy, the larger the number of

sexual partners, and the more likely the young woman is to be exposed to sexually transmitted infections. Finally, they explored whether, to the extent there has been an increase in premarital sex, it is due to the greater period of exposure between puberty and marriage, or to changing norms about the acceptability of unmarried sex.

Results show a shift in the context of sexual initiation

Although “child” marriage is still very common in the region, the analyses indicated that:

- The prevalence of marriage by age 18 has declined significantly in 24 of 27 sub-Saharan African countries.
- The prevalence of premarital sex before age 18 has increased significantly in 19 countries.
- The likelihood of marriage by age 18 following premarital sex has declined significantly in five countries and remained unchanged in the others.
- The prevalence of sexual initiation by age 18, whether before or at marriage, has declined significantly in 13 countries, increased significantly in four, and remained the same in ten.

In short, while the likelihood of early sexual activity has either remained the same or declined in 23 of 27 countries, a shift in the context of sexual initiation from marriage to premarital sex has taken place throughout the region. Among the 19 countries with a significant increase in the prevalence of premarital sex, the longer exposure to the period of risk explains a greater proportion of the increase in eight countries, whereas a rise in the rate of premarital sex explains a greater proportion of the increase in five countries. In the remaining six countries, the increase is due approximately equally to a higher rate of premarital sex and longer exposure.

Implications for interventions and future research

Program planners who design interventions targeted to adolescent girls in sub-Saharan Africa need to understand that while sexual initiation prior to age 18 has declined or remained the same in the vast majority of countries, a shift has taken place in the context of sexual initiation, which, as age of marriage increases, is more likely to occur prior to marriage. This change is likely to affect the demand for reproductive health information and services among unmarried adolescent girls; yet, in much of sub-Saharan Africa, youth-serving family planning and other reproductive health services are considered woefully inadequate (Hughes and McCauley 1998).

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