

Economic Empowerment and Reproductive Behaviour of Young Women in Osun State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Women are increasingly being recognised as equal partners in development. However, there is a growing awareness that negative health, social and economic consequences act as barriers in their efforts to contribute to sustainable development. Consequently, to fully harness the potentials of women in this regard, these barriers have to be addressed. This paper utilises qualitative data collected as part of an intervention programme designed to increase access to reproductive health information/services and economic resources among young women in Osogbo, Nigeria. The aim was to provide reproductive health information and training in basic business skills and micro-credit facilities to enable beneficiaries to establish private businesses. Findings from the study highlight the importance of the relationship between female education, access to economic resources as a means of furthering empowerment of women especially in terms of their reproductive behaviour. The paper argues that increased access to resources is a major factor toward ensuring the much desired empowerment. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2003; 7[3]: 92–100)

RÉSUMÉ

Emancipation économique et le comportement reproductif des jeunes femmes dans l'état d'Osun, Nigeria. Les femmes sont de plus en plus reconnues comme des partenaires égaux en matière du développement. Pourtant, il y a une conscience croissante du fait que la santé négative et les conséquences sociales et économiques constituent des obstacles dans leurs efforts pour contribuer au développement viable. Par conséquent, à fin de profiter pleinement des potentiels des femmes à cet égard, il faut résoudre ces obstacles. On se sert dans cette étude, de données qualitative recueillies dans le cadre d'un programme d'intervention conçu pour augmenter l'accès à l'information/au service de la santé reproductive et les ressources économiques parmi les jeunes femmes à Oshogbo, Nigéria. L'Objectif était de fournir l'information concernant la santé reproductive et d'assurer la formation dans les techniques des affaires de base ainsi que les facilités micro-crédits, à fin de permettre à l'audience visée d'établir des entreprises privées. Les résultats de l'étude soulignent l'importance des rapports entre l'éducation féminine et l'accès aux ressources économiques comme moyen de promouvoir davantage l'émancipation de la femme en ce qui concerne leur comportement reproductif. L'article soutient que l'augmentation de l'accès aux ressources est un facteur majeur pour assurer l'émancipation tant désirée. (*Rev Afr Santé Reprod* 2003; 7[3]: 92–100)

KEY WORDS: *Young women, empowerment, reproductive health*

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Introduction and Background

One of the significant milestones of the twentieth century in the field of population and development is the recognition of women as equal partners in development efforts in all societies of the world. Two major events of the last decade, the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994) and the World Women Conference (Beijing, 1995), were instrumental in this regard. At these meetings, it was recognised that issues affecting the reproductive health of women are linked to wider issues of economic and educational status and gender equality. Gender equity and women empowerment were particularly emphasised as a catalyst for promoting and sustaining economic growth and development.¹ By locating women within the context of global development, these conferences have encouraged women to openly discuss issues that affect their status and reproductive health.

A major response to this development is a review of programmes and strategies aimed at improving the reproductive health of women. This response has been in form of increased research and programme focus on the reproductive health needs of women, especially girls. This interest has been fired by a growing awareness of the negative health, social and economic consequences of early sexual activity and childbearing including unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) and decreased economic power among women. Available data from the Population Reference Bureau² illustrate the magnitude of the problem worldwide. About 15 million young women aged 15–19 years give birth every year, accounting for more than 10% of births worldwide. About two million adolescent women in developing countries have illegal unsafe abortions each year and at least 10% of abortions worldwide occur among women aged 15–19 years. In addition, rates of STD infection among adolescents are high and their risk of contracting HIV is growing rapidly. In many countries, women aged 15–24 years account for 40% of all new HIV infections.

Although power is a significant dimension of all human relationships, few studies have examined how power operates in adolescent sexual relation-

ships. Adolescent relationships are often assumed to occur in a context of mutual choice and benefit for both partners, particularly in western societies where women's movement has made great strides in extending equal rights to women and men.³ In recent years, however, it has been recognised that power struggles continue to play an important role in courtship and dating relationships.⁴

In developing countries, issues of power and reproductive decision-making have come under closer examination as young women's vulnerability to AIDS and unintended pregnancy has increased. Studies⁵ suggest that culturally-based gender roles that reinforce male rights over sexual and reproductive decision-making can contribute in an important way to female adolescents' vulnerability to unintended pregnancies and STDs including AIDS. Adolescent girls are often engaged in relationships with older men, creating a potential for unequal power in relationships. This in turn reduces the ability of adolescent girls to negotiate sex with condom and contraceptive use.⁶ In many instances, the threat of male violence can also contribute to the pressure on teenage girls to agree to unsafe sexual practices. Poor adolescent girls who depend on sexual relationships for part of their economic survival are particularly vulnerable since they may have little leverage around such issues as safe sex and condom use.

The importance of empowering women during adolescence cannot be overemphasised. The social costs of young people's inability to exert control over their lives and fulfil their educational, economic and reproductive goals can be enormous. Women who become parents as teenagers experience more social and economic disadvantage throughout their lives than those who delay childbearing. They are less likely to complete their education, be employed, earn higher wages and be happily married; they are also likely to have larger families.⁷ Ultimately, pregnancies can also impede women's attainment of healthy living as evidenced by unsafe, and sometimes fatal, abortions in many countries where abortion is restricted. As gender identities are often crystallised during adolescence, empowering women in the early stages of their lives can lay the foundation for achieving a positive balance of power in marriage

and for women's enhanced social and economic position later in life.⁵

Empowerment, according to Batiwala,⁸ is the process by which the powerless gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives. It includes control over resources (physical, human and intellectual) and over ideology (beliefs, values and attitudes). It means not only greater extrinsic control but also a growing intrinsic capability, greater self-confidence and an inner transmission of one's consciousness that enables one to overcome external barriers to accessing resources or changing traditional ideology. Empowerment is about the transformation of power relations between men and women at four distinct levels, namely, the household/family, the community, the market and the state. Such transformation, viewed in different contexts of power, includes access to and control over material and other resources (economic, legal, institutional and social) as well as a possible and measurable change in self-perception and confidence.⁹ Empowerment can also be viewed as a means to an end, incorporating the improvement of quality of life of everyone in society through specific demographic outcomes (decline in fertility, maternal mortality, rate of unsafe abortion, etc), or as an end in itself, directly resulting in improvement of women's rights and status in societies.¹⁰

Two other important dimensions to the understanding of the concept of empowerment are decision-making power and the view of empowerment in relational terms. While the former stresses the crucial role of women, the latter focuses on relationship between empowerment of women and its impact on men in different societies. Empowerment is context-specific, varying for women in different cultures, situations and stages of their life cycles. Genuine empowerment must necessarily include these aspects. Thus, as Seen and Batiwala¹⁰ argued, any development programme that changes women's control over resources must also build their confidence in themselves, if women are to have the resilience and motivation to retain and build on that control. Similarly, programmes that change awareness without leading to greater access to material resources can lead to frustration and high dropout rates.

The World Health Organization defines reproductive health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well being in all matters relating to the reproductive system and processes. The most important aspects of reproductive health include family planning, safe motherhood, safe and satisfying sex, prevention and treatment of reproductive tract infections and sexually transmitted diseases, as well as the decision-making power associated with these. Thus, as Adedokun¹¹ argues, the extent to which women have and can exercise power of decision in the timing of marriage, the number and spacing of their children and access to quality reproductive health services are some of the important indicators of the level of empowerment in different societies.

Given the foregoing, this paper examines the relationship between empowerment (defined in terms of increased access to reproductive health information and economic resources) and reproductive behaviour among women aged 19–25 years. Data for the study was obtained from part of a large-scale intervention programme that was implemented by Life Vanguard, a non-governmental, non-profit making organisation based in Osogbo, Nigeria. The intervention programme was designed to increase access to reproductive health information and services and economic resources among young women who had received formal education in tertiary institutions and those who had completed training as apprentices in various vocations.

There were two components of the intervention programme. The first sought to increase access to reproductive health information and services among the target population. The second sought to involve the provision of training in basic business management, survival strategies and micro credit facilities to a selected group of recent graduates of tertiary institutions who were unemployed and those who had completed a period of apprenticeship in tailoring, hairdressing, fashion design, *e.t.c.*, from the larger group. Loans were disbursed after the participants had successfully developed and presented a feasibility study of their business plans. The modality for repaying the loan was jointly worked out by programme beneficiaries and officials of the implementing NGO.

The intervention programme spanned a two-year period, June 1999 to July 2001, after which an assessment of impact on knowledge, attitudes and practices of beneficiaries was undertaken by an independent assessor. The authors of this paper, based on empirical evidence, argue that empowerment is important in securing the reproductive and sexual rights of young women, which in turn affect their perceptions of issues, their health, reproductive behaviour and to a large extent that of their male partners.

Data and Methods

Qualitative data was generated. Focus group discussion (FGD) guides were designed and used to conduct interviews with groups of young women who had benefited from the first and second components of programme implementation. FGD was also held with their parents and opinion leaders in the selected communities within Osogbo, Ife and Iree towns of Osun State. A total of eight focus group discussions were held with each group consisting of between eight and ten participants who had homogeneous characteristics. In other words, four FGDs were held for each category of graduates and non-graduates. Out of the total of eight FGDs held, four were held in Osogbo, being the largest of the three communities with the largest number of beneficiaries. In addition to the FGDs, case studies of beneficiaries who had set up their private businesses were conducted. A total of five case studies were conducted.

Field activities were undertaken between August and September 2001. The guides used consisted of issues that examined knowledge of reproductive and sexual activities, attitudes and practices of contraception, knowledge of sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS, sexual health negotiation skills, myths and misconceptions surrounding sexuality issues, and health-seeking behaviour. Additionally, issues of community perception of adolescent sexual and reproductive behaviour, the linkage between economic conditions and development aspect of the programme and sexual health were included in the instruments.

Project evaluation was designed to examine the impact of the project on beneficiaries. Specifically,

the evaluation procedure sought to determine the impact of information, skill building and the micro credit scheme on sexual and reproductive behaviour of female adolescents. One major hypothesis was tested: that economic empowerment through entrepreneurial skill development and availability of credit facilities to start a business venture could significantly alter the perception and behaviour of young women in sexual and reproductive issues. Key indicators in these areas were assessed after a period of project implementation.

The intervention was expected to meet the following objectives:

- Improve the reproductive health knowledge of the target population.
- Improve accessibility to reproductive health services among the target population and eliminate all barriers to the use of these services.
- Develop and strengthen entrepreneurial capability of young women and empower them economically.
- Improve their self-efficacy and skill acquisition, thereby reducing susceptibility to pressures to initiate or continue sexual activity as a result of economic deprivation.

The data were transcribed, edited and processed using *Microsoft WordPad*, after which they were coded. Where necessary, statements were quoted verbatim in order to demonstrate the importance of opinions expressed by participants. Data processing was done with *Open Code*, a software for analysing qualitative data.

Findings

A critical aspect of the programme was the entrepreneurial skill development. This aspect was initiated because of the pervasive belief that female adolescents succumb to pressures to initiate sexual activity early and make wrong decisions about sexual and reproductive health issues for economic reasons. Consequently, the programme planners believed that efforts to address the sexual and reproductive health of young women must begin by empowering them economically and providing access to opportunities for improving their social and economic conditions.

The result of this was the entrepreneurial skill development component that was built into the programme. There were two levels of training; the graduate training, which targeted those who already had tertiary education, and the non-graduate training, which targeted those who had completed apprenticeship training in the informal sector. The curriculum of training was similar for both graduates and non-graduates. The overall goal was to make available to them credit facilities with which they could establish/strengthen their individual business ventures. In several cases, some of them could not effectively practice the skills they had acquired while a few others who had started their private businesses were not making progress because of a lack of economic resources.

Although all the businesses selected in some of the case studies were operating on a small scale, they were nevertheless doing well. This conclusion is based on the results of assessments carried out on the beneficiaries. The beneficiaries indicated that they were able to manage their businesses well and had acquired useful skills during the entrepreneurial skills training programme.

Available information revealed that the exposure of participants to basic business survival and management skills has enhanced their efficiency in the day-to-day management of their businesses in addition to the training they received in their various vocations. They were also trained in book keeping to enable them to manage their funds properly. Some of the participants were of the opinion that without such additional training it would have been more difficult for them to successfully manage their businesses financially. As a result of the training, beneficiaries were able to account for their overhead and maintenance costs and the profit they make. One of the participants in the case studies made the following comments:

Ah ... for me, the training programme has been very useful to the extent that I am able to manage my own finances ... something I was previously unable to do. At a point, it was difficult to know the amount of profit I was making in this business simply because I could not render an account of what goes in and what comes out! (Non-graduate participant, Osogbo, September 2001)

All those interviewed were beneficiaries of the loan scheme that was built into the programme. The loan scheme was introduced to facilitate the establishment of business ventures for those who were yet to start their own businesses or to strengthen already existing ones. One of the strategies employed was to request would-be beneficiaries to apply for loans after conducting feasibility studies on any business they wished to embark upon. Many of them said it was a useful aspect as it enabled them to have adequate information about their business of choice and it prevented many of them from investing in a business that would have run bankrupt. It was also as a learning process for them, as they became knowledgeable of the need to conduct feasibility study before starting a business. One of the participants said:

I had finished my diploma course in the polytechnic and was finding it extremely difficult to get employed. As a result of frustration, I tried my hands on several businesses but none proved profitable. In any case, I was fortunate to participate in this programme and I learned what it means to conduct feasibility studies about a business before you embark on it ... today I am a better person for it. I, who had once been an applicant, am now an employer of labour. (Graduate participant, Iree, September 2001)

Many of those interviewed confirmed that without the loans it would have been difficult for them to start the businesses they are now managing. They cited the poor state of the economy that has made it almost impossible to raise loans from family members who may want to help them, while the banks are described as a "no go area". They are aware of the stringent conditions that have to be fulfilled before qualifying for a loan in any bank. Apart from the non-availability of collateral, the interest rates on bank loans would have discouraged them from obtaining loans from banks.

One of the participants spoke thus:

After my training, I had approached a wealthy relative to assist me with money to start a business, rather than tell me he had no money, he kept promising without fulfilling. After a while, I became fed up and thought of going to a bank to ask for

loan. When I approached the bank, the things (collateral) I was asked to bring were just too much that even if I had them I would not need to go to anybody to ask for a loan in the first place. The experience was quite frustrating. (Non-graduate participant, Osogbo, August 2001)

There was variation in the amount of loan given participants in the graduate scheme and those who participated in the apprentice girls' scheme. There were however complaints by the non-graduates about this variation. Some of them felt that it was not good enough especially because they believed they were operating in the same environment and under the same economic conditions. They said they should have been given more money because they are educationally disadvantaged and may not be left with any alternative like the graduate participants.

In the words of one non-graduate participant:

... those of us who never went to the university should have been given more money or at least given equal amount of money as those who are graduates. You know, those who are graduates have a choice ... that they can get employed if things do not turn out the way they expect. As for those of us (non-graduates) whose livelihood is tied to this business, we will do everything possible to make sure it succeeds. This is why we need more money than they do ... or at worst, the same amount so that we can also compete favourably with them. (Non-graduate participant, Osogbo, September 2001)

In spite of the complaints about discrepancies in the amount of money given to graduate and non-graduate participants, the method of repayment was highly commended. Beneficiaries had a 24-month period to repay whatever amount of loan was given to them. The loans ranged from ₦25,000 for non-graduates to ₦40,000 for graduates. The repayment method adopted was based on a mutual agreement between beneficiaries and officials of Life Vanguard. On some occasions, it was difficult for beneficiaries to meet up with the schedule, and in such cases Life Vanguard was willing to accommodate their shortcomings. One of the non-graduate beneficiaries, who operates a hair dressing salon, commented on this:

Sometimes you run short of your expectations in terms of paying back your monthly instalment, the officials of LIV/A do not bother you at all. They are willing to accommodate these shortcomings as long as they know you are not defaulting intentionally. For instance, I have defaulted on two occasions now but nobody has come here to harass me. (Non-graduate participant, Osogbo, September 2001)

Participants were asked to list the benefits of participating in the programme. Apart from the economic benefits they cited, the strong linkage between poverty and individual behaviours manifested in the responses they gave. The non-graduate beneficiaries opined that if they had not participated in the programme, life would have been more difficult for them. They said even if they had acquired the training but had no initial capital to start off, they would have had to depend on their family members or other people (men) for survival. This was echoed by some of the participants:

What would be the benefit of acquiring training such as I have and not be able to stand on my own at the end of the day? If there is nobody to help me, I would remain like I was before this help came my way. (Graduate participant, Ife, September 2001)

The benefits I have gained from this programme cannot be quantified. Where do I start? Is it from the knowledge I have gained about my body or the fact that I now command respect in the community as a responsible lady? Both young and old, especially the men in this community, now see me as a big woman ... somebody who a few years ago was an apprentice and now a manager of my own business. In fact, I cannot quantify the benefits. (Non-graduate participant, Osogbo, September 2001)

The opinions expressed by respondents suggest that when women are economically disadvantaged and they have to seek help from a man, it serves as some sort of invitation for the man to have his way with them. The girls did not mince words in castigating men for this behaviour, lamenting that they take undue advantage of girls because of their helpless situation.

In this part of the world, a man sees nothing wrong in asking for sexual and other kinds of favours in return for any help rendered a woman who is obviously disadvantaged. When you ask a man for help, he takes that to mean an invitation from you to sleep (have sex) with him, and there are few men who would think otherwise. If I have to be honest with you, I would have found myself in this situation if not for the opportunity I have with Life Vanguard. (Graduate participant, Ife, September 2001)

I want to thank God and this organisation (Life Vanguard) without whose help and support I would not have been what I am today. Who could have imagined that I would today be a manager of my own business? I had lost all hope of a great future with the death of my parents and with no one to help me. I have been saved from the dilemma of depending on a man for daily survival for the rest of my life. (Non-graduate participant, Osogbo, August 2001)

Respondents were asked to indicate which aspect of the programme has been most effective. Their responses varied from the loans given to them to the reproductive health information they were exposed to. A greater proportion of the respondents said the training and entrepreneurial skill development component complimented each other. They said without the reproductive health knowledge acquired they may have had to indulge in negative behaviours without knowing the consequences. One of the participants noted:

You may have all the money in the world, but it would amount to nothing when you don't know that certain kinds of behaviours put you at the risk of pregnancy or AIDS, and you know when AIDS strikes, there is no amount of money that can save a victim. (Graduate participant, Osogbo, September 2001)

Many of those interviewed suggested that many girls are still disadvantaged and that there is an impending need to reach them. There were calls from the beneficiaries for the laudable programme to be extended to as many girls as possible.

There are several girls who are still relatively deprived and without the help from programmes

of this nature, they would continue to fall prey to the whims and caprices of men who take advantage of them. (Non-graduate participant, Osogbo, September 2001)

The linkage between poverty and risky sexual behaviour is apparently highlighted in these cases. There were other opinions which suggest that the relationship between poverty and negative/risky sexual behaviour may not be as strong as previously suggested in literature. The proponents of such opinions indicated that it is a matter of individual decision.

The entrepreneurial skill development programme was designed to address this linkage. In large part, one may conclude that the programme has been able to achieve this objective based on the responses from participants. On the other hand, some participants noted that the linkage between poverty and negative sexual behaviour especially among girls may not be as clear-cut as the issue has often been painted.

One participant indicated thus:

Not all the girls who are prostitutes or indulge in negative and risky sexual behaviour are from poor homes. What shall we say about rich high class ladies who are prostitutes? Would you say it is poverty that has driven them into prostitution? Those who hide under the guise of poverty to indulge in this kind of behaviour are not being honest, they simply want to do it, whether they are poor or not. We have seen cases of people who are poor, yet they abstain from this kind of behaviour. (Non-graduate participant, Osogbo, September 2001)

This and similar opinions reveal that there is more to the issue of risky sexual behaviour among adolescents than poverty and economic deprivation. It is precisely because of this that some of those interviewed suggested that programmes should focus on factors other than economic that make young people to engage in negative risky sexual behaviours. Respondents suggested that the family background and upbringing of an adolescent play significant role in the behaviours they manifest. In this regard, they suggested that parents should be involved in this type of programmes so that they

can better appreciate their children and devote more time to their training.

When parents are too conscious about money they tend to have no time for training their children. As a result, some of these children end up manifesting negative behaviours which they learn from their peers and parents are not always around to discredit the negative impressions that young people learn from their friends about a lot of issues. There is still a lot of grounds for this project to cover. Without the involvement of parents and a training of this nature organised for parents, it may be difficult to achieve in totality the goals of this programme. I will strongly advise that trainings should also be organised for parents. (Graduate participant, Iree, September, 2001)

These responses were given when respondents were asked which aspect of the programme should be done differently. They indicated that boys should also be considered when this type of programmes are being planned. They believed that boys also have their own problems and these should be taken care of in order to reduce the rate of such social problems as armed robbery and other social vices perpetuated mainly by boys.

In my own opinion, I think boys too should be encouraged to participate and benefit from such programmes. Boys perpetuate a lot of the armed robbery, thuggery and other social vices going on in our society and this is because they are idle and are denied of opportunities. Let their interests be taken care of also ... they need loans to start off businesses, they need to be trained about reproductive health issues ... so that they will stop putting girls under pressure for sex, they need to be trained in these aspects and have the same opportunities as we have in this programme. (Non-graduate participant, Osogbo, September 2001)

Discussions

The importance of the relationship between female education and access to resources such as land and credit facilities as a means to further empowerment of girls has long been recognised by researchers and policymakers. Education provides young girls with the capacity and skills to achieve favourable balance

of power in male-female and inter-generational relationships. It encourages independence, helps to counter pronatalist attitudes and provides girls with a wider social network and greater exposure to non-traditional values. Similarly, employment outside the home can contribute to greater sexual and reproductive autonomy by reducing girls' dependence on men and children and providing girls and women with the moral leverage to challenge patriarchal controls over their sexual and reproductive lives, particularly if the earnings constitute a significant proportion of household income.

This paper has highlighted the significant contributions of economic empowerment of adolescent girls to their reproductive behaviour. Without doubt, a lot can be achieved in the attempts to empower young women by providing access to opportunities and resources. In spite of what can be achieved by economically empowering young people, there are several areas that also call for increasing attention.

The development of a psychological sense of personal control is also important in the effort to empower girls. As studies have shown, adolescent behaviours, including sexual activity and pre-marital childbearing, are a function of low self-esteem and internal locus of control, and low aspirations and expectations regarding the attainment of salient goals. For girls to achieve some reasonable level of control over their reproductive lives, they must not only have the knowledge and resources to exercise their choices, they must also put into practice what they have learnt by being able to negotiate terms with men regarding reproductive behaviour on their own. This remains the most challenging part of reproductive health programmes that seek to empower young women.

There are several other issues to be considered in the attempt at empowering female adolescents. One of these is the peer group, which has a vital role to play in strengthening the positions of adolescents in negotiating the terms of reproductive behaviour. Because adolescents are more likely to seek opinion or advice regarding their behaviours from their peers, empowerment through peer education can provide young girls with information

and knowledge about reproductive health and communication skills, and strategies to resist peer as well as partner pressure to engage in negative behaviour. Furthermore, communication about sexual matters is a significant factor associated with decision-making among adolescents. It has been shown consistently that young girls who discuss sexual matters with mothers or other family members demonstrate positive sexual behaviours. While it is recognised that family intervention based on parent-adolescent communication is an effective strategy for preventing negative sexual and reproductive behaviour among young people, efforts in this regard continue to be compromised by a lack of understanding of the specific kinds of messages that affect adolescent sexual decisions and practices.

Finally, it is important to recognise that to effectively empower adolescent girls, males must also be educated to respect young women's rights to control their own sexuality.

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