

# **Parents' Attitudes to Adolescent Sexual Behaviour in Lesotho<sup>1</sup>**

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# PARENTS' ATTITUDES TO ADOLESCENT SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR IN LESOTHO

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Reproductive health of both women and men has recently received special attention in many African countries. Many governments have been concerned with various reproductive health matters of its people especially after the 1994 Cairo International Conference on Population and Development. A special focus has been directed towards the reproductive health of adolescents due to the consequences this group of people face. Obviously, adolescence is a wonderful time in one's life. It is the time filled with new and exciting things. What happens between ages 10 and 19, whether good or ill, shapes how girls and boys live out their lives as women and men (Mensch et al., 1998). It is therefore the task of all responsible parties to make sure that the transition from childhood to adulthood happens under favourable environments.

Several studies have looked at reproductive health matters of young people in Lesotho.<sup>2</sup> Makatjane (1997) assessed premarital childbearing among Basotho (people of Lesotho) using data from a nationally representative sample collected in 1991/92. The main finding of Makatjane's study is that premarital childbearing is increasing in Lesotho. This is contrary to what Basotho culture advocates in relation to sex and related activities (Kimane *et al.*, 1999). Traditionally, Basotho are not allowed to initiate sexual activities before marriage. There are cultural practices (such as checking bride's chastity immediately after consummation of marriage) which discourage premarital sex especially for girls. Premarital childbearing is more restricted and children who are born to unmarried women are regarded as illegitimate (Maqutu, 1992). It is because of these reasons that some adolescents resort to induced abortion as a method of avoiding unwanted children, which is illegal in Lesotho unless performed to save the life of the mother. It has been reported that "backstreet" induced abortions is also not uncommon in Lesotho (Mturi and Moerane, 2001). In addition, there is evidence that school drop-out rates among adolescent males and females is increasing dramatically (Mturi, 2001), one of the reasons for girls drop outs is probably pregnancy. The HIV/AIDS epidemic is also affecting, among others, adolescents.

In 1999, a study was conducted by this author on adolescent sexual behaviour and reproductive health in three districts of Lesotho (Mturi, 2000). That study aimed at collecting information from unmarried adolescent males and females who were still attending secondary and high schools. It was noted that slightly over 20 per cent of adolescent females discuss sex-related matters with their parents. The proportion of males discussing sex-related matters with their parents is half that of females (Mturi, 2000). This is because it is a taboo in many African societies to discuss sex-related

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<sup>2</sup> 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 (Bureau of Statistics and UNFPA, 1998).

issues between parents and their unmarried children. However, when adolescents were asked about the person they prefer to be responsible in passing information about sex matters to them, a third (highest proportion) ranked parents to be the most preferred source of such information (Mturi, 2000). Studies in many countries have found that parents are influential sources of information and advice for children (John Hopkins Center for Communication Programs, 1995). There was therefore a strong need to conduct research that will investigate the existing communication barriers between adolescents and their parents and to identify the difficulties experienced by parents in discussing sexual issues with adolescent children. A study of this nature will also assist in understanding the overall opinions and attitudes about adolescents' sexual behaviour.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The study uses a qualitative methodology. Data were collected using focus group discussions (FGD). The FGD is the best methodology for this study because the topic is explanatory and is focussed on particular opinions, beliefs and experiences. This type of information cannot be collected through a quantitative study design. FGD is also a very flexible tool useful for exploring topics about which little is known (Hennink and Diamond, 1999). Thirty focus groups were conducted with parents in three districts of Lesotho namely Maseru, Maseru, Maseru and Maseru. Fifteen focus groups were conducted with fathers and 15 with mothers. In addition, 6 focus groups were conducted with teachers in the same districts but the results are not presented in this paper. All focus groups were conducted during the months of June and July 2000.

Six researchers were recruited for the purpose of conducting the focus groups. Three research teams were formed, each team consisting of a male and a female researcher. The question guide covered four topics: social environment of adolescents, knowledge of the perception of adolescents' reproductive health issues, provision of services to adolescents and opinions on the introduction of family life education into the schools curriculum. It was decided that fathers and mothers participate in focus groups separately so that they can discuss issues without reservations.

## **3. KNOWLEDGE OF SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR OF ADOLESCENTS**

One of the issues discussed during the focus groups was parent's knowledge about adolescents' sexual behaviour. The actual question was Do you know if young people have boy/girlfriends? Young people in this case were males or females aged between 10 and 19 years. The boyfriend or girlfriend is a sexual partner of the opposite sex. In other words, this discussion was intended to find out if parents know that their own adolescents or adolescents in the area where they live had sexual partners. Since sexual activities are usually hidden practices, the parents may not necessarily be able to know whether or not their adolescents are sexually active. In some cases the response reflects what they perceive to be happening.

The majority of the parents who participated in the focus groups reported that they know that unmarried adolescent males and females have sexual partners. This observation was given across all groups of participants. The focus group participants stated that the source of information about the knowledge of adolescents' sexual partnerships is not through parent-son/daughter conversation. Usually parents' knowledge is through other sources of information such as accidentally seeing a love letter, hearing from younger siblings, etc. Here are the typical excerpts from the focus groups:

*We know through letters in their pockets or in their books. When searching their clothes or looking at their books, you will find letters written "nyeo-nyeo darling".*

Female Parents – Urban

*They hide themselves but once I found a letter from my boy and I asked him if he has a girlfriend. To my surprise he admitted having one and I told him to stop at once.*

Male Parents – Rural

Some parents in both rural and urban areas indicated that it is easy to know that adolescents have love affairs because of the way they behave. The practices that are usually done in private places like kissing are now done in public areas. However, there are some parents who admitted that they suspect there are sexual relationships among young people but they don't have any proof to that effect. The typical comments by parents include the following:

*They kiss each other in our presence here in town. Hugging each other and kissing each other means there is something going on.*

Female Parents – Urban

*Things have changed, they don't hide any more. They hug each other in front of us and they do it in daylight. They don't do it the way it was done in the past where they were hiding themselves. You will notice this even before being told by their younger siblings.*

Male Parents – Urban

*I see them on the way. They don't fear. They just cover and kiss each other on the way. If you try to threaten them, they stop, which means they know that they were doing something wrong.*

Male parents – Rural

A minority of female and male parents in both rural and urban areas responded that they knew nothing about adolescents having sexual relationships. This group of parents is however not homogenous. Whilst there are those who did not know anything going on but had doubts, there are those who said that their adolescent children were too young to be involved in a sexual relationship. The following excerpts give the picture of what these parents had to say.

*I don't know because they are young. I have not seen them because I am saying they are very young. For example my son is 13 years old and so you can't think...according to the way things happen, second born is only 10 years old.*

Male Parents – Urban

*Yes, adolescents have girlfriends, but my child is still very young and does not have a girlfriend. But I don't know maybe he has one since I am not always with him.*

Male Parents – Rural

*Whom are you talking about? The one who is 11 years old. Young as he is? I haven't seen anything as far as boyfriends and girlfriends are concerned.*

Female Parents – Urban

*My children are still young. I'm not aware of what they can do. What about the one who is aged 12? That one is still young. She just plays around.*

Female Parents – rural

Respondents had mixed feelings about allowing adolescents to have sexual relations before marriage. Some parents felt that adolescents should be allowed particularly the older group but some relationships should not be allowed. For instance, some parents were concerned with the behaviour of having a “sugar-mummy” for male adolescents and a “sugar-daddy” for female adolescents. It should be noted however that the idea of parents accepting sex before marriage amongst adolescents was only observed in urban centres. In other words, among those people who participated in rural focus groups, there is no one who had an opinion that supported premarital sexual relations among adolescents. The opinions of parents residing in urban centres about adolescents' sexual behaviour is reflected by the following excerpts.

*I think there is a problem. Young people of 19 or 20 years have boyfriends or girlfriends. I don't think there is anything wrong in having a boyfriend or a girlfriend. The problem arises when a boy wants to have a 'sugar mummy' and a girl likewise wants to have a 'sugar daddy'. Having sex is part and parcel of these relationships because you can't expect a man who has a family to go out with a 15-year-old for other reasons other than sex. The same applies with a married woman who has a relationship with a boy.*

Female Parents – Urban

*Whether my daughter has a boyfriend or not I don't know. But she has reached a stage where she can have a boyfriend. I mean she is mature enough to have one.*

Male Parents – Urban

In conclusion, the results presented above indicate that parents know that both male and female adolescents have sexual relationships. Although they never discuss this topic with adolescents, the majority of respondents stated to know about the adolescents' sexual relationships without any reservations. The main source of knowledge includes indirect methods such as finding love letters, hearing from younger siblings or observing their movements. There is also an indication that the parents think

that younger adolescents are less experienced in sexual activities compared with older adolescents. It is interesting to note that although Basotho culture is very restrictive in terms of sexual activities amongst unmarried adolescents (Mturi and Moerane, 2001), there are parents who allow their adolescents (at least old ones) to have sexual relationships. The parents who reported to accept their adolescents to initiate sex before marriage reside in urban areas. This finding is contrary to what adolescents themselves perceive to be their parents' attitudes (Mturi, 2000).

#### **4. ATTITUDES TOWARDS ADOLESCENTS' ACCESS TO REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH SERVICES**

During the focus groups, parents discussed issues related to adolescents' access to reproductive health services. The services discussed include information on reproductive health matters, family planning services for prevention of both unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections including HIV, and counselling. It is very important to know the attitudes and opinions of parents towards access and provision of reproductive health services to adolescents. Parents are important gatekeepers for adolescents, they are also in constant contact with adolescents and therefore can easily advise and encourage adolescents to use the services. Furthermore, at some services unmarried adolescents can only access reproductive health services if they are accompanied by their parents or guardians during the visit. The question posed during the discussions was Do you think young people are discriminated in getting access to reproductive health facilities?

The majority of participants in the focus groups felt that adolescents are not discriminated in obtaining the services. However, some participants pointed out that traditionally unmarried adolescents are not expected to initiate sexual activities until after they marry. This fact restricts unmarried adolescents to visit health centres for reproductive health facilities. In other words, Basotho culture discourages adolescents from visiting health centres because they are shy to be seen in need of reproductive health services prior to marriage. Those who are courageous to visit health centres sometimes receive a cold shoulder from service providers. The following excerpts reflect these issues.

*They are not discriminated. You will find them in large numbers there [health centres].*  
Male Parents –Urban

*I sometimes hear that when young people go there those ladies who work there refuse to give them services because they argue that the place is not good enough for them but for their parents.*  
Female Parents – Urban

*Adolescents are not discriminated in getting access to health facilities especially if parents accompany them.*  
Female Parents – Rural

*They are not discriminated. They even go there more frequently than people who have families. Their queue is even longer than ours.*

Female Parents – Rural

The most important point to note relates to parents who do not want adolescents to have access to reproductive health services. Apparently, there is confusion between reproductive health and family planning. Some parents, especially fathers, argue that unmarried adolescents are not supposed to have a family to plan for, therefore it is not right to provide them with reproductive health services. This shows that parents are ignorant of the fact that reproductive health services also include information and counselling. In addition, since a lot of adolescents are sexually experienced / active there is a need to equip them with knowledge and facilities for practising safe sex.

## **5. COMMUNICATION WITH ADOLESCENTS ON REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH ISSUES**

Respondents debated the issue of who should pass knowledge of reproductive health matters to adolescents. During the focus groups, parents were asked if they ever discuss sex-related matters with their adolescent children. Some parents reported that they discuss these issues freely with their adolescent children by discouraging any sex-related activities before marriage. The issue of discouraging premarital sexual activities is sometimes linked with the Bible. Parents especially those residing in urban areas argue that it is against the Bible for a person to be involved in any sexual activities before marriage. This suggests that parents used “religion” as the main point to discourage premarital sexual relations. The following are some of the typical points raised during the focus groups.

*We do discuss about these issues and sometimes quote the Bible.*

Female Parents – Urban

*We talk about blessings from God that enables them to resist temptation. They are not to put themselves in a position that will make boys want to have sex with them. They should also avoid being with boys in the late hours because they will end up sleeping with them. I try by all means to teach them to learn through experience from their peers who had problems such as getting pregnant. I warn them from people who will mislead them by saying that if they don't have sexual relationships they will be mentally disturbed. I say these are just man's ideas and not God's will of how people should live.*

Male Parents – Urban

The majority of participants in focus groups stated that they discourage premarital sexual relations of adolescents by referring to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. In addition to HIV/AIDS, parents discuss other consequences of having sexual relations such as premarital pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. The discussion is usually

initiated if there is a live example of unmarried adolescents having problems in the neighbourhood that resulted from sexual relationships.

*I don't discuss directly. I only discuss when one of their age-mates has a problem. It is during that moment that I give advice.*

Female Parents – Urban

*I am afraid of facing my daughter with that. But if there is a scandal such a girl has thrown a baby in the toilet or a girl has left the baby in the forest, I will then advise her by saying as follows “do you see the results of bad behaviour? If you are also doing that you will suffer the consequences soon or later”.*

Female Parents – Urban

*I only talk to him [my son] if there is a programme about AIDS on the radio. I try to make him aware that the programme is intended to educate young people.*

Female Parents – Rural

It is also a common practise to talk to adolescents by giving examples that will make sense to them. One such example was reported by a father who teaches his daughter by comparing a girl who sleeps around with boys with an old driving school vehicle.

*Yes, I always tell my girl that if she has sexual relationships before marriage, as we know boys are tempting, she will end up being like a driving school vehicle. Before one can buy a new vehicle he starts driving other people's vehicles – usually in a driving school. When the time comes to buy own vehicle, he will never buy the old vehicle he used to drive.<sup>3</sup> The same applies to boys. When he reaches the stage of marriage he will not marry the girl he has been sleeping with. He will go for a girl whom he loves.*

Male Parents – Urban

It has been reported during focus groups that some parents do not discourage sex matters directly but mention other activities which lead to having relationships or encourage sex-related activities such as going out at night, playing around with boys (for girls) especially if boys touch their private parts. Some parents are only concerned about the act of sex. Other important matters like the expected changes in the adolescent body or the expected emotional changes were not discussed.

There are parents who stated that they cannot discuss sex-related matters with their adolescent children. Various reasons were given for this. Some parents say that they are shy or embarrassed to discuss sex with their adolescents. Some blame the tradition that these issues are not supposed to be discussed especially across generations. Other parents argue that their adolescent children are too young to discuss those matters and discussing with them implies encouraging them to indulge into sexual

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<sup>3</sup> In Lesotho, driving school vehicles are usually very old. It is not uncommon to see a learner driver pushing the vehicle to jump start it instead of driving it. It is this reason that makes one to suggest that if a person wants to buy a vehicle, s/he will not consider buying a driving school vehicle.



activities. The excerpts below indicate the mixed feelings of why parents do not want /fail to discuss sex-related matters with their adolescent children.

*I never discuss with my children about sex-related matters...The fact that they are still young i.e. age-wise, I never thought they have started having sexual relationships.*

Female Parents – Urban

*Sex before marriage is not acceptable and therefore as parents we cannot encourage it. In other words we cannot teach them about sex because they will develop ideas which they did not have before.*

Male Parents – Urban

*Even if they are grown-ups, I never discuss sex-related issues with them because I am very shy.*

Female Parents – Rural

*I do not like it. It is not right at all. It is totally wrong because... children of that age cannot do it three times before I catch them. It is very embarrassing. Mr chairperson, that kind of thing I do not want to see it at all, I can strongly prevent it if I happen to see it happening because these children are still young.*

Male Parents – Rural

There are parents who discuss sex-related matters directly with their adolescent children. But, a number of male parents suggested that they talk to their adolescent children through their mother. The argument is that fathers are shy to discuss these issues. Another argument is that there is an arrangement in the household that it is the mother who is supposed to talk to children about these issues. Some fathers let their wife discuss sex-related matters with their children because that is the way they were brought up.

In most cases the fathers discuss with male adolescents and mothers discuss with female adolescents. However, there are occasions when discussions become arguments. This happens when adolescents feel that they know better than their parents. One female parent reported as follows:

*I do discuss with them but they say I don't understand what I am talking about. But I think they are the ones who do not understand.*

Female Parents - Rural

## **6. INTRODUCTION OF SEX EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS CURRICULUM**

The final item discussed during the focus groups relates to introduction of sex/family life education into schools curriculum where adolescents attend. This is a very controversial topic because of the nature of the schools in Lesotho. Most of the schools in Lesotho are owned by the churches. Some of these churches, such as the Catholic Church, are very reluctant to allow adolescents to be taught sex education in schools. Another factor is that of culture. According to Basotho culture, just like in many other African settings,

discussion of sex is a taboo. The on-going debate in Lesotho about the introduction of sex education in schools has only succeeded in identifying a few trial schools where sex education can be tested. However, the reluctance of the churches, some parents and some teachers has made it difficult even for some trial schools to introduce sex education in their curriculum. The introduction of this issue to the focus groups reads as follows: The government of the Kingdom of Lesotho is planning to establish family life education in the secondary and high schools. Most of the sex-related issues and reproductive health knowledge will be formally taught in class. What is your personal reaction to this strategy?

The majority of the people who took part in the focus groups felt that sex education should be introduced in the schools curriculum in Lesotho. The excerpts below indicate that all types of focus groups were very positive to the fact that there will be a formal subject dealing with sex-related matters in schools. This includes participants who were of the opinion that sex-related matters should be taught at home. They argue that it is acceptable for the school to teach if it is a well designed subject. Shy parents agreed that this would help them to discuss sex as a subject at home. This implies that if a child comes home with questions from what has been taught in class, it will be easier to explain. This is what is happening with other subjects such as science, mathematics, etc. Some parents not only supported the idea but also recommended that the government should make similar arrangements for adolescents who are not attending school.

*I think I support that because all the methods that have been used have failed. Most of them take it as a joke. It will be different if they are taught at school because they will be assessed and that will make them concentrate.*

Female Parents – Urban

*I agree with that. Children could be able to socialise with teachers since parents have failed. They could be able to demand help from us for their assignments. This will also enable parents to be involved.*

Male Parents – Urban

*I think if they are taught like any other subject at school, the knowledge can stick into their heads.*

Female Parents – Rural

*I think it should be included as one of the subjects. Secondly, I think something should be organised for adolescents who don't attend school.*

Male Parents – Rural

Few participants in focus groups were not happy at all with this initiative. They argue that teaching adolescents about sex is equivalent to allowing them to go ahead with those practises. Most of the participants who were against introducing sex education in schools curriculum were fathers; only one mother was against the idea. The following

excerpts explain the position of those who were against the initiative of establishing sex education as a formal subject.

*I think it is going to worsen the situation because they will be given a lesson as a group. It will take 2 years for the whole world to be destroyed.*

Female Parents - Urban

*I don't agree with the idea at all because when you talk of sex issues, that is exactly what excites young people. Even Satan, the devil gets excited because his followers are increasing in number. We will hear people say that many teachers are involved with our children. Talking about these issues makes young people feel like doing it after class. Talking about sex in class makes them loose concentration of other subjects that are important.*

Male Parents - Urban

*My whole body is shaking. Corruption is going to emerge from this. They will want to experience what they have been told in order to prove some of the issues. I don't encourage it at all.*

Male Parents - Urban

*In that way I don't appreciate it. I thought they are just going to be taught how to behave.*

Male Parents - Rural

The majority of parents felt that introducing sex education in schools curriculum in Lesotho is a good idea. They argue that if sex education is taught as a formal subject in schools, teachers will take the lead in passing the knowledge to adolescents. But, parents will also be involved by helping adolescents with their homework. In other words, parents will then discuss sex education at home the way they discuss other subjects like mathematics and science. Few parents did not like this idea because they think teaching sex education in schools is equivalent to encouraging promiscuity. However, the literature does not support this type of relationship. UNAIDS (1997) has reviewed 53 reports that evaluated the intervention of sexual health education on young people's sexual behaviour and found out that only three studies increases of sexual behaviour was associated with sexual health education. In 27 studies, young people did not change sexual behaviour and there was delay on the onset of sexual activity, reduced number of sexual partners and reduced unplanned pregnancy and STD rates in 22 studies. Based on these results, UNAIDS concluded that there is no evidence that sex education promotes promiscuity.

## **7. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

The discussion on knowledge about adolescents' sexual behaviour was intended to find out whether parents know that adolescent children had sexual partners and are involved in sexual activities. The majority of the participants in the focus groups reported that they know that unmarried adolescent males and females have sexual partners. In

addition, they said that it is easy to know that adolescents have love affairs because of the way they behave such as holding each other, hugging, kissing, etc. Some participants in the focus groups said they do not know but they can guess that the adolescents have sexual relationships. A small group of participants argued that their adolescents do not have sexual relationships because they are too young.

During the focus groups, parents were asked whether they ever discuss sex-related matters with their adolescent children. Some parents responded that they discuss freely with their adolescents by discouraging any sex-related activities until they are married. There was a concern from many participants that they cannot discuss sex-related matters with their adolescent children. In fact, even those who said that they discuss, some just give examples of their peers with problems to show the consequences of sex or they only discuss some topics such as AIDS, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections. Very few participants mentioned that they teach adolescents the details of all aspects of sexual and reproductive health. Some reported that they are shy and embarrassed to discuss these things, some said adolescents are still too young for this type of conversation, and others were restricted due to the cultural taboo of discussing sexual issues with unmarried adolescents.

Parents felt that adolescents are not discriminated in obtaining reproductive health services because they see adolescents in large numbers in the health centres seeking services. A lot of respondents especially male parents were not happy with the idea that adolescents should be allowed to visit health centres for family planning services without any restrictions. The participants suggested that parents or guardians should accompany adolescents when they visit the family planning clinics.

The idea of introducing sex education into the schools curriculum was received very positively by many participants in the focus groups. Participants felt that if it is a formal subject, teachers will take the responsibility but parents will also help at home as they do in other subjects. This was also the opinion of adolescents who were interviewed in the previous study by this author (Mturi, 2000).

The findings in this study have a number of policy implications. The issue of awareness amongst parents of adolescents' reproductive health needs need to be addressed seriously. The majority of parents are aware that adolescent males and females are experiencing sexual relationships. This point is very important in understanding the reproductive health problems facing adolescents. It is imperative therefore for the policy to target the group of parents who are unaware of the fact that adolescents are engaged in sexual activities. In addition, parents are expected to know that unmarried adolescents have the right to visit the family planning clinics. Parents need to be advised to encourage unmarried adolescents to seek reproductive health services, whether those adolescents are sexually experienced or not.

The problem of communication between parents and their adolescent children has come out very clearly in this study. Parents are either shy to discuss sex-related matters with their adolescent children or they think the discussion will encourage them to indulge in

sexual activities. The same notion applies to the introduction of sex education in schools curriculum. Although some parents support the idea, others are against it because they think by teaching them it will encourage promiscuity amongst adolescents. However, empirical studies have shown that communication of sex-related matters or teaching sex education in schools does not lead to promiscuity. On the contrary, this has been found to delay age at initiation of sexual activities, to reduce the rate of unwanted pregnancies, reduce the rate of illegal induced abortions, and reduce the rate of sexually transmitted infections including HIV.

This study supports the initiative by the government of Lesotho to establish sex education in schools curriculum. All interested stakeholders should be involved in this exercise. Meanwhile, parents should be encouraged to discuss sex-related issues with their adolescent children at home. The government may attempt to use the village Chiefs to encourage parents to talk to their adolescent children.

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