

"Nurses Are Witches, They Won't Allow Abortion": Exploring Adolescents' Abortion-Seeking Pathways, Perceptions and Preferences in Ibadan, Nigeria

Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) reports that not less than 10 million unintended pregnancies happen among female adolescents in developing countries yearly.¹ More than half (56%) of these unintended pregnancies result into abortion. In a quantitative study carried out by Byrne et al. (2021) amongst abortion clients in Nigeria, 21% of the 1144 respondents were adolescents at the time of their abortion experience.² This makes the issue of abortion relevant for study amongst adolescents in Nigeria.

Looking at the incidence of abortion in Nigeria, Bankole et al. (2015) revealed that the estimates of abortion cases in 1996 doubled to 1.25 million abortions in 2012.³ More than half of these cases are carried out secretly and by non-clinical providers. This is due to the restrictive nature of abortion laws and reproductive social norms in Nigeria.

In a qualitative study carried out by Scott-Ashley, Akande, Adebayo & Iken (2020) in secondary schools in Ibadan southwest Nigeria, adolescents perceive that teenage pregnancy is on the rise.⁴ Some of these pregnancies result into abortion. A large proportion of the 5.6million abortions committed globally by adolescent girls are unsafe thereby leading to chronic health problems and contributing to maternal mortality (WHO, 2020).⁵ Hence, to promote safe abortion amongst adolescence, there is a need to investigate their abortion-seeking pathways. Abortion seeking pathways reveal the decision-making processes of females seeking abortion right from the time of pregnancy detection to termination.

Research that explores the abortion-seeking pathways including preference and choice of abortion providers amongst female adolescents in Nigeria is scarce. Using a mix of qualitative research methods, this study seeks to explore the abortion-seeking pathways, perceptions and preference of adolescents in Ibadan, a major city in Southwestern Nigeria.

¹ World Health Organization. "Adolescent Pregnancy." 2020. Accessed September 8, 2022.
<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-pregnancy>

²Byrne, M. E., Omoluabi, E., OlaOlorun, F. M., Moreau, C., & Bell, S. O. (2021). Determinants of women's preferred and actual abortion provision locations in Nigeria. *Reproductive Health*, 18(1), 240.
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-021-01290-w>

³ Bankole, A., Adewole, I. F., Hussain, R., Awolude, O., Singh, S., & Akinyemi, J. O. (2015). The Incidence of Abortion in Nigeria. *International Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, 41(04), 170–181.
<https://doi.org/10.1363/4117015>

⁴ Scott-Ashley, O., Akande, S., Adebayo, A., & Iken, O. (2020). Adolescents' Knowledge of Sexuality and Perceptions Regarding Teenage Pregnancy: A Qualitative Study among Secondary School Students in Ibadan, Southwest Nigeria. *International Journal of School Health*, 7(2). <https://doi.org/10.30476/intjsh.2020.84758.1047>

⁵ Ibid. 1

Methodology

This is an exploratory study. The study adopted two qualitative methods to collect data: use of vignettes and focus group discussions (FGDs). The use of vignettes and FGDs avails a comprehensive and robust picture of respondents' perception, attitudes, and preferences concerning not-publicly-discussed matters like sexuality, rape, and abortion.

Within the qualitative paradigm, vignettes are used to interpret actions in a situational context, helps to clarify individual beliefs in relation to moral dilemmas in a less threatening way according to Barter & Reynold (1999).⁶ Utilizing the tool of storytelling in in-depth interviews, ten female adolescents responded to the vignette, Bola's Dilemma; the story of a brilliant girl who got pregnant "mistakenly" and plans to terminate the pregnancy.

Nyumba, Wilson, Derrick and Mukherjee (2018) explained that focus group discussion is a tool popularly used to explore and understand social issues.⁷ It allows the full participation of respondents in sharing their own opinions through personal experiences or other people they know. This makes FGDs useful for exploring perceptions and abortion-seeking pathways amongst female adolescents in Nigeria. Three FGDs were conducted by the researcher amongst eighteen female adolescents; a range of 6-8 females per group.

The responses gotten from the FGDs and vignettes were analyzed using thematic analysis. In the opinion of Kiger and Varpio (2020), the method is a suitable one for investigating experiences, thoughts, and behaviors.⁸ Thematic analysis helps to identify, categorize, describe, and report similar responses which could be grouped into themes in a qualitative dataset. Hence, codes and themes were generated from the data gotten from the FGDs and vignette.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Ibadan Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Committee with the assigned number UI/SSHREC/2022/0035 in January 2023. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, and the intentions of the researcher to get their consent. Informed consent were obtained from the participants through the filling of consent forms prior to the study. Informed consent was obtained from each participant after they were informed of the purpose, benefits, voluntariness, and non-maleficence of the study and the confidentiality of the information provided.

Adolescents according to the WHO, are defined as persons from 10 – 19 years old. However, the study sample comprised of twenty-eight female adolescents strictly within 18 and 19 years of age due to ethical considerations and the delicate nature of abortion in the communities. In addition,

⁶ Christine Barter and Emma Renold (1999). The Use of Vignettes in Qualitative Research. Social Research Update, Issue 25, University of Surrey. <http://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU25.html>

⁷ Nyumba, T., Wilson, K., Derrick, C. J., & Mukherjee, N. (2018). The use of focus group discussion methodology: Insights from two decades of application in conservation. *Methods in Ecology and Evolution*, 9(1), 20–32. <https://doi.org/10.1111/2041-210X.12860>

⁸ Kiger, M. E., & Varpio, L. (2020). Thematic analysis of qualitative data: AMEE Guide No. 131. *Medical Teacher*, 42(8), 846–854. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159X.2020.1755030>

it has been discovered that older adolescents have more likelihood to get pregnant and seek abortion (Akanbi, Ope, Adeloye, Amoo, Iruonagbe & Omojola 2021).⁹

Findings

According to the study, it was seen that teenage pregnancies are usually seen as a social deviance and hence, frowned at in the society. This leads to expressions of fear, panic, depression and suicidal thoughts amongst adolescents carrying unwanted teenage pregnancies.

The study revealed that female adolescents in Ibadan metropolis prefer non-clinical abortion providers. Majority prefer the use of pills from drug vendors and herbs. The use of pills is the commonest while the use of herbal mixtures followed closely in the scale of abortion service provider preference amongst adolescents in Ibadan. The fear of intimidation and criticism in hospitals is a leading determinant of why they prefer to patronize non-clinical methods.

All of the study participants supported that the hospital has the best form of abortion care. However, majority of the participants complained that the nurses will express disappointment and also stigmatize them. In the words of a FGD 2 participant, *“the matron and nurses are witches...they won’t allow abortion”*.

Overall, the participants concordantly agreed that there is stigmatization of teenagers seeking abortion service at hospitals. A participant explained, *“If I enter the hospital with my small stature... they will be like where are your parents.... They will just abuse you and before you get home, you will be depressed....”* - Participant, FGD 3.

An interesting finding of this study is that though clinical methods are perceived to be the best and optimal provider of abortion service, majority of female adolescents in Ibadan metropolis prefer to use non-clinical methods. This is due to the stigmatization and unfriendly treatment by nurses and doctors, and bureaucratic processes of the hospital which requires parental consent.

This discovery correlates with the findings of Onukwugha, Agaba, Hayter & Orton (2022)¹⁰ and Nmadu, Mohamed, & Usman (2020).¹¹ Both studies posited that health workers have negative and impolite attitudes towards adolescents seeking reproductive health services in Nigeria. Hence, non-clinical abortion service providers are preferred by female adolescents in Ibadan metropolis mainly due to the harsh conditions persisting towards pregnant teenagers in hospitals.

⁹ Akanbi, M. A., Ope, B. W., Adeloye, D. O., Amoo, E. O., Iruonagbe, T. C., & Omojola, O. (2021). Influence of socio-economic factors on prevalence of teenage pregnancy in Nigeria. *African Journal of Reproductive Health*, 25(5s), Article 5s. <https://doi.org/10.4314/ajrh.v25i5s>

¹⁰ Onukwugha, F., Agaba, P., Hayter, M., & Orton, B. (2022). Unmarried Adolescents’ Experiences of Using Reproductive and Maternal Health Services in Nigeria and Uganda: A Qualitative Study. *Social Sciences*, 11(5), 203. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11050203>

¹¹ Nmadu, A. G., Mohamed, S., & Usman, N. O. (2020). Barriers to adolescents’ access and utilization of reproductive health services in a community in north-western Nigeria: A qualitative exploratory study in primary care. *African Journal of Primary Health Care & Family Medicine*, 12(1), 2307. <https://doi.org/10.4102/phcfm.v12i1.2307>

Conclusion

The study explored the abortion-seeking pathways of female adolescents in Ibadan metropolis. Using a mix of qualitative methods to analyze perception, it was seen that they prefer to use non-clinical methods like pills and herbs despite their knowledge on the arising complications and side effects. Clinical methods are not preferred due to the stigmatization experienced by abortion-seeking teenagers in health facilities. As unsafe abortion is a main contributing factor to maternal mortality in Nigeria, it is important to create adolescent-friendly spaces in health facilities. This will attract more adolescents to seek abortion in clinical settings, thereby promoting safe abortion procedures in Ibadan and Nigeria at large.