Inconceivable conception: Social unacceptability of sex and family planning use among unmarried women

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Family planning in Zanzibar

- Only one published study on family planning use in Zanzibar
- 2010 DHS showed fewer than 1 in 8 married women use family planning.
- No data for unmarried sexually active women
Younger women have sexual debut before marriage

TDHS 2010
Abortion in Zanzibar

• No research ever on abortion in Zanzibar
• Post-abortion care was most common cause for admission to gynecologic ward in 2008
• High interest from MOH and providers
Methods

Focus group discussions, grouped by age and gender (n=15 groups, 118 participants)

Semi-structured interviews with women who had abortions, recruited via respondent driven sampling (n=50)

In-depth interviews with reproductive health providers & other key informants (n=23)

Structured interviews with women receiving post-abortion care (n=200)
Unwanted pregnancy:
Better to use family planning, have an abortion, or have a baby?
Adolescent friendly RH services

“Adolescents are informed of their sexual and reproductive health rights and services”

(MOH principal adopted in 2006)

SRH rights and services include:

– personal decision making & behavior on reproduction
– access to quality RH information
– privacy
– guidance and advice from trained professionals
– services free of discrimination, coercion or violence
Q: Should unmarried women receive education about family planning?

Don’t let a woman who is unmarried use family planning! You are permitting her to have sex by understanding how to prevent pregnancy. She will wander freely like a cow with its rope cut.

-Married, urban woman

No! If she uses family planning you have already told her, “Go! [feel free to have sex]”

- Married, rural woman
[Once I had a skin reaction to a condom] and when I want to the hospital to ask about it, the doctor just laughed at me... and he told me, “You should not do what you are doing.”

-Unmarried, peri-urban man
Q: Should unmarried women receive education about family planning?

There is no need for unmarried women to use family planning. For us Muslims, it is wrong to practice sexual intercourse [when unmarried]. We should respect ourselves and our parents.

  -Unmarried, urban woman

They should use condoms only. If they use implants or pills, it may cause harm. If they cannot wait, use condoms.

  -Unmarried, urban woman
Socio-cultural environment is a barrier to adolescent SRH care

When presenting these findings to RH partners in Zanzibar, I asked:

Do you agree that adolescents should have the right to obtain all SRH services free of discrimination?

Do our SRH providers in hospitals and clinics?
They haven’t gotten married so they don’t need family planning. They don’t have any need to plan. It’s just bad luck if they get pregnant.

- Unmarried, urban man
In our place, if she gets pregnant, she will feel ashamed because her parents will turn her away. Her schooling, too, will stop.

-Unmarried, rural woman
No Sex -------- Sex

FP

No FP

Lucky

Unlucky
What is risker?

Using FP?
Or chancing unwanted pregnancy?
FP < ab/birth
FP < ab/birth

FP > pregnancy likelihood * ab/birth

FP * shame >> pregnancy likelihood * ab/birth
No Sex  →  Sex
   ↓        ↓
   FP       No FP
         ↓
   Lucky  →  Unlucky
          ↓
Abortion  →  Baby
No Sex -- Sex

FP

No FP

Lucky

Unlucky

Abortion

Baby
If young unmarried women are having sex and they get pregnant, whether they give birth or have an abortion, they’ll have problems getting married.

- Unmarried, urban man
Conclusions

Externally, social norms prevent unmarried women from using family planning

- Belief that FP leads to immoral sexual behavior
- Criticism from providers
- Fears of side effects/health problems from community leaders
Conclusions

Internally, using family planning represents known risks (social and health).

Many unmarried women expose themselves to possible bad consequences of pregnancy over certain bad consequences of using family planning.