



Youth, sexuality, gender, and health: dealing with a social phenomenon

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The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) posits that every individual—including young people—has the right to make their own choices about their sexual and reproductive health (United Nations Population Fund 2020). A rapid fact-check looking at young people's realities suggests that there is a considerable gap between global policies and local realities. Young people have to navigate their sexual and reproductive health at the juncture of individual and social, economic, cultural, and political realities. They necessarily balance intimacy and societal prescriptions, often in contexts of inequitable gender norms and gerontocracy (Van der Sijpt 2013). Their ability to start a healthy sexual and reproductive life is thus reliant on multiple factors beyond their control, embracing, besides individual capabilities, also social norms and structural conditions. In many societies, sexual norms are more restrictive for young unmarried women, and their access to sexual and reproductive health information and services may be restricted due to the stigma associated with these conditions (Heise et al. 2019). Concomitantly, the economic context has a strong bearing on young people's autonomy and ability to guide and apply informed decisions. Worldwide, many young people face precarious living conditions characterized by youth unemployment, limited access to higher education, sometimes paired with

political instability, increasing young people's social and economic dependency on older generations on the one hand and, often, young women's dependency on their male partners' socioeconomic trajectory on the other hand (Schwarz et al. 2019). These constraints, which negatively impinge on young people's lives, can negatively affect their wellbeing and health. Accordingly, the recent United Nations' Youth-Strategy 2030 lists the health of young people as action point, highlighting the importance of sexual and reproductive health problems in this age-group (United Nations 2018). Sexual and reproductive health issues due to a lack of choice in reproductive decisions, unintended pregnancy, unsafe abortion, sexually transmissible infections (STI) including HIV, infertility, or pregnancy complications are further often accompanied by mental health problems (World Health Organization 2009).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, HIV and maternal conditions are the two leading causes of death among young women 15–25 years old, while HIV/AIDS is also the third most important cause of death among men in the same age-group (Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation 2020). UNAIDS estimates show how young women are 60% more affected by HIV as compared to their male peers, illustrating that health problems of young people are highly gendered. In some cases, the disadvantage is on the side of young men, who tend to be less likely reached by HIV testing and treatment (Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS 2019). Gender norms generally play a key role for these differences. Where especially young women are expected to abstain from sex, access to information about pregnancy, contraception, or STI may be deemed unnecessary. Gender-based violence has been highlighted as one of the drivers of HIV infection of young girls. Young men, in turn, may be exposed to social pressures to be strong and self-reliant, constraining their uptake of health services.

This special issue is providing a platform for research emerging from different African contexts. When the call was launched at the International Conference of Family Planning in Kigali end of 2018, the conference reported an

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increase of 40% in abstract submissions compared to the previous conference in 2016, observed the highest number of youth at the Youth Pre-conference—about 600—and mentioned the highest number of submissions to the Youth Leader video contest—550 (Gates Institute International 2018). This high interest in the topic of family planning and related health issues was mirrored by a high interest in this special issue.

The collection of articles reflects a wide spectrum of research into sexual and reproductive health of young people on the African continent. While several articles document persisting low health literacy, high stigma of unplanned pregnancy, and social barriers to using sexual and reproductive health services, other research explores how young people can play an active role in shaping access to information and services, and the difficulties this poses. Research into young people's engagement for their own health is important because of the relevance of the meaningful inclusion of young people—men and women—for the development of strategies and programs targeting this age-group (World Health Organization 2018). But hitherto, social factors such as the denial of adolescent sexuality, gender inequality and violence, and the stigmatization of sexual and reproductive health conditions of unmarried women all impinge upon young people's health, rooted in the ways societies attempt to control the sexuality of youth. Addressing these social determinants of sexual and reproductive health inclusive of the perspective of youth will be indispensable if young people's right to make their own choices about their sexual and reproductive health ought to be realized.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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