



## Parents' and Teachers' Attitudes to Adolescent Sexual Behaviour in Lesotho

### Background

Reproductive health of both women and men is an area that has received special attention in many African countries especially after the 1994 Cairo International Conference on Population and Development. However, it is only recently that adolescents' sexual and reproductive health has begun to be a focus for discussion and action in these countries. Considerable volume of research has been devoted to finding out the adolescents' views of their sexual behaviour and reproductive health needs but research has ignored views of significant adults such as parents and teachers. Parents are responsible for the welfare of their children, and yet, their opinions are usually not considered when addressing adolescent reproductive health issues at national or international forums. Given the importance of the parent-child relationship, such an omission can jeopardise efforts to improve adolescents' health. This study corrects this oversight by investigating the knowledge, attitudes and opinions of parents and teachers on various aspects of adolescents' reproductive health in Lesotho.

Lesotho is a small country that is completely surrounded by South Africa. It has two million inhabitants of which one quarter are adolescents. By sub-Saharan African standards, fertility and mortality are moderate in Lesotho. The life expectancy at birth is 59 years and total fertility rate is 4.1 births per woman.

### Methodology

The study uses a qualitative methodology and complements a related study on adolescents sexual behaviour conducted in Lesotho in 1999. Data were collected using focus group discussions. Thirty-six focus groups were conducted in three districts of Lesotho namely Maseru, Mophale's Hoek and Mokhotlong. Fifteen focus groups were conducted with male parents, 15 with female parents and 6 with teachers. All focus groups were conducted during the months of June and July 2000.

### Findings

- ◆ Parents and teachers are aware that both male and female adolescents have sexual relationships. Some parents believe that their adolescent children are too young to initiate sexual activities while others indicated that they don't mind older unmarried adolescent children experiencing sex.
- ◆ Parents felt that adolescents do not face any discrimination in obtaining family planning services because they see them in family planning clinics. However, many felt that family planning clinics were no place for adolescents.
- ◆ Parents reported that they do not discuss sex-related matters with their adolescent children. Some parents responded that they only discuss

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general issues especially if there is an event that will trigger a conversation such as a TV programme or an incidence happening in the neighbourhood.

- ◆ Traditionally, initiation schools were places where young people on the verge of marriage were given information about sexual relations and reproductive health. The majority of parents opposed the current operation of initiation schools because they felt that adolescents who graduate from these schools develop bad behaviour such as raping, stealing, insulting people, drinking alcohol, and bullying others.
- ◆ The parents and teachers noted that the ages of young people going to initiation schools is becoming lower, so that a large gap exists between graduating from such schools and marriage.
- ◆ Parents as well as teachers agreed that sex education should be introduced into the school curriculum. They felt that if sex education is formalised, teachers will take the responsibility of passing reproductive health

knowledge to adolescents and it will ensure that shy parents do not have the burden of discussing sexual issues with their children.

## Policy Implications

- ◆ There should be greater encouragement of communication between parents and their adolescent children on sex-related matters. It is suggested that parents should start the discussion at a young age with simple issues and orient the discussion to include more sensitive matters as children become older.
- ◆ The government should carry on with the dialogue on introducing sex education in the school curriculum. Since churches own the majority of the schools in Lesotho, it is vital that religious leaders are included in such discussions.
- ◆ The study recommends that the relevance and operation of initiation schools should be assessed.



### Full reference:

Mturi, A.J. 2001. "Parents' and Teachers' Attitudes to Adolescent Sexual Behaviour in Lesotho". Study Report, Opportunities and Choices, Department of Social Statistics, University of Southampton, Southampton, U.K.

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