

Beyond love

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Valorization

This valorisation section describes the social value of this dissertation project by outlining the relevance of the project, the people, and organisations that may have an interest in the findings besides the scientific community, the emerging activities informed by the conclusions and how such activities can be implemented for the benefit of the wider society.

Relevance

Ghana's population is largely youthful. While some have the knowledge, understanding and skills to care for themselves and access support when they need it, this dissertation has shown that many others are neither equipped nor supported to make the transition from childhood to adulthood. Further, some adolescents are especially vulnerable because they are growing up in homes and communities where they are neither protected nor nurtured. There has been substantial investment over many years in child survival resulting in impressive declines in childhood mortality. However, the Ghanaian society has been slow to respond to the pressing needs of adolescents. Consequently, adolescents face many challenges in their attempt to navigate their way through the transition to adulthood. These include engaging in risky sexual behaviours that lead to unintended and unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections.

Besides the health consequences, teenage pregnancy presents many social problems. Girls who become pregnant as teens drop out of school, resulting in low educational attainment and an adult life of poverty. Also, many girls who become pregnant end up in child marriage. Given the linkage of teenage pregnancy to child marriage, the factors driving early childbirth also become relevant. These include limited sexual and reproductive health education, low access to contraceptives and low girls' empowerment. This is the gap that the findings of this dissertation seek to contribute solutions to fill. Amongst others, this work has highlighted the need for comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) to help young people better to understand their bodies, feelings, and personal integrity. The work has shown how CSE can enable young people to make informed choices about sex and relationships, and counters myths and misconceptions about sexuality. It has also demonstrated how CSE can help to counteract gender stereotypes and address masculinity norms. The work has also pointed out how access to contraceptives is a means for young people to make empowering decisions about their life course, such as education. Apart from using the empirical findings to highlight the need for CSE, this dissertation provides an excellent example of how CSE programs can be systematically adapted to include interactive skills components to make it effective at positively influencing the factors that determine young people safe sexual choices. Finally, since CSE

is still not yet incorporated into the Ghanaian school curriculum, the findings of this dissertation also contributes to the evidence base upon which civil society groups can embark on advocacy actions for the inclusion of CSE into the national curriculum.

Target groups

The findings of this dissertation are of interest to many institutions and agencies working in youth development and the empowerment of young people. First, the Government of Ghana is concerned about the high rates of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases among the youth. Therefore, the relevant ministries, including the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health are constantly formulating various policies and programmes aimed at addressing unsafe sexual behaviours among adolescents. These ministries require evidence to be able to convince government at the highest level to invest in the implementation of such policies. The findings of this dissertation contribute to the work of these ministries in a significant manner.

The results of this work may also be very useful to civil society groups, including NGOs working directly to provide services to meet the sexual and reproductive needs of adolescents as well as those advocating for policy and legal changes to expand access to youth friendly health and educational services. To be taken seriously by decision-makers, NGOs need to show credibility and support their advocacy arguments with concrete evidence. For example, in Ghana, to get stakeholders to support the implementation of CSE in schools, strong proof that abstinence-only messages do not empower young people to be able to make informed decisions on their sexual choices and that CSE does not necessarily promote sexual promiscuity is crucial. Thus, civil society groups and human rights activist will find the findings of this dissertation a valuable addition to their advocacy work.

Also, in poor settings like northern Ghana, many young people live in poverty and discrimination. These people can gain a voice and participate in civil society or other avenues for engagement. This dissertation shows adolescents themselves why they may lack the means to achieve change and areas in which changes need to take place to enjoy sexual and reproductive health.

Activities

A number of activities can be developed based on the results of this dissertation to promote adolescent sexual and reproductive health in Ghana. These includes using the effect evaluation of SPEEK as a guide to design sex education programs targeting junior high

school students, using the evidence from the qualitative analysis to engage stakeholders to gain support for the teaching of CSE in schools and using the qualitative narratives of the girls and boys to engage parents on the need for an open and positive sex communication at home. The results may also be used to develop clear advocacy messages to engage decision makers at various levels for the inclusion of CSE in the school curriculum. Finally, the results point out new directions for further research to gain more insight into the factors influencing the safe sex choices of adolescents in Ghana.

Innovation

There are many governmental and non-governmental organisations and institutions that are making efforts at different levels to promote adolescent sexual and reproductive health in Ghana. Much of these efforts are not informed by empirical data. The results of this study are innovative in how it provides comprehensive empirical evidence on the personal factors influencing adolescents' family planning decision-making processes. In particular, this dissertation provides evidence in changing determinants at the specific sub-behaviour level. For example, to increase condom use, we have discussed how to influence changes in preparatory sub-behaviours such as buying condoms, carrying or having condoms available, negotiating condom use and how to be consistent in condom use. Such a discussion on specific preparatory sub-behaviours that culminate in the performance of the actual desirable health behaviour is novel in the literature in Ghana.

Implementation

As the author works for the Youth Harvest Foundation Ghana (YHFG) that provided the platform upon which the research was conducted, the results put into operation the YHFG's commitment towards promoting the sexual and reproductive health of young people in northern Ghana. It will guide our resource mobilization, the content of our programming and grant applications, as well as our annual planning. It will also guide us in the development of human resources – identify capacity building needs and assist us when recruiting new staff. The findings will be rolled-out and presented internally in YHFG, to its partners, key allies, and donors. The results will inform how the organization's work is presented on our website and in all our printed material. Depending upon availability of funding, the results will inform a revision and scaling up of the SPEEK sex education programme to include income generating activities to empower many girls to take control over their sexuality and life choices.