

What are the main barriers and facilitating factors associated with intergenerational communication on sexual and reproductive health in Niger and Côte d'Ivoire?

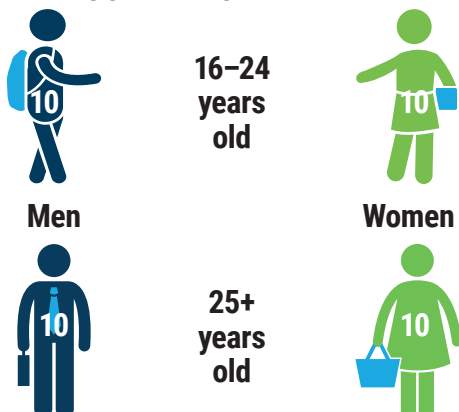
When parents communicate with their youth on sexual and reproductive health (SRH) issues, they have a greater influence on youth SRH behaviors. But parents' lack of knowledge of SRH, low self-efficacy in engaging young people, and unfavorable social norms about communication and youth access to SRH information are barriers to open intergenerational communication.

Breakthrough RESEARCH, funded by the United States Agency for International Development, conducted a qualitative study in Niger and Côte d'Ivoire to better understand the specific barriers to intergenerational communication about SRH, and ways in which adult allies can be supported to engage young people and encourage them to lead a healthy life. This research contributes to a nascent body of literature that is specific to the context of francophone West African countries, which have among the highest rates of adolescent pregnancy in the world.¹

Methods

- Researchers conducted 40 in-depth interviews (January and March 2021) in Niamey, Niger and Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire with young and adult men and women.
- Thematic analysis was conducted, by country, using Dedoose software.

SAMPLE FOR IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS IN BOTH NIGER AND CÔTE D'IVOIRE



KEY POINTS

Adults in Niger and Côte d'Ivoire are highly motivated to protect young people's health and wellbeing, but many question the benefits of open communication about sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and lack the skills to engage in it.

Adults themselves need support to communicate with their youth about SRH.

Results

The following are the key results from interviews.

- **In both countries, there is a limited view of SRH.** All adult participants mentioned pregnancy prevention, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and HIV when asked what most adults talk about with youth when discussing SRH. Participants said little about the prevention of sexual violence and did not mention elements such as positive relationships, sexual consent, or physical and emotional safety that influence SRH.
- **Contraception and pregnancy prevention is still a girl or woman's affair.** In both countries, although adult participants acknowledge that boys are also in need of SRH guidance and information, pregnancy is mostly talked about as a girl's issue.
- **The sex educator role of parents varies between the countries.** In Côte d'Ivoire, participants are accepting that parents are the primary sex educators. In Niger, parents are not considered the primary sex educators as this role is conferred on religious leaders, trusted relatives, or teachers. Nonetheless, there were voices that

highlighted the role and responsibility of the family in providing sex education, as well as society as a whole.

“In any case, if we want to make the observation, society can also be accused. It is not playing its full role [of educating young people] properly. It all depends on the family...that is the big problem. For the child to be well educated, everyone must [participate].

—Adult male, Niger

- **Common motivational factors to communicate about SRH.** Respondents in both countries expressed that ensuring the safety and health of young people and safeguarding values such as respect for parents and elders were motivational factors for communicating about SRH
- **Initiating conversations about SRH is easier for adults than it is for youth.** In both countries, young people noted that it was easier for adults to take the initiative to initiate conversations about SRH with them than it was for them to initiate conversation with adults. Such attempts by youth could be perceived as disrespectful.
- **Barriers to intergenerational communication.** Participants in both countries, both youth and adults, expressed that the barriers to communication included shame and fear of social judgment. Adults in both countries expressed beliefs that providing SRH information to youth leads to sexual experimentation, and that young people are not “ready” to receive information, while adults in Niger particularly expressed the belief that it is not necessary to talk about SRH before marriage.
- **Lack of empathy.** Both youth and adults expressed negative attitudes and perceptions toward young people “these days,” attributing what they consider risky or inappropriate behavior as a generational problem, and attributed responsibility for unsanctioned SRH activities to youth.
- **Adults are fearful of losing young people’s respect.** The dominant feeling that emerged from adults is fear. Parents expressed fear of losing young people’s respect by talking about SRH due to the taboo nature of topics related to sex. Adults are also fearful of social and religious sanctions for themselves and their youth if their

young people are perceived to be sexually active, as well as being fearful of negative health outcomes such as STIs for their young people.

“I’m not going to allow myself to be humiliated in front of a young person when I know by talking to him about [SRH], he’s not going to listen to me... maybe he’s even going to offend me; he will trivialize the conversation: “old man, lets drop that...”. Why go and tire myself?

—Adult male, Côte d’Ivoire

- **Young people still need adult guidance.** Although adults and some young people felt that young people have easy access to information thanks to new technologies, young people expressed a general lack of support and guidance and clear indication that they craved and needed it.

“I need someone to give me advice, to look out for me so I don’t regret anything. I need meone to give me advice every day, that’s how I’m going to live a healthy life.

—Adolescent female, Côte d’Ivoire

Programmatic recommendations

Based on these findings, the following programmatic recommendations are proposed to address the barriers that prevent positive intergenerational communication within the Nigerien and Côte d’Ivoire contexts.

- **Demystify and destigmatize** talking to young people about SRH by increasing adults’ skills and confidence levels of **when, how, and what to talk** about with young people and tap into adults’ motivation to want to protect young people.
- Change the “script” with which adults communicate with young people, moving from fear-based communication to **positive, life affirming communication**.
- Campaigns must adopt a **gender transformative vision**, where young men and women share the rights and responsibilities of accessing SRH information and services.

References

1. Garbett, A., B. Perelli-Harris B, and S. Neal. . 2021. "The untold story of 50 years of adolescent fertility in West Africa: A cohort perspective on the quantum, timing, and spacing of adolescent childbearing," *Population and Development Review*. 47(1): 7–40.

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