
**COUNSELLORS ADVOCACY OF REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH NEEDS OF YOUNG ADULTS IN
NIGERIA: ASSESSING THE FACTORS, CHALLENGES AND REMEDIES.**

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ABSTRACT

The study assessed counsellors' advocacy of reproductive health needs of young adults in Nigeria: assessing the factors, challenges and remedies. It found out that the reproductive health needs of young adult include; Comprehensive Sexuality Education, Access to Contraception, Prevention of Sexually Transmitted Infections, Menstrual Health and Hygiene, Support for Healthy Relationships, Access to Reproductive Healthcare Services. The study identified Lack of Comprehensive Sex Education, Limited Access to Reproductive Health Services and High Rates of Unintended Pregnancies and Abortions. The role of counselors in advocating for the reproductive health of young adults is crucial. They play a vital role in promoting informed decision-making, providing support in the mental health and emotional well-being of young adult, education and information dissemination, navigating societal and cultural influences, advocating for policies that enhance the overall reproductive health of young adults and promotion of healthy relationships. In conclusion addressing the reproductive health needs of young adults in Nigeria requires a comprehensive approach. Tackling factors such as sociocultural norms, economic disparities, and limited access to sex education is essential to promote informed decision-making. One of the recommendations made was that government should implement and strengthen comprehensive sex education programs in schools to provide accurate information on reproductive health, contraception, and STI prevention. These programs should be age-appropriate, culturally sensitive, and address diverse needs.

KEYWORDS: Counsellors Advocacy, Reproductive Health Needs of Young Adults and Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Reproductive health, which includes a variety of concerns about sexual and reproductive rights, family planning, and access to necessary healthcare services, is an important component of general well-being, especially for young adults. It is crucial to recognize and meet the reproductive health needs of young people in Nigeria, a nation with a rapidly growing youth population.

The demands of young people in Nigeria with regard to reproductive health are influenced by several factors. Important roles are played by sociocultural norms, economic inequality, and restricted access to comprehensive sex education. Nigeria's heterogeneous cultural landscape might influence people's decisions and choices by fostering different viewpoints on reproductive health. Furthermore, access to reproductive health treatments, such as family planning and contraception, might be impeded by economic disparities for young adults (NPC & ICF, 2019).

Even though reproductive health is important, young adults in Nigeria confront many obstacles. Sexually transmitted infections (STIs), unsafe abortion practices, and high rates of unwanted pregnancies are all common problems. The stigma associated with talking about sexual health frequently results in misunderstandings and incomplete knowledge, which encourages risky behavior (Okonofua, Ogbomwan, & Alutu, 2018). Having limited access to youth-friendly, reasonably priced healthcare services makes it more difficult for young adults to maintain optimal reproductive health.

It takes a diversified strategy to meet the needs of young people in Nigeria with regard to reproductive health. Complete sex education programs that include factual information on STI prevention, contraception, and reproductive health should be incorporated into school curricula. Additionally, efforts should be made to lessen the stigma associated with talking about sexual health in society, fostering an atmosphere where young adults feel at ease seeking advice and assistance. Moreover, it is critical to increase access to youth-friendly, reasonably priced healthcare services (WHO 2018). This entails setting up outreach initiatives and clinics that are customized to the unique requirements of young adults while maintaining patient privacy and impartial treatment. Involving the community is crucial to raising awareness and gaining support for reproductive health efforts. This community includes parents, religious leaders, and local influencers.

CONCEPT OF REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

Reproductive health is a crucial aspect of overall well-being, encompassing various dimensions such as physical, emotional, and social factors related to the reproductive system. The World Health Organization (2021) defines reproductive health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity in all matters relating to the reproductive system and its functions and processes.

Reproductive health implies that people are able to have a satisfying and safe sexual life and that they have the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when, and how often to do so. According to Cottingham, Kismödi, and Hussein (2019), sexual and reproductive health (SRH) is a field of research, health care, and social activism that explores the health of an individual's reproductive system and sexual well-being during all stages of their life. Reproductive health implies that, apart from the absence of disease or infirmity, people have the ability to reproduce, to regulate their fertility, and to practice and enjoy sexual relationships. It further implies that reproduction is carried out to a successful outcome through infant and child survival, growth, and healthy development. It finally implies that women can go safely through pregnancy and childbirth, that fertility regulation can be achieved without health hazards, and that people are safe from having sex.

Fathalla (2016) mentioned that reproductive health is an integrated package. Women cannot be healthy if they have one element and miss another. Moreover, the various elements of reproductive health are strongly interrelated. Improvements in one element can result in potential improvements in other elements. Similarly, a lack of improvement in one element can hinder progress in other elements. This definition, idealistic as it may look, is nowhere as relevant and applicable as in the area of reproductive health. A woman in distress from carrying an unwanted pregnancy cannot be considered healthy simply because her blood pressure is not elevated and the fetus is showing a normal biophysical profile. In the context of this positive definition, reproductive health is a condition in which the reproductive process is accomplished in a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and is not merely the absence of disease or disorders of the reproductive process.

One key component of reproductive health is access to comprehensive sexual education. According to the Guttmacher Institute (2018), comprehensive sex education programs that cover topics such as contraception, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and communication skills contribute to better reproductive health outcomes. Proper education empowers individuals to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive lives. Reproductive health is not limited to mothers. Nor is it limited to women of childbearing age. It recognizes the special health needs of adolescents related to their acquisition of sexual and reproductive capacity before they have completed their social preparation for adult life. It recognizes that mature women, beyond the childbearing period, still have important health needs related to the reproductive system, which they still carry, and to the cessation of ovarian function. The concept also recognizes that the health of the adult builds on the health of the child, and that this is probably no truer than in the area of reproductive health. Reproductive health is not limited to women. Men too have reproductive health needs, and responding to these needs of men is also important for women.

CONCEPT OF YOUNG ADULT

A young adult is typically defined as an individual who has transitioned from adolescence to adulthood but has not yet reached middle age. According to Weiler, Wutzkowsky et al. (2020), youth and young adults, conceived as a transitory stage between childhood and adulthood, are in fact a “modern” social category. The concept of young adulthood is encapsulated in the concept of ‘Emerging Adulthood’ introduced by Arnett in 2000. Arnett’s “emerging adulthood” captures the unique features of young adult developmental stages. Emerging adulthood, or young adulthood, is a process characterized by prolonged exploration of identity, increased self-focus, and a delay in traditional markers of adulthood, such as marriage and parenthood. During this time, young adults often engage in identity exploration, make significant life choices, and experience a heightened sense of autonomy and responsibility.

The University of Minnesota (2020) mentioned that young adulthood begins at age 18–24; it is a developmental stage of late adolescence when young people are transitioning out of child- and adolescent-focused systems and into adult-focused systems. Wikipedia (2023) mentioned that in medicine and the social sciences, a young adult is generally a person in the years following adolescence, sometimes with some overlap. Young adulthood is a unique developmental period that occurs between the ages of 18 and 25 years, during which there are key developmental tasks that allow the young adult to participate in self-exploration and identity formation (Higley, 2019). Young adulthood is a transitory stage between childhood and adulthood. The Cambridge Dictionary (2023) defines a young adult as a person who is in his or her late teenage years or early twenties.

Young adult refers to a distinct and transitional phase in human development, characterized by a range of physical, cognitive, and psychosocial changes. While the definition of the specific age range for young adulthood varies, it generally spans from the late teens or early twenties to the thirties. This stage represents a critical period of exploration, self-discovery, and the establishment of independence as individuals navigate various life domains such as education, career, relationships, and identity formation (Arnett, 2000).

REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH NEED OF YOUNG ADULT

Reproductive health is a critical aspect of overall well-being, particularly for young adults. Ensuring good reproductive health involves addressing various aspects, including education, access to healthcare, contraception, the prevention of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and fostering healthy relationships. Promoting and addressing these aspects of reproductive health can contribute to the overall well-being and empowerment of young adults. It is essential to consider individual needs, cultural contexts, and diverse perspectives when implementing reproductive health programs.

HERE ARE SOME KEY REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH NEEDS FOR YOUNG ADULTS:

- **Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE):**

CSE equips young adults with accurate information about their bodies, relationships, and sexuality, enabling them to make informed decisions.

- **Access to Contraception:**

Providing accessible and affordable contraception helps young adults make choices about when and if they want to start a family, promoting family planning and reproductive autonomy.

- **Prevention of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs):**

STI prevention is crucial for safeguarding reproductive health. Information on safe sex practices and regular screenings are essential components.

- **Menstrual Health and Hygiene:**

Understanding menstrual health, addressing menstrual hygiene needs, and providing access to sanitary products are crucial for the well-being of young adults.

- **Support for Healthy Relationships:**

Promoting healthy relationships and communication skills is vital for emotional well-being and forming respectful connections.

- **Access to Reproductive Healthcare Services:**

Ensuring access to healthcare services, including reproductive health check-ups and screenings, is crucial for early detection and prevention of potential issues.

DETERMINANT OF REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH NEEDS OF YOUNG ADULT

The determinant of reproductive health needs of young adults encompasses a wide range of factors that influence their overall well-being in terms of sexual and reproductive health.

- **Access to Education:**

Access to education is a crucial determinant of reproductive health needs among young adults. Here are some key points related to the impact of education on reproductive health

- **Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE):**

Access to quality sexuality education is essential for young adults to acquire accurate information about reproductive health, contraception, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and healthy relationships.

- **Delaying Early Marriage and Pregnancy:**

Education empowers individuals to make informed decisions about their lives, including delaying marriage and childbirth until they are emotionally and financially ready.

- **Improving Health Literacy:**

Education enhances health literacy, enabling young adults to understand and navigate healthcare systems, make informed decisions about their reproductive health, and communicate effectively with healthcare providers.

- **Empowering Women:**

Education plays a crucial role in empowering women, fostering gender equality, and allowing women to have greater control over their reproductive choices, including family planning and contraceptive use.

- **Reducing Risky Behaviours:**

Education is associated with lower rates of risky sexual behaviors, including unprotected sex and multiple sexual partners, leading to a reduced risk of unintended pregnancies and STIs (Bearinger et al., 2007).

- **Enhancing Economic Opportunities:**

Education is linked to increased economic opportunities, which can contribute to better reproductive health outcomes by providing young adults with the means to support themselves and their families (Lloyd, 2005).

- **Socioeconomic status (SES):**

It is a key determinant that significantly influences the reproductive health needs of young adults. Here are some key aspects and references related to the impact of socioeconomic status on reproductive health:

- **Access to Healthcare Services:**

Individuals with higher socioeconomic status often have better access to healthcare services, including reproductive health services, family planning, and prenatal care.

- **Educational Attainment:**

Higher levels of education, often associated with higher socioeconomic status, are linked to better reproductive health outcomes. Education contributes to informed decision-making and healthier behaviours.

ROLES OF COUNSELLORS IN ADVOCACY OF REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH NEEDS OF YOUNG ADULT IN NIGERIA.

The role of counselors in advocating for the reproductive health of young adults is crucial in addressing the diverse and complex needs of this population. Reproductive health encompasses a broad spectrum of issues, including sexual education, family planning, STI prevention, and emotional well-being. Counselors play a vital role in promoting informed decision-making, providing support, and advocating for policies that enhance the overall reproductive health of young adults.

- **Education and information dissemination:**

Counselors serve as educators, providing accurate and comprehensive information about reproductive health to young adults. They play a key role in ensuring that individuals are well-informed about topics such as contraception, STIs, fertility, and sexual anatomy. By utilizing various educational platforms, including workshops, seminars, and online resources, counselors can empower young adults to make informed choices regarding their reproductive health. Effective communication is essential for reproductive health education. Counselors create a safe and non-judgmental space where young adults feel comfortable discussing their concerns, questions, and experiences. This open dialogue helps dispel myths, reduce stigma, and encourages responsible sexual behavior (Planned Parenthood, 2021).

- **Individual and group counseling:**

Offering individual and group counseling sessions allows counselors to address the specific needs and concerns of young adults. These sessions create a safe space for discussing sensitive topics, such as sexual health, relationships, and family planning. Through personalized guidance, counselors can help young adults navigate the challenges associated with reproductive decisions and promote a positive and healthy approach to their sexual well-being. Young adults often face unique challenges related to reproductive health, including exploring their sexuality, making informed decisions about relationships, and understanding contraception. Counselors need to comprehend the socio-cultural context and the diverse experiences that shape the reproductive health concerns of this demographic (Sundstrom et al., 2018).

- **Mental health and emotional well-being:**

Reproductive health is not only about physical well-being but also encompasses mental and emotional aspects. Counselors play a pivotal role in addressing the psychological implications of reproductive choices, including issues like body image, self-esteem, and relationship dynamics. By integrating mental health support into reproductive health advocacy, counselors contribute to a more holistic understanding of well-being. Some young adults may carry past traumas or negative experiences that impact their reproductive health. Counselors work to identify and address these underlying issues, offering therapeutic interventions to help individuals process and overcome emotional barriers that may affect their current and future reproductive choices (APA, 2020).

- **Advocacy for comprehensive sex education:**

Counselors actively advocate for comprehensive sex education in schools and communities. They engage with policymakers, educators, and parents to emphasize the importance of age-appropriate, evidence-based sexual education that goes beyond biological aspects to include topics such as consent, healthy relationships, and communication skills. Advocacy efforts contribute to the development of informed and empowered young adults. Reproductive health is influenced by the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. Counselors assist young adults in navigating issues such as power dynamics, conflicts, and decision-making within relationships. Addressing these dynamics positively impacts the reproductive choices and overall satisfaction of individuals (World Health Organization [WHO], 2019).

- **Promotion of healthy relationships:**

Counselors promote the importance of healthy relationships as an integral part of reproductive health. This includes addressing issues related to communication, consent, and mutual respect. By advocating for healthy relationship dynamics, counselors contribute to reducing the risk of unintended pregnancies, STIs, and fostering overall well-being. Counselors collaborate with educational institutions and community organizations to integrate relationship education into reproductive health programs. By addressing relationship skills alongside sexual health education, counselors contribute to the development of well-rounded and informed young adults, capable of navigating the complexities of intimate relationships and reproductive health (Planned Parenthood, 2021).

- **Navigating societal and cultural influences:**

Societal and cultural norms can significantly impact reproductive health decisions. Counselors actively engage in cultural competence training and advocate for inclusive practices that respect diverse perspectives. By addressing cultural taboos and

challenging stigmas, counselors create an environment where young adults feel supported in making choices aligned with their values and cultural backgrounds. Counselors employ culturally competent counseling techniques, ensuring that interventions are tailored to the cultural backgrounds and belief systems of their clients. This approach enhances the effectiveness of counseling in addressing reproductive health concerns within diverse communities (Sundstrom et al., 2018).

CHALLENGES OF REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH TO YOUNG ADULTS

Reproductive health challenges faced by young adults are multifaceted and influenced by various factors including societal, economic, cultural, and individual aspects.

- **Lack of Comprehensive Sex Education:**

Inadequate or absence of comprehensive sex education contributes to misinformation and risky sexual behaviors. Lack of sexual education reinforces existing taboos and leads to sex by trial and error, possible impotence or lack of satisfaction, guilt complexes, and, where contraceptive advice is lacking, unwanted pregnancies and abortions because of ignorance. Sexual repression may lead to sexual violence and deviancy. Anti-authoritarianism among young people may make them shy about using advice facilities. (The Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential, 2021).

- **Limited Access to Reproductive Health Services:**

Barriers such as cost, geographical location, and stigma can impede young adults' access to reproductive health services. Lack of accurate sexual and reproductive health knowledge and social stigma were the leading causes of young people's limited access to sexual and reproductive health services. Cultural and religious beliefs also invoked stigmatizing behaviors in some family and community members. (Baigry, Ray, Lindsay, Kelly-Hanku, Redman-MacLaren, 2023).

- **High Rates of Unintended Pregnancies and Abortions:**

Limited access to contraceptives and inadequate knowledge contribute to high rates of unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortions. An unintended pregnancy is a pregnancy that is either unwanted, such as the pregnancy occurred when no children or no more children were desired. Or the pregnancy is mistimed, such as the pregnancy occurred earlier than desired. The concept of unintended pregnancy helps in understanding the fertility of populations and the unmet need for contraception, also known as birth control, and family planning. Most unintended pregnancies result from not using contraception or from not using it consistently or correctly. (Center of disease 2023).

- **Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs):**

Insufficient awareness, risky sexual behaviors, and stigma surrounding STIs contribute to their prevalence among young adults. When used correctly and consistently, condoms offer one of the most effective methods of protection against STIs, including HIV. Although highly effective, condoms do not offer protection for STIs that cause extra-genital ulcers (i.e., syphilis or genital herpes). When possible, condoms should be used in all vaginal and anal sex. (James, Barouche, Walton, et al., 2016)

- **Mental Health Issues and Sexual Well-being:**

Mental health concerns such as anxiety, depression, and body image issues can impact sexual well-being and reproductive health. Depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety disorders, or even psychosis include symptoms affecting sexual life, such as impaired desire, arousal, or sexual satisfaction that inevitably need to be properly identified and addressed.

- **Gender Inequality and Power Dynamics:**

Challenge: Unequal power dynamics in relationships, societal norms, and gender-based violence can affect reproductive health choices and outcomes. Gender dynamics refer to the relationships and interactions between and among people based on gender. Gender dynamics are informed by socio-cultural ideas about gender and the power relationships that define them. Depending on how they play out, gender dynamics can reinforce or challenge existing norms (i.e., reinforcing a gender norm could be a man saying that women can only stay home and look after children, whereas challenging a gender norm would be saying that it is okay for men to feel emotions and express them, including crying) (University of Auckland, 2018).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, addressing the reproductive health needs of young adults in Nigeria requires a comprehensive approach. Tackling factors such as sociocultural norms, economic disparities, and limited access to sex education is essential to promote informed decision-making. Challenges like high rates of unintended pregnancies and STIs underscore the urgency for targeted interventions. Implementing sex education programs in schools, reducing societal stigma, and enhancing accessibility to youth-friendly healthcare services are crucial remedies. By engaging communities and fostering a supportive environment, Nigeria can empower its young population to make informed choices, ensuring a healthier and more resilient society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Government should implement and strengthen comprehensive sex education programs in schools to provide accurate information on reproductive health,

contraception, and STI prevention. These programs should be age-appropriate, culturally sensitive, and address diverse needs.

- Engage communities, including parents, religious leaders, and local influencers, to foster open discussions about reproductive health. This will help reduce societal stigma and create a supportive environment for young adults to seek information and services without fear of judgment.
- Launch public awareness campaigns to disseminate accurate information about reproductive health through various media channels. This can help dispel myths, challenge misconceptions, and encourage positive attitudes towards sexual and reproductive health.
- Increase the accessibility of youth-friendly healthcare services by establishing clinics and outreach programs specifically tailored to the needs of young adults. These services should be affordable, confidential, and non-judgmental, ensuring a safe space for seeking reproductive health assistance.

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