HEALTH AND CULTURE IN MALI: PERCEPTIONS AND OPINIONS OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE INFORMAL SECTOR

Study to guide strategies in promoting sexual and reproductive health of young people in the informal sector

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Theatre forum: a tool used to discuss sexual and reproductive health with young people

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Context

The Role of Culture in the Tools and Strategies for the Promotion of Sexual and Reproductive Health of Young People in the Informal Sector in Mopti was a 2-year project implemented in Mopti by Interarts and Family Care International Mali (FCI), in partnership with the Children and Young Workers Association (Association des Enfants et Jeunes Travailleurs, AEJT) of Mopti, and with support from the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID).

This program aimed to improve the sexual and reproductive health (SRH) of young people in Mali by developing and promoting tools and strategies that are adapted to the cultural context of young people who work in the informal sector — in other words, outside of formal employment and educational systems — in the port city of Mopti, located on the Niger River. The project also sought to underline the pervasive role of culture in all human development processes, especially in promoting SRH among the most vulnerable groups. This goal was particularly important in the region of Mopti, where young people under 24 years old represent 42% of the population.

FCI Mali, AEJT, and Interarts have prepared this report to further explore the role of culture in development processes designed for young people in the informal sector and other vulnerable groups. Its findings are based on a survey of approximately one hundred program participants and other stakeholders.

The diagnosis, an element of a cultural approach

Opinions and attitudes towards sexuality and SRH are driven by a complex interplay of cultural references and dynamic variables. To ensure that interventions, strategies, and actions that seek to promote SRH are successful, we must carefully consider and study these processes. In a context containing diverse ethnicities, beliefs, and value systems, cultural factors play a crucial role in perceptions and decisions related to relationships, sexuality, and SRH. It is therefore essential to analyze the aspects of culture that influence these behaviors and attitudes.

After two years of implementation of the project in the field, it is clear that there is a lack of up-to-date information on cultural factors that influence the SRH of young people in the informal sector. There is also a need for evaluation of the effects of cultural interventions in promoting young people’s SRH.

Because there is little or no data on the needs and interests of young people in Mopti’s informal sector, the project partners sought to explore their opinions and perceptions in various areas related to their health and culture.

Objectives of the diagnosis

This diagnostic process aimed to identify the cultural factors — including cultural and recreational activities, uses of spare time, needs and means of expression, and existing spaces and mechanisms for participation — that influence the opinions and behaviors related to SRH of young people in the informal sector in Mopti.

The information collected should help identify ways to adapt public and private initiatives to promote SRH among this vulnerable population.

Methodology

To ensure optimal data collection, the AEJT selected participants available for follow-up surveys at the end of the project. The survey questionnaire was designed for two groups:

- Young people in the informal sector (YIS) of the city of Mopti, including:
  - 45 young “peer educators”, (PEs) who had been trained to share information about SRH with other young people as part of the current project.

1 Source: www.malikunnafoni.com

2 For more information visit: www.interarts.net/en/encurso.php?pag=2&p=362
- 45 other young people who were potentially affected by the project’s activities (for example, during awareness-raising activities)

- Key stakeholders (10 people), who played a strategic role in observing and providing support to young people in the course of the project (including religious leaders, employers, health workers, and representatives of key partners like Action Mopti).

**Questionnaire design**

Two questionnaires (one for young people, the other for key stakeholders) were drafted by Interarts and reviewed by FCI to ensure that the questions were relevant to the local sociocultural context. Both surveys were designed to observe and record perceptions and values on themes related to SRH, such as health, sexuality, marriage, and sexual education.

**Data compilation and questionnaire management**

Prior to conducting the survey, the project partners translated the questionnaires into Bambara and reviewed survey objectives, methodology, and data collection procedures. Representatives of AEJT Mopti and FCI Mali then interviewed 10 PEs individually on March 21, 2011, shortly before a specialized training in “theatre forum” took place. The results of this first consultation were used to further refine the questionnaires. The remaining respondents (35 other PEs, 45 other YIS, and 10 key stakeholders) were interviewed by consultants between May 23rd and May 31st, 2011. Data compilation took place between June 1st and 13th, 2011.

**Gathering additional information**

After seeing the limitations of several closed-ended questions included in the surveys, the organizations conducted supervised group discussions in order to gather additional qualitative information. Preparations for

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3 Theatre forum involves designing and creating short plays aimed to open a dialogue and generate reflections about different themes such as SRH behaviors. Every play – written and performed by PE trained in the techniques of theatre forum – is followed by questions addressed to the audience, in order to start a discussion about various topics (e.g., Sexually Transmitted Diseases, family planning, unwanted pregnancies, female genital mutilation, early marriage and its consequences) and let the audience speak. These 10 young people will also participate in the final interview at the end of the project, in order to evaluate the impact of the theatrical experience.
these focus groups included selecting participants, note-takers, and supervisors to facilitate the discussions. One of these focus groups was composed of 8 young women, and another of 8 young men; an additional focus group, which included 6 women and 4 men, was composed exclusively of peer educators. All group participants had also participated in the initial questionnaire-based survey.

**Study results**

More than 16,000 young people participated in awareness-raising activities implemented during the project *The Role of Culture in Sexual and Reproductive Health Policies and Strategies Targeting Young People in the Informal Sector in Mopti*. This report seeks not to represent the opinion of every one of them, but rather to reflect some important trends that could play a positive or negative role in the SRH of young people. These trends can provide some direction on how best to adapt strategies in the future.

**Young people's attitudes about cultural customs and values**

Face-to-face interviews and focus groups revealed young people's attitudes on cultural variables, including the following:

- A cultural legacy of traditional customs and values is passed on from generation to generation, both by family members (parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts) and by members of the broader community, and young people view this as an important cultural function. Griots, elders, employers, and friends were specifically mentioned, although — interestingly — no references were made to religious leaders.

- Young people are attached to immaterial cultural patrimony (language, customs, traditions) and to other social norms (polygamy, abstinence before marriage), and feel that both convey positive values and protect against “acculturation.”

- Religious precepts related to SRH (including abstinence, nonviolence, and physical and mental health) are positively perceived, and are rarely viewed as impediments to sexual freedom. More than 75% of respondents reported that religion influences their sexual behavior and health.

- Gender matters to perceptions of sexual issues. Young people generally believe that the ideal age to become sexually active is after 18; however young women feel this much less strongly, and are more tolerant of early initiation of sexual activity. Sexual desire is also perceived differently, with each group considering that it is stronger among members of the opposite sex.

- Young people believe that their views on sexuality and relations between men and women are freer than the opinions held by their families and communities. For instance, they associate love with intercourse, even before marriage.

- There is a virtual consensus around issues of sexual morality, including rejection of violence, acceptance of polygamy, and support for abstinence before marriage.

- Only a third of young people question traditional sexual behaviors and beliefs (including female genital mutilation, early marriage, and levirate marriage) that are often considered incompatible with sexual education.

- A number of participants expressed support for traditional sexual morality during individual interviews, but expressed more liberal views of gender relations — including suggestions that love can manifest itself in sexual relationships before marriage — during focus group discussions, suggesting some conflict between the pull of traditional teachings and lessons learned through sexuality education.

- Many young people feel that it is difficult to communicate with family and acquaintances about issues of sexuality. However, the weight of sexual taboos seems lighter among people of the same gender and generation (friends, relatives).

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4 A “griot” is a member of a caste responsible for maintaining an oral record of tribal history and tradition of a village or family, in the form of music, poetry, and story telling in Western Africa. Source: http://www.thefreedictionary.com/griot
Participants displayed a real appetite for online SRH information — almost every young internet user reported looking up SRH information online — but many have **little or no access to the internet** because of technical, economic, and educational barriers. Several interviewees indicated willingness to pay to have Internet access at cybercafés.

Other cultural variables mentioned during the study, in particular during the focus group discussions include:

- *Marabout* practices (i.e., the use of talismans, gri-gri, etc.) are sometimes associated with religion and used as methods of contraception and prevention of Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs).
- Popular sayings that are heard on the street — like “Premature sexuality prevents growth” or “Circumcised men can only satisfy excised women” can influence young people’s attitudes, despite their inaccuracy.

**Young people's access to leisure activities**

The second part of the study concerned young people’s access to recreation, and to cultural recreation in particular. Findings included the following:

- Many young people (as many as two-thirds) participate in cultural events organized by the community.
- Young people also attend cultural events, both traditional (pirogue races, family events, folkloric dance festivals) and artistic (theatre, concerts, national artistic and cultural biennale). Most commonly mentioned events are the pirogue races, the local artistic and cultural week, and concerts.
- Fewer than one-quarter of young people, however, actively participate as direct protagonists in these cultural events.
- Two-thirds of young people reported participating in cultural events related to SRH, including theatre, discussion groups, various public entertainment activities, concerts, and competitions. Most frequently mentioned events were public entertainment activities, musical meetings called “balani shows,” competitions, and discussion groups.
- Many cultural, artistic, and sports activities attract more boys than girls. Sports were mentioned more (42 times) than cultural activities (11 times).
- Young people highly value the importance of dedicating free time to socializing with friends and relatives, relaxing at home (watching TV, reading, tea, music, etc.), and resting.
- Cultural activities related to SRH that might be particularly effective in reaching young people include theatre, competitions, sports, and public shows. Preaching and the use of mass media were also mentioned.

**Opinions and behaviors depend on gender**

The survey and focus group discussions revealed significant differences between attitudes of young men and young women, including the following:

- More often than young men, the young women stated that the first sexual intercourse — for men and women alike — should occur before age 18.
- A clear majority of young women (60%) opposed polygamy, while young men supported it in a similar proportion.
- Young women strongly support a cultural norm of virginity until marriage (80% favor it compared with less than 70% of men), citing in particular notions of family honor and the risk of pregnancy. In general, young women adhere to traditional sexual behaviors and beliefs in greater proportions than men, and some revealed it commenting their acceptance of other traditional concepts including compulsory conjugal duties and of the use of violence as a “proof of love.”
- Twice as many young men than young women know how to use the internet; this may be related to schooling rates, which are higher for men than for women.
Regarding SRH cultural events, only women reported taking part in activities dedicated to family planning.

Fewer than half of the women interviewed (compared with 90% of the men) have ever participated in a cultural, artistic, or sports activity, and only men mentioned participating in sports (mostly soccer) as a leisure activity.

Only women mention housework as a leisure activity. The number of women who want to rest during their spare time is twice as high as for men. The proportion of women watching TV during their spare time is twice as high as for men.

Lessons learned

Even though the survey guaranteed anonymity of responses, questionnaire administration through face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions is bound to produce a number of biases. As a result, some of the answers show contradictions between the opinion and the actual behavior of the interviewee (for example, opinions regarding sexual intercourse before marriage). The desire to look good or to conceal aspects that may be socially inappropriate or awkward may explain the discrepancies between stated and actual behaviors.

Data analysis and survey software (such as Sphinx) provide an opportunity for a more in-depth data analysis. All data can be matched to the age, gender, marital status, or ethnic group of the interviewees. It can potentially give cross-cutting information for any of the questions (for example, we could know what proportion of young people attending religious schools also attend official schools). This tool is even more interesting if we consider that some traditional behaviors (for example, female genital mutilation) vary from one ethnic group to another.

The initial questionnaire tested with 10 young leaders who were trained in theater forum did not disaggregate responses by gender. After preliminary tabulations, the wording of some questions was modified. This adjustment phase complicates the interpretation and analysis of responses as a whole.

This study led us to identify the most relevant issues and to reformulate and clarify questions in order to obtain optimal results. After numerous exchanges between the Spanish and Malian partners, a new version of the questionnaire was finalized.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study identified factors that hinder or facilitate young people’s access to information, services, and decision making related to SRH. Expectations, wishes, and opinions of young respondents demonstrate a number of trends that can inform project impact evaluation at the individual and collective levels. More generally, our findings can guide efforts to improve the effectiveness of actions and strategies aimed at promoting young people’s SRH.

In general, the views of youth from the informal sector remain fairly consistent with traditional views when it comes to sexual and emotional relationships. Practices arising from the unequal status between men and women, such as polygamy, are quite tolerated and normalized. False beliefs, especially in relation to sexuality, are common among young people (for example, boys tend to believe that it is harder to have satisfying sex with uncircumcised women). Girls generally also adhere to these myths and values, and often report that violence and coercion are sometimes acceptable in the name of marital obligations or “as a proof of love”. Opposing this justification of violence and promoting equitable gender relations that respect human rights will require offering young people with access to objective information on cultural practices and their effects, so that they can engage in dialogue on sex roles and gender expectations.

Responses of peer educators — young people who have participated in SRH awareness-raising activities — tend to diverge from generally-accepted and integrated social, cultural, and gender norms. PEs generally want to delay the age of first intercourse, favor gender equality, and hold a more critical opinion of traditional practices (including FGM and early marriage) than other young people from same background. All PEs
reported that they know their health rights, which is not the case with the other group. With respect to prevention of STDs, focus group discussions showed that the PEs did not present risk behaviors, unlike the other interviewees. Better knowledge of SRH increases young people's independence and has a positive influence on opinions and behaviors related to sex and reproduction. Providing information appears to develop critical thinking and offer young people the opportunity to make responsible and autonomous decisions about their SRH. This demonstrates the need for continued advocacy that aims to provide youth in the informal sector with the necessary tools that allow them to make informed decisions about their sexual lives.

By volunteering their free time to conduct SRH awareness-raising activities targeting other young people, PEs developed a sense of altruism, responsibility, and ownership, leading to an efficient implementation of the project. PEs often expressed satisfaction with the ways their lives had transformed since they began counseling their peers. Because young people are often more comfortable discussing issues related to sexuality and family planning with people of similar age and social status, peer-to-peer education seems very appropriate for young people in the informal sector. Despite a lack of formal education and poor living conditions, they can become engaged in the improvement and development of their community.

Analysis of young people’s needs and interests reveals that cultural diversity can help to open exchanges and reflection on some traditions and practices that affect young people’s sexual lives. Female circumcision, for example, is only practiced in some ethnic and cultural groups. Interventions should continue to promote healthy cultural practices (e.g. recognition of diversity and cultural identity, the ideas of hygiene and respect conveyed by religion) while educating young people about traditions that infringe on their physical and moral human rights in the area of sexuality and reproduction.

Many young people recognize that cultural and recreational activities can effectively educate the community and allow people to communicate about unwanted pregnancies and the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV. Drama, radio quizzes, and sports are all useful, inexpensive tools that are easy to implement to reach young people in the informal sector. In communities where religion is important, it can also provide a space to address issues related to reproductive health. The survey showed that young people are sensitive and responsive to messages delivered by religious leaders, especially during sermons. Civil institutions and the government should join forces with religious leaders and integrate them into strategies to prevent HIV and unwanted pregnancies. Mass media, especially television, reaches many young people in their free time and should be used as a communication tool to promote SRH.

The survey collected data on access to cultural and recreational activities among youth in the informal sector, an area that has not been explored before. Unfortunately, young girls in particular rarely participate in cultural and recreational activities, which could contribute to their physical and mental well-being.

Culture and arts (e.g. theater) can be used as tools to disseminate information and ensure informal learning and personal development, including self-knowledge, self-esteem, and critical thinking. An analysis of the needs and interests of youth from the informal sector regarding local cultural and leisure opportunities (community facilities, locally implemented cultural policies, etc.) could open new avenues to address young people’s health problems. Culturally appropriate services and information on SRH should be accessible to young people in their native languages (Bambara, Fulani and Dogon, the most common languages in Mopti).

A broad and integrated strategy to promote youth SRH should be implemented. It should take into account the fact that many young people in the informal sector do not have access to cultural, leisure, and educational opportunities, making it difficult for them to access objective information. Promoting SRH should be done in synergy with both public and non-institutional actors, and with other health, educational, cultural, and artistic policies.