

## **Teenage Pregnancy and the Culture of Silence on Sexuality in Ghana: Some Ethical and Educational Considerations**

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### **Abstract**

**Background:** *The problem of teenage pregnancy remains an issue of great concern in most Ghanaian societies despite some remarkable efforts made by the government and other stakeholders to address the issue.*

**Objective:** *This research attempted to examine whether the culture of silence on matters of sexuality played a significant role in the rise of cases of teenage pregnancy.*

**Methodology:** *Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used for the collection of data. Questionnaires were drafted and analysed with Google Forms software. There were 300 respondents hailing from the districts of Ejisu, Juaben and Mampong in the Ashanti region of Ghana. A series of one-on-one interviews were also conducted. This research equally used a “focus group discussion” comprised of six participants from the above-mentioned districts.*

**Results:** *The study found out that the culture of silence on matters of sexuality largely contributes to the high rate of teenage pregnancy. Sex education is a rare topic in homes, cultural communities and churches. Most schools approach sexuality from a biological [reproductive] perspective while paying less attention to its broader ethical considerations. Yet, today, most teenagers are exceedingly exposed to and lamentably bombarded with inappropriate sexual information through peer groups, newspapers, music, billboards, television screens, internet (smart phones) and other social media. This phenomenon, in a way, creates confusion among teenagers and induces some of them to curiously practice what they are informed of.*

**Conclusion:** *There is a need to prudently break the culture of silence on matters of sexuality by introducing in educational establishments an “appropriate” sex education for young people. This study modestly recommends what is termed “humancentric sex education” that aims [among other things] at awakening in young people a sense of moral consciousness and accountability. The discussion holds that a morally-awakened conscience is likely to empower teenagers to say “NO” to compromising sexual relations which, quite often, culminate in unwanted pregnancies.*

**Keywords:** *Teenage Pregnancy, Culture of Silence, Current Strategic Plan, Humancentric Sex Education (Ethics).*

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### **I. Introduction**

#### **Background and Problem Statement**

The phenomenon of teenage pregnancy is still one of the major societal problems faced in Ghana (Bubik, 2022) [1]. Efforts have been and still are being made by the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection in collaboration with the United Nation Population Fund (UNPFA) and other stakeholders to find ways of preventing or at least reducing the rate of this worrisome phenomenon that has caused so much undeserved suffering in the lives of teenagers and their respective families (Dasmani, 2022)[2]. Previous and current summits have aimed at assessing whether there is any progress in addressing the issue. The data rendered by the Ghana Health Service (GHS) show that between the year 2016 and the year 2020 more than half a million girls (555,575) aged between 10 and 19 years became pregnant (Bubik, 2017)[3]. This phenomenon reflects an average of 112,500 teenage pregnancies per annum.

The rise in cases of teenage pregnancy became more alarming during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown when people were confined to their homes. Statistics from the GHS reveal that at least 13 teenage pregnancy cases were recorded each day (Fettrie, 2021)[4]. At that time, the situation became an issue of major concern to many Ghanaians. Unfortunately, the aftermath of the Covid-19 lockdown has not amended the situation. The reopening of schools and other social centres has had a relatively low impact in the sense that cases of teenage pregnancy are still on the rise (The Mirror, 2022)[5]. Some teenage girls dropped from school due to pregnancy. Most teenage mothers often find it challenging to return to school because of lack of the needed family support despite having the intellectual capacity to pursue their studies. The phenomenon of teenage pregnancy in Ghana has induced this study to raise the following questions: What exactly are the major

contributory factors to the high rate of teenage pregnancy in Ghana? What can be done to prevent or at least reduce the rate? Are there other ways that can be explored to adequately address the problem? What role can parents, educators, political leaders, cultural leaders and religious leaders play to address this challenging phenomenon?

### **Purpose of Study**

The first task of this research was to critically examine whether the culture of silence on matters of sexuality contributed to the increase in cases of teenage pregnancy in Ghanaian societies. This study had in mind other factors that contribute to teenage pregnancy such as material poverty, school dropout, parental neglect, defilement, rape, etc. But the thrust of the study was to verify whether the culture of silence on sexuality also played a significant role in the occurrence teenage pregnancies. Most African societies rarely discuss sexual issues (Arnfred, 2004)[6]. If a situation requires it, an indirect or coded language is used. In the course of this research, some respondents claimed that talking about sex or availing teenagers with sexual information could induce the same teenagers to indulge themselves in early sexual relationships for curiosity's sake. This is why the culture of silence is still favoured in most African societies. Paradoxically, today's globalised world is not silent on issues of sexuality. The youth are constantly exposed to inappropriate sexual information mainly through peer groups, internet (mobile phones), music, magazines and other social media. The culture of silence, as traditionally held on sexual issues, appears to have lost its ethical significance.

The second task of this research was to explore other possibilities of reducing the rate of teenage pregnancy in Ghana. It has been observed that the current strategies needed to be more holistic, i.e., to go beyond the biological and preventive aspects of sexuality to include some fundamental ethical issues.

### **Methodology and Area of Study**

This paper relied on a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods. Questionnaires were drafted and analysed with *Google Forms* software. Conversational communication was also favoured to properly exchange information and ideas on the phenomenon of teenage pregnancy in Ghanaian societies. A series of one-on-one interviews were conducted with a section of participants working for some non-governmental organisations (NGO) that focus on the welfare of teenage girls such as "BeBetter Mentorship Foundation," "Girls Not Brides," "Youth Aid Initiative Ghana" and "Safe-Child Advocacy" of the Catholic Archdiocese of Kumasi. The move to engage with the above mentioned NGOs was to verify whether other regions of Ghana were experiencing the same problem. Conversations based on the questionnaires were also held with a number of students of Ejisuman Senior High School, Juaben Senior High School and St. Monica Senior High Mampong, all located in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. This research also used a focus group discussion comprised of six participants from Ejisu, Juaben and Mampong districts in the Ashanti region of Ghana. Most interviews were conducted in the local language known as *Twi* which is widely spoken in Ghana. Some responses to questionnaires were recorded and then translated into English.

## **II. The Scale of Teenage Pregnancy in Ghana**

The increasing rate of teenage pregnancy remains a matter of concern in most Ghanaian societies (Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, 2017) [7]. As the term suggests, a teenager is an individual of, and between, the ages of 13 and 19 years. According to the global statistics provided by the World Bank, about 2, 380,000 teenage mothers between the ages of 15 and 19 were recorded in Ghana (Fettrie, 2020a)[8]. The rate of teenage pregnancy rose steeply during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown (World Vision May 2020)[9]. At least 13 teenage pregnancy cases were lamentably recorded each day (Fettrie, 2021b)[10]. While the re-opening of schools, churches, businesses, sports arena, etc., slightly eased the situation, the rate of teenage pregnancy is still alarming in most parts of the country.

Tears dropped from the eyes of Cindy narrating how she found herself pregnant during the school holidays of 2022. Cindy (name changed), 16 years old, was at home waiting to deliver her first baby when this research was conducted. She had just completed her 3<sup>rd</sup> year of Junior High School (JHS). She lived with her single mother and three other siblings. She narrated that she had sexual intercourse with a male classmate who used to accompany her on her way home. The two reportedly "liked" each other. They used to clandestinely talk about sex as it was a common practice among peer groups. They had had a class on human reproduction and wanted to know how sexual intercourse really felt. Little did Cindy know their "innocent sexual encounter" would culminate in unintended pregnancy! Similarly, Afia (name changed), 17 years old, narrated how she had sexual intercourse with a male classmate after the two had hidden themselves in the bush to watch a pornographic video on a mobile phone. The two found themselves enacting what they had watched. Afia had no idea that she would get pregnant.

Notice that the above-mentioned teenagers found themselves driven into sexual intercourse mainly due to the presence of inappropriate sexual information coupled with what may be termed "innocent ignorance."

### **III. Main Causes of Teenage Pregnancy**

Research findings show that aside from young people's exposure to inappropriate sexual material, the rise in cases of teenage pregnancy is mainly attributed to social, economic and cultural factors such as poverty, family pressure for marriage, parental neglect, inadequate education on sexuality, defilement, rape, etc. (Dubit, 2022)[11]. In Ghana, just as in many developing countries, material poverty is one of the major contributory factors to unintended pregnancies among teenagers. A number of teenage interviewees, especially Senior High Students (SHS), revealed that they were sometimes forced to befriend rich men to obtain financial favours from them. Quite often, their families could not afford to cater for their school fees and daily upkeep. As such, many teenagers found themselves befriend financially stable classmates or even some teachers in view of obtaining favours such as tuition fee, means of transportation, books, food, good grades, etc. In some families, teenagers are breadwinners (World Vision, 2019)[12]. For them, sexual exploitation is the only option for survival. Maria (name changed), 19 years old, narrated how she financially supported her family during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown through secret affairs with three married men in her neighbourhood. She did not like her moves, but she absolutely had to devise means of survival. Some teenagers are forced into traditional marriages as a way of lessening the economic burden on the family. It is economically less-burdensome when one or two members leave the nucleus family, for there will be fewer people to feed.

Aside from the social-economic causes of teenage pregnancy in Ghana, this research aimed at examining whether the culture of silence on matters of sexuality also played a significant role. Few scholars have taken this direction, the reason why this research opted to venture into the problematic.

### **IV. Culture of Silence and Sexuality in Ghana**

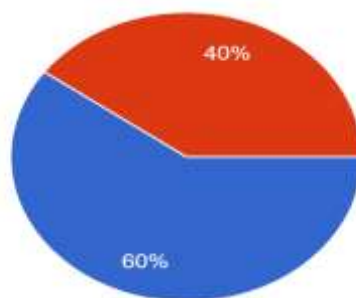
In most African countries including Ghana, sexuality is not a topic to be discussed in the open (Arnfred, 2004) [13]. Matters of sexuality are largely absent in African literate. Sex-talk is often regarded as dirty and embarrassing. A curious young person who dares to raise a question on sexual issues is either ignored or insulted. Such a person would be regarded as a "spoilt child." It is thus extremely difficult for young people to openly engage in a conversation with their parents or guardians on matters of sexuality. When the situation calls for it [like when a girl starts her menstrual periods or when a boy begins to have wet dreams], a coded language is used to address issues of sexuality. For example, in the Ashanti region, the coded words *Kaikai Otontonto* are used to designate both male and female organs. The collective argument is that sexual issues are topics for adult discussions only.

As mentioned earlier, the thrust of this study was to empirically examine whether the culture of silence really contributed to the rise in cases of teenage pregnancy. Interviews and discussions were carried out based on the following questionnaires.

#### **Question 1.**

*Is sex education a rare topic at school?*

60% of respondents said sex education was a rare topic at school, while 40% said it was not a rare topic as shown below (figure 1).

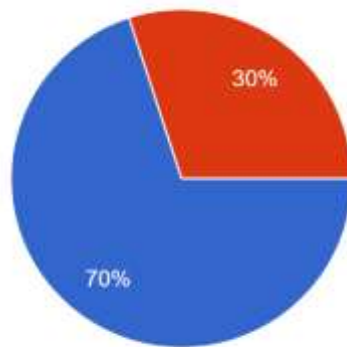


**Figure 1**

#### **Question 2.**

*Is sex education a rare topic in your religious community?*

70% of respondents said sex education was a rare topic in their religious communities, while 30% said it was not a rare topic as shown below (figure 2).

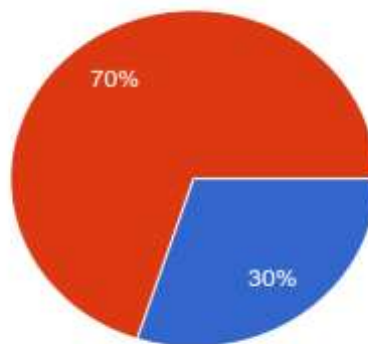


**Figure 2**

**Question 3.**

*Are you given some form of sex education at home?*

70% of respondents said they were not given sex education at their homes, while 30% said they received some education on sexual matters at home (figure 3).



**Figure 3**

**Question 4:**

*Which of these are the causes of teenage pregnancies in your communities?*

- a. Lack of sex education
- b. Poverty
- c. Lack of parental control
- d. Sexual exploitation

This was an inclusive question targeting both teenage students and non-students. It was also the central question examined under *Focus Group Discussion*. According to research findings, 50% of respondents said lack of sex education was a major cause of teenage pregnancies in their communities, 30% said it was poverty, 10% said it was lack of parental control, and 10% linked teenage pregnancy with sexual exploitation as shown below (figure 4).

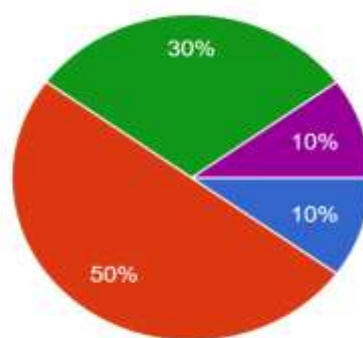


Figure 4

Interestingly, these findings (figure 4) align with a field survey on the causes of teenage pregnancy carried out by Efiinu Kwaku Obiako in the district of Asikuma-Odoben-Brakwa located in the Central region of Ghana (Obiako, 2021) [14]. According to his findings, lack of sex education was the main cause of teenage pregnancy in the area. In other words, the culture of silence on matters of sexuality largely contributes to incidences of teenage pregnancy in Asikuma-Odoben-Brakwa district.

#### ***Culture of Silence as a Traditional Practice***

The culture of silence on sexual issues is a common practice in many African societies. In the Ashanti region of Ghana where this research was conducted, sexual topics were not raised until a girl reached the age of puberty (Sarpong, 1991)[15]. Puberty was determined by the girl's first menstrual bleeding and the increase in the size of breasts. Sex education was automatically linked with procreation through marriage. Sex-talk before marriage was a taboo. Unfortunately, the cultural of silence on sexuality did not favour teenage girls prior to and during their first menstrual periods. Most of them lived in what may be termed "cage of innocent ignorance." Here is a concrete example extracted from the book of the Reverend Sarpong:

Mrs.Minkah has recorded the case of girl who informed her that although she had often heard of *kyima* (menstruation), she had not the slightest idea of what it connoted. She awoke one morning to feel her loin-cloth wet. Looking down to see what was the matter, she found to her horror that it was soaked with blood. In her nervous excitement she was at her wit's end what to do. She put her cloth on tightly so that nobody should notice the bleeding. She then prepared a concoction of herbs and applied it to her genitals, because she thought they were infected.... Since nothing would stop the flow of blood she became depressed and lost all appetite for food. At length she gathered up courage and told her friend about her 'disease,' who after teasing her, explained everything to her (Sarpong, 1991, 17)[16].

In a similar situation, another girl woke up and saw that her underwear was soaked with blood. She ran, in panic, to inform her mother that she had been wounded (Sarpong, 1991a)[17]. Notice that the above-mentioned girls innocently thought they had got an "infection" when they experienced their first menstrual bleeding (cycle). This is a concrete example on how insufficient sex education can disorient the minds of young people. The two girls thought they were sick. Ignorance about sexuality may not favour proper growth, the reason why the culture of silence ought to be prudently broken. Prudence is required for mainly two reasons: Firstly, it is difficult to judiciously gauge the appropriate age at which young people should be given sex education. Secondly, the culture of silence, in itself, has got some ethical-religious and philosophical values [as indicated in the following lines] which must not be underestimated.

#### ***Culture of Silence and its Ethical-Philosophical Underpinnings***

In most African cultures, sexual intercourse was seen as a sacred activity (Okechi, 2018)[18]. The act itself was more than a physical encounter between a male and female. It had some emotional, social and spiritual implications. The sexual act was essentially a means of procreating; a means of transmitting human life and enhancing human bonding. Procreation was a "religious obligation" in the sense that transmitting life meant sharing in the life of God who created humankind and made human beings in such a way that they should procreate (Kanyike, 2004)[19]. Sexual intercourse was thus a sacred responsibility. Philosophically, the sacred displays an ambivalent feature; it is both attractive and awesome (Kanyike, 2004a)[20]. The sacred is less talked about, it is rather revered. A veil of silence accompanies it. Direct language can cause profanation. This may

explain why most African cultures do not entertain open talks on matters of sexuality. The act itself embodies a mysterious element that defies human language (Arnfred, 2014a)[21].

Sexuality was only and openly talked about during initiation ceremonies. Initiation marked a formal passage from childhood to womanhood. It was during these “puberty or nubility rites” that teenagers were introduced into matters of sexuality as preparation for procreation through marriage (Sarpong, 1991c) [22]. Among the Ashanti people of Ghana, those designated as *Queen Mothers* played a significant role as moral referents for the girls in their respective chiefdoms. Unfortunately, puberty rites have largely dropped in most Ghanaian societies (Crentsil, 2014)[23]. Only a few communities still uphold the practice. There is no doubt teenagers were more protected in terms of sexuality than they are today. Sexual acts were not as liberal as they are in contemporary times. Virginity or sexual purity for both boys and girls were more valued and prized than nowadays.

Today, the culture of silence on matters of sexuality has largely lost its ethical-philosophical and religious significance. The modern world is not and cannot be silent about sexual issues. With modern technology, sexual material and information are ubiquitous. The youth are constantly exposed to and bombarded with inappropriate sexual information through peer groups, new papers, music, billboards, television screens, internet (mobile phones) and other social media. The traditional argument that talking to teenagers about sexuality may encourage them to curiously indulge themselves in sexual activities does not hold anymore. Indeed, most teenagers have easy access to sexual information nowadays than before. This phenomenological fact continues to cause enormous confusion and tension among teenagers. Besides, there is a growing tendency in modern African societies to also “liberalise” sexual behaviour and attitudes like most Western societies. Indulging oneself in pre-marital sexual activities is no longer disgraceful as it used to be. The cultural values that used to protect the sacredness of sexuality have significantly dwindled. This again confirms the need for an educational strategy that would proactively avail teenagers with some appropriate information on sexuality before they are exposed to “toxic sexual information” through social media, cultural influence and peer groups.

## **V. Current Efforts to Address the Problem of Teenage Pregnancy in Ghana**

Tremendous efforts have been made by the government and other stakeholders to reduce the rate of teenage pregnancy in Ghana. A strategic plan of five years, counting from 2018 to 2022, had been set in place by experts from State institutions, non-State institutions and other relevant stakeholders (Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, 2017)[24]. Since then, a series of meetings have been held to assess whether there is progress in addressing the problem teenage pregnancy in the country (Dasmani, 2022)[25]. The concerned parties are aware of the ongoing rise in cases of teenage pregnancy and the harm they do to the teenagers’ health, social, and economic wellbeing. The concerned parties are equally aware of the main causes of teenage pregnancies such as economic constraints, ignorance, lack of appropriate sexual health education, etc. (Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, 2017a)[26].

The primary objective of the strategic plan was to “empower adolescents to make choices regarding their sexual debut and enable them to prevent early and unplanned pregnancies” (Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, 2017b)[27]. The plan recommended, in the first place, availing young people with what is termed “youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health information and services” (Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, 2017c)[28]. Secondly, the plan promoted the virtue of abstinence among teenagers as a sure way of preventing unwanted pregnancies (Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, 2017d)[29]. Thirdly, the same plan recommended providing suitable platforms on which teenagers could acquire the “right information, knowledge, skills and adolescent-friendly services” (Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, 2017e)[30]. This would empower teenagers with the knowledge and skills to avoid unwanted pregnancies and concentrate on pursuing their future dreams.

Interestingly, the above mentioned strategic plan for reducing the rate of teenage pregnancy in Ghana already makes an allusion to an educational strategy that would empower young people to make *ethical decisions*. The plan insists on providing adolescents with the “right information, knowledge, skills and adolescent-friendly services” which will empower girls to make “informed decisions.” Also, the insistence on the moral value of abstinence is a point of admire. However, the above-mentioned strategic plan [despite its richness] is not without some ethical challenges.

### ***Ethical Challenges***

Firstly, research findings show that the current strategic plan mainly focuses on the welfare of girls and not so much on the welfare of boys (Yvonne P. Adzimah, 2022) [31]. Yet, most pregnancies are a result of a relationship of both female and male teenagers. Preventing teenage pregnancy is not solely the responsibility of girls. Boys should also be involved in programmes that promote what is termed “youth-friendly sexual and

reproductive health information.” Boys should also be helped to understand their sexual development and know how to relate with their fellow teenagers in a healthy and respectful manner.

Secondly, there is no guarantee that the move to avail teenagers with sexual information [however friendly it may be] will not induce teenagers to indulge themselves in sexual activities. Most teenagers lack proper understanding of relationships and the dynamics of consent. This is the fear of many parents and guardians. The strategic plan recommends “launching media-based educational campaigns to dispel myths about the availability of family planning and reproductive health services to adolescents and young people.” (Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, 2017f)[32]. While this information may be useful in certain circumstances, it, nevertheless, raises some ethical concerns. Is it not risky to avail teenagers with information on issues of family planning or the use of contraceptives without giving them a moral foundation first to enable them to handle such information? Many teenagers lack the appropriate knowledge and maturity to make moral decisions. Also, does the talk on contraception [at this level] not likely to instill in some teenagers a sense of confidence or fearlessness; hence, giving them the courage to indulge themselves in sexual activities thinking that they are safe from getting pregnant?

Thirdly, the practice of abstinence without a moral foundation may not make sense among the teenagers of today. From a biological perspective, teenagers are among those with a high sexual libido. It may be very difficult for them to abstain from sexuality in a world that is more and more *sexualised* through advertisements, casual conversations, music, internet and other social media.

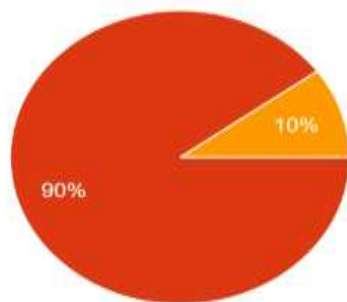
The findings of this research clearly show that an appropriate sex education is needed to reduce the rate of teenage pregnancy in Ghanaian societies. Beneath this need is the fact that when teenagers are not given in advance an appropriate sex education, they will search for it from prevailing social media and the internet. As mentioned earlier, most media contain inappropriate sexual information that can be detrimental to a healthy sexual development. The majority of respondents indeed advocate for an appropriate sex education for teenagers as a means to curb the rate of teenage pregnancy as shown below (figure 5).

#### Question 5.

*Which of these strategic plans would you recommend as a means to reduce the rate of teenage pregnancy in your community or region?*

- a. Sex education in social institutions
- b. No sex education
- c. Leave sex education in the hands of parents only

90% of respondents uphold that appropriate sex education can reduce the rate of teenage pregnancy, while 10% said the parents themselves could offer sex education to their children as shown below (figure 5).



- a. No sex education
- b. Sex education
- c. Parents themselves could offer sex education to their children

Figure 5

## VI. Discussion

The above figures and the discussions held earlier evoke a fundamental question: What kind of sex education can offer teenagers a moral foundation to enable them to responsibly handle matters of sexuality? What kind of sex education can prudently break the culture of silence on sexuality without compromising those moral, religious or cultural values inherent in it? Concretely, what kind of sex education would empower teenagers to say NO to compromising sexual advances?

## **VII. Humancentric Sex Education (HSE)**

Humancentric sex education (HSE) is a learning process that aims at awakening in the minds and hearts of young people a sense of moral consciousness and accountability in their relationships. HSE basically seeks to empower one to learn to listen to one's conscience and to act upon its moral lures. Conscience is a voice from within that lures one to do good and avoid evil. Conscience can approve or disapprove one's intended or actualised behaviour. Approval may appear as a feeling of enthusiasm or inner peace. Disapproval may appear as a feeling of guilt, discomfort or self-hate. Conscience, in some way, sets a foundation for ethical deliberations. It shall be argued that when teenagers learn to listen to their innermost conscience, the possibility of indulging themselves in early and compromising sexual activities is likely to reduce. Basically, HSE is a conscience-centred education. It focuses its attention at nurturing the conscience in young people in view of transforming them into ethically responsibility beings capable of handling complex situations of life. To understand the ethical dynamics of HSE, one needs to shed light on the following question: What is conscience and how can it be nurtured in young people?

### ***Conscience***

In the context of this paper, conscience denotes an inner sense of rectitude that may guide one's behaviour or action. It manifests itself as an *inner invitation* to behave in a certain way or to take a course of action. Many philosophers attest to the fact that every human being has got a conscience. Plato conceives of conscience as an inherent principle that guides human beings both in the understanding of what the good life is and in making morally-informed decisions (Plato, 1969)[33]. For Immanuel Kant, conscience is an "internal court" [in rational beings] that judges whether or not an individual's behaviour complies with the moral law (Kant, 1991) [34]. For Christine Wanjiru Gichure, "conscience is the 'silent voice' of reason" which is propelled by "certain standards of good or evil called 'sources of morality.'" (Gichure, 2008)[35]. For Vicki Zakrzewski, conscience is a "little voice" in the human mind that "tells us the right thing to do..." (Zakrzewski, 2021)[36]. Consciences can also be understood as an inner barometer, an emotional impulse that tells one that they have done good or not so good. Conscience is what keeps pestering someone when they do something they know is not right.

It shall be argued in the following lines that conscience-centred morality transcends conventional morality. In other words, the operation of conscience is not entirely dependent upon established human laws. A person's conscience may compel one to break through the neighbour gate to save a drowning child in the neighbour's swimming pool. A teenager's conscience may compel her to disobey the laws of the land by categorically refusing to give in to a pre-arranged or forced marriage. Conscience is a voice from within that compels one to seek life-giving goods and avoid life-destroying stuffs. The ancient Greek philosopher Sophocles is quoted to have said: "there is no witness so terrible, no accuser so powerful as conscience which dwells within us" (Zakrzewski, 2021a)[37]. Some individuals have lamentably come to confess to the crime of murder or theft many years after getting away with the crime for the very reason that their consciences kept bothering them.

As mentioned earlier, conscience operates from within at the level of sensibility. It is an emotional impulse that works hand in hand with the human intellect. Sometimes, conscience defies the dictates of conventional morality where the situation calls for. Saint Paul describes it as a witness [regardless of human laws] that sometimes accuses or defends a person (Rm 2:14-15). Conscience is thus an inner-voice that compels an individual to follow "the right path," not necessarily the path dictated by someone else, but the path that generates life for all as opposed to a path that is life threatening. How then does HSE empower teenagers to become conscience-mindful and gain the moral courage to say NO to compromising sexual acts?

### ***Humancentric Sex Education: Curbing the Rate of Teenage Pregnancy through Conscience Mindfulness***

Humancentric sex education (HSE) promotes three pedagogical strategies, namely, (1) empowering young people to discover their self-worth, (2) putting emphasis on character formation (i.e. acquisition of fundamental ethical values), and (3) awakening in young people a sense of moral accountability.

Firstly, HSE aims at enabling young people to discover their self-worth through practising what may be termed "inner listening." Young people generally lead noisy lives; they hardly find the space and time to listen to their inner-selves. Yet, self-discovery requires a journey into the self. It is when a person makes a journey into the self that they are likely to discover what is termed "self-worth." Self-worth is the acknowledgement of one's own value as a human being endowed with great potentialities. It is the discovery of one's inherent giftedness as a being living on purpose, capable of making life more meaningful despite human limitations. Self-worth does not depend on external factors such as social approval, educational achievements, good family background, wealth, etc. It is something intrinsic. It springs from within. It is the awareness that I am a valuable human being, loved by the Creator and capable of loving others. Self-worth is what allows people to appreciate themselves as they are, regardless of how other people see them. Self-worth is the foundation of a



good self-esteem.<sup>1</sup> Notice that self-worth is a product of self-consciousness. The role of the conscience is to remind people of their own value, of their self-worth. When young people, especial teenage girls, discover their self-worth and learn to listen to their inner-voice (conscience) telling them to do good and avoid evil, they are likely to begin to appreciate themselves and invest their energies in building a future for themselves and their loved ones rather than allowing themselves to be used by others for sexual gratification. This would in turn reduce the rate of unplanned pregnancies among teenagers.

Secondly, HSE puts the accent on character formation. Character is a disposition or trait that influences one's behaviour and actions. Phenomenologically, people are defined by their character. A person can be said to have a good or bad character. A good or life-giving character presupposes an embodiment of fundamental ethical values and attitudes (Rogers, 2006)[38]. As such, HSE aims at instilling into the minds and hearts of young people a number of fundamental ethical values such as compassion, honesty, integrity, solidarity, forgiveness, fidelity, love, hope, generosity, resilience, truthfulness, gratefulness, moderation, courage, self-control, etc. A person who embodies most of these values is regarded by others as a person of good character. Notice that HSE promotes internalisation of ethical values as opposed to simply following rules or doing only what one is told to do as in military training. When dealing with teenagers, HSE goes beyond the language of "dos and don'ts." Human experience reveals that the morality of rules (deontology) produces effective results among children (i.e., people not more than 12 years of age). But as soon young people attain the age of puberty, the morality of rules begins to produce contrary results. Puberty is the stage of curiosity and self-affirmation. Teenagers usually want to show that they are free agents and sexual beings. It is precisely at this level that HSE is needed to enable teenagers to internalise core ethical values as a moral foundation for their behavior and actions. Ethical values are often internalised through repeated attitudes and acts. A teenager who constantly refuses sexual advances and makes an effort to abstain from sexual intercourse is likely to develop a sense of integrity, resilience, self-discipline or self-control.

Thirdly and lastly, HSE aims at awakening in young people a sense of moral accountability. In contemporary times, sexual intercourse is no longer a taboo as it used to be. Premarital sexual relations are largely tolerated. Several factors are to blame including the cultural influence of some liberal movements from the Western world as well as the current promotion and distribution of contraceptives among teenagers (Collins, 2007)[39]. Rather than letting teenagers get drowned in the streams of the time, educators at all levels, in collaboration with their parents or guardians, should set ethical limits and seriously challenge young people to know that they are morally accountable to both their inner conscience and the community to which they belong. Without denying them their basic human rights such as the right to life, freedom, education etc., young people should be informed that their rights necessarily correlate with certain moral responsibilities. Freedom is not free. Freedom correlates with moral responsibility. Human life is a life lived with and for others under mutual respect. Through HSE, teenagers are likely to understand that any behavior or action they undertake has ethical repercussions on their families or close relations and on the society as a whole. A thoughtful emphasis on this aspect is likely to awake in the minds and hearts of teenagers the sense of moral accountability in a world that tends to liberalise sexuality.

### **VIII. Conclusion and Recommendations**

This work relied on a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods to investigate whether the culture of silence on matters of sexuality played a significant role in the rise of cases of teenage pregnancy in Ghana. Research findings showed that the culture of silence indeed contributed to the problematic. Teenagers are more vulnerable than ever due to uncontrolled availability of distorted sexual information on television screens, internet (mobile phones), billboards, magazines, music, literature, movies, art, etc. It is practically impossible in the current times to prevent teenagers from getting access to improper sexual information. As such, denying them an appropriate and holistic sex education is endangering their future. To prudently break the culture of silence, this paper has modestly recommended what is termed as humancentric sex education (HSE) that aims at transformation teenagers into ethically responsible beings. HSE empowers young people to learn to listen to their inner conscience and to act accordingly. Conscience is an "inner voice" that summons humankind to do good and avoid evil (Gula, 2005)[40]. Concretely, HSE should be mandatory in Junior and Senior High Schools (Clausen, 2015)[41]. Traditional initiation rites that used to prepare teenagers for a responsible sexual life should be revived and encouraged. Educators should go beyond teaching about the biological functioning of the human body [reproduction] to include core ethical values surrounding human sexuality such as self-worth, self-respect, love, fidelity, integrity, truthfulness, self-control, moderation, resilience, courage, moral accountability, etc.

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<sup>1</sup>While self-worth is independent on external factors, self-esteem largely builds on external influences such as successes, achievements, social approvals, etc.

To enable teenagers to develop these ethical values, policy makers should introduce into school curricula a number of human development programmes such as religious anthropology, positive psychology, cultural studies, creative art, martial arts, etc. Religious anthropology [religious formation] can empower young people to learn to listen to their innermost conscience (divine voice from within), i.e., by introducing young people to introspective exercises such as prayer, recollection, mediation (mindfulness), etc. Positive psychology can empower learners to discover their natural endowments and appreciate their self-worth despite their human limitations. Cultural studies can remind young people of their fundamental cultural values and moral heritage surrounding issues of sexuality and other aspects of life. Creative arts, including sports, can help learners to recognise and develop their talents, and also to acquire key ethical values such as resilience, fortitude, courage, moderation, mental focus, concentration, mutual respect, self-control, etc.

Notice that these educational programmes, when judiciously applied, can provide a solid foundation for self-respect, character formation and moral accountability. To achieve these objectives, special commissions on ethics [comprised of educators, parents, civil, cultural and religious leaders] could be introduced in educational centres to ensure that learners [especially teenagers] receive adequate sex education. Parents or guardians should also be familiarised with the same educational content to avoid discrepancies in the educational process. A parent or guardian is the child's first teacher. Moral education begins at home. Policy makers should carry out sensitisation programmes on the importance of sex education and ensure teenage girls and boys enroll and stay in schools. Local communities should be helped to understand that sex education is not about instructing young people how to have sex but rather how to handle their sexual life in a more responsible and mature manner. A thoughtful concretisation of these measures could gradually decrease the rate of teenage pregnancy in Ghanaian societies and other parts of the world.

Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, the culture of silence on matters of sexuality is not the only factor that contributes to the problem of teenage pregnancy. Economic poverty continues to drive many teenagers into compromising sexual activities as a means of survival, sometimes with the approval of their parents (World Vision International, 2019) [42]. This remains a serious obstacle to reducing the high rate of teenage pregnancy in Ghana and in other developing countries. Is this not a call for developing countries to critically review their economic and political policies so as to create economically secure environments where young people could freely and productively exploit their potentials for a better future rather than finding themselves hooked into sexual exploitation for economic favours?

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