

How educated Sub-Saharan African immigrant mothers teach children about sex

January 27 2017, by Marcene Robinson

While many African immigrants make efforts to retain their culture, when it comes to sex education, acculturation can occur three times faster than average.

Where a shift in cultural behaviors and beliefs typically takes three generations, new research has found that among educated Sub-Saharan African immigrant mothers, cultural views regarding sex are rarely passed down to their children, indicating change after a single generation.

The study, "Exploring the Experience of African Immigrant Mothers Providing Reproductive Health Education to Daughters Aged 10-14 Years," was led by Kafuli Agbemenu, PhD, assistant professor in the University at Buffalo School of Nursing, and published recently in the *Journal of Transcultural Nursing*.

The research sought to gather what each mother's culture taught about sex, and discover how much of the information the mothers planned to share with their teenage daughters.

The topic stems from an encounter Agbemenu had at 14 years old with a pregnant teenager while shadowing nurses at a hospital in Kenya. The girl, who was 17 years old, believed that she wouldn't be impregnated if she only had sex once.

"Typically, you get information about sex education from your family,

friends and the media, so I started to wonder which part of the system failed her," says Agbemenu. "Mothers are the gatekeepers to information. We wanted to look at what they think about the issue and how they talk about abstinence and contraceptives."

The African immigrant population in the United States is a fast-growing yet under-researched community, making up 4 percent of the foreign-born population. The cultural influences, traditions and beliefs of African immigrants are distinctly different than those of native African-Americans. Examining how cultural differences impact their attitudes toward reproductive health education is critical to [public health services](#), says Agbemenu.

The researchers surveyed 20 African immigrant mothers in Pittsburgh about the information they shared with their daughters regarding menstruation, sexual intercourse, pregnancy, and HIV and AIDS.

The results found that most of the mothers' sex education stemmed from religious and moral teachings, with little factual information. For many, the subject of sex is taboo in their native country and is not taught in schools. A history of AIDS denialism and pushback against condom use by religious leaders have also negatively affected several nations.

The lack of information leads to young adults receiving conflicting or inaccurate information about sex, and to the prevalence of myths and scare tactics to prevent promiscuity, such as the notion that touching a man could cause a girl to become pregnant, the study found.

Inadequate sex education is one of several factors that underscore the growing HIV and AIDS pandemic faced by Africa. Out of the 34 million HIV-positive people in the world, more than 70 percent live in Sub-Saharan Africa, including more than 90 percent of HIV-positive children, according to statistics from the Joint United Nations

Programme on HIV and AIDS.

Although the mothers felt that 10 to 14 years of age was too young for their daughters to receive information about [reproductive health](#), most of them displayed no desire to share the teachings, myths and scare tactics that they were taught, and instead sought to provide more factual information.

Agbemenu attributes this reluctance to education and cultural influence. Of the surveyed mothers, the majority received at least some college education, and several worked in health care. The only mother who desired to share the myths she learned with her daughter was also the least educated. Many of the mothers were also struck by how liberal U.S. society is toward sexuality and how accepting American culture is of adolescent relationships.

The researchers aim to use the results to help design more culturally appropriate comprehensive [sex education](#) programs for African immigrant mothers and their daughters, says Agbemenu.

Future research will continue to study the amount of factual [information](#) regarding sex that the mothers know and expand the reach of the survey by conducting it in languages other than English.

Provided by University at Buffalo

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