

United Nations
Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) in collaboration with
International Labour Organization (ILO)
Joint United Nations Programmes on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS)
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
Expert Group Meeting on
“The role of men and boys in achieving gender equality”
21 to 24 October 2003
Brasilia, Brazil

Fatherhood in adolescence: the construction of political agenda

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Fatherhood in adolescence: the construction of political agenda ¹.

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1. Context

In Brazil there is a lack of academic research on specific actions in the theme of sexuality and reproduction geared towards the male population, particularly young and adolescent fathers. This was ascertained by an extensive study carried out by Jorge Lyra (1997) and Benedito Medrado (1997) in their postgraduate studies, as well as through intervention programs geared towards the adolescent population in many states in Brazil.

In defining the appropriate strategies to reach young and adolescent fathers, it was seen that even when a young man wants to take on an active role as a father, the existing social structures, such as family, school and health institutions, seem to deny them this role. Related to this, is the notion in today's society that conception and raising of children are restricted to the mother, where the father is discreetly included (Novelino, 1989; Novelino and Santos, 1993). Fatherhood, when it is discussed is done through the feminine perspective, reinforced by the notion that it is women who "carry" the responsibility of pregnancy: men are rarely asked about their participation in this process, nor regarding their commitment and thoughts in the process of reproduction. However, research, reflections and interventions, mainly from outside Brazil indicate that which is obvious to some and a novelty to others: the importance of the man in the reproductive cycle.

Currently it is accepted that knowledge of male representations and practices can contribute towards programs in the area of children's health, the prevention of STDs, gender-based violence, family planning, and women's issues (Mundigo, 1995). This emphasizes the need to promote actions which include the participation of men and adolescents in a family's reproductive life, hence the need to re-examine established preconceptions regarding adolescent fathers. Thus promoting the conditions for increased interaction between father-mother-son, and more equitable gender and age relations with a special emphasis on parental relationships.

¹ The other version this text will be publicized in CD of the Seminar young men as allies in the promotion of health and gender equity. Rio de Janeiro - Brazil, 27-30 of the august 2002.

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Through a more in depth study of the theoretical, empirical and political knowledge of this subject area, Instituto PAPAI has chosen to focus on the denied social role of fatherhood in adolescence. Existing literature has pointed to the importance of creating a network for the adolescents who become fathers. Thereafter they can become the protagonists of their own stories, which now include a child that needs human caring contact in order to achieve healthy development.

2. Target Population

- Male adolescents (15-19 years old) and young adults (20-24 years old) who become fathers in these age ranges
- Families of adolescents who become pregnant
- Professionals who work in NGOs, schools and health centers who are interested in the area of young men's sexual and reproductive health

3. Rationale

Instituto PAPAI asserts that there are two ways of working with adolescents in the context of sexuality and reproduction. For those who are not parents yet, discussions and reflection should focus on desire, pleasure, prevention, responsibility, the body, conception, and particularly, on how to avoid an unwanted pregnancy. For those who are already parents or who are expecting a child, support should be provided. There are challenges but these can be mitigated with the support of networks in the areas of health, education, jobs and daycare centers.

Promoting conversations, support and respect of the emotional limitations of a young woman or man is the best way to help both to overcome, in the most appropriate way, the obstacles which can be created by a pregnancy at this age. This support will not cause teenage pregnancies to increase, although it will certainly contribute to decreasing the physical and psychosocial harms for the pregnant couple and for their children.

4. The Program in Action

The activities in the low-income communities of the metropolitan area of Recife are structured in three inter-related parts:

1. Direct actions with the population
2. Weekly planning and evaluation meetings
3. Weekly theoretical and methodological workshops

Weekly meetings are held in hospitals and in public health centers in Recife for the partners of pregnant adolescents who accompany them in the pre-natal process or during the post-partum visits. The meetings, held as workshops as if in waiting rooms, focus on themes such as: pregnancy, birth, infant care, and fatherhood.

Since 1999 over 183 young fathers in the institutions where PAPAI works have been directly followed. This number is due to two factors: until 2000 records were not systematic. Also in

addition to the young and adolescent fathers we have accompanied, we have also given information and support to adult fathers who have requested it.

From this total number of young and adolescent fathers that have been part of the program, statistical information on them follows: the youngest was 14 and the oldest was 30 years old. The average ages of participants is 21.69 years old and most are between ages 18 and 25.

Regarding the age of their partners, records follow the Brazilian demographic numbers where the female partner is usually younger than the male. The average age of the female partner is 19.87 years old, and the highest concentration has been found between the ages of 15 and 19; the youngest was 13 years old.

Since 1999, an average of 40 cases have been registered per year. However, through July 2002, 64 young fathers had been seen.

The majority of these men's partners were pregnant (53%). The partners are between three and nine months pregnant when their partners seek participation in the program. 58% of these young men previously had an offspring apart from this pregnancy.

78% of the men we saw were living in a consensual union (as opposed to officially married to their pregnant partners).

Most of them (68%) were born in the metropolitan region of Recife and only 4.5% were born in a city outside the Northeast region of Brazil.

Educational levels: 41.7% had not completed the primary school level, only one had done the basic school (alfabetização), and only one had completed a course following secondary school.

More recently, the race/ethnicity category has been included in the records as it is considered important within the context of health and national policies. By using a self-classification criterion, 61% consider themselves colored, 28% white and 10% black. Only one father considered himself to be indigenous.

4. The Voices of Young Men

The following quotes are illustrative of the challenges and situations that adolescent fathers face:

“No, we never thought of getting rid of the child (having an abortion), because it was part of our plan to have a child. It just wasn't the right time, but since it came...”

“For me, my daughter is more important than anything else, more than shows, the bar, anything. Because there are lots of folks that have no daughter, no son, who live in the bar. I'd rather have a daughter, a son, a little boy than going to these places. I prefer to be giving love, receiving affection and all that stuff than gossiping and drinking.”

“When I got the news, it was a shock. A real shock. I kept thinking for months, I was paranoid, not knowing which way to turn in my life...A new family, I couldn’t even support myself, how was I going to support another person and a child?”

5. Lessons Learned

Not all adolescent fatherhood is necessarily unwanted

Taking care of a child is not an easy task in today’s world, especially from a financial perspective. Also, although maturity is questionable and difficult to define, some young people (perhaps most of them!) are not prepared to take care of a child. It is the view of the authors that pregnancy and becoming a parent during adolescence is not the best option for every adolescent; however, pregnancy and fatherhood can provide substantial emotional benefits to some adolescent parents.

Even though researchers and practitioners tend to see pregnancy in adolescence in a negative light, there are adolescent couples that have shown good performance in school, family life and care for their child. Research in human and social sciences carried out in different countries have shown that pregnancy is seen by some young people as a transition to the much desired adulthood, and the child thus becomes the reason for a social reorganization, the possibility of engaging in the work place, giving up a ‘life of drugs’ and of crime, among others.

In different countries teenage pregnancy has been considered by health professionals and by relevant institutions as a social problem, characterized by a prejudiced stand and *alarmist* rhetoric associated to the negative consequences that may occur with the adolescent mother and her baby (leaving school, difficulty in getting a job, low weight of babies at birth) as well as negative references related to the pregnancy: *not planned, undesired, precocious, premature*.

This viewpoint reflects a social fear that motherhood and fatherhood in youth can create barriers to the economic growth of developing countries, generating additional problems for governments of countries which are already impoverished by public policies that do not address the social needs of its populations.

In developed countries the rates of pregnancy are higher amongst illiterate young people with basic education who have little possibility of escaping from the poverty cycle. As a consequence, generating the maintenance and the reproduction of poverty and the lack of access to information and education.

6. Evaluation and Conclusions

It has been shown that young fathers have the same fears that all fathers have, irrespective of age: the fear of the unknown. As fatherhood is a new experience for these young men, the fear of being unsuccessful and to have difficulties in dealing with unexpected situations is very strong. However, fatherhood is a diverse experience and as such it is not possible to say that there is a typical experience that young fathers go through. There are those who abandon the young woman and who do not want to deal with being a father. However, there are others who seek out

the services of this project precisely to share with other fathers (who can be less or more experienced) their doubts and questions.

The best result of this project has been to make the issue of adolescent fatherhood more visible in society. When this project began five years ago, very little if anything was discussed regarding adolescent fatherhood. Fortunately this theme is now part of the subjects discussed by the media, governmental and non-governmental institutions. The “wall of silence” is slowly being broken.

As well as the work geared towards young people, Instituto PAPAI has also engaged in various advocacy efforts, acting in partnership with governmental institutions on a local and on a national level, ensuring that the work with young men be included in public policy, education and health agendas.

Instituto PAPAI also believes that it is necessary to create more positive messages regarding fatherhood. For example, when the term “responsible fatherhood” is mentioned, this already denotes that fatherhood is in itself responsible and that the notion of responsibility is the main goal to be reached. However, fatherhood is not an obligation – it belongs in the realm of desire, inside the scope of rights and as such requires a strong commitment.

Collaborators and Support Networks

The activities of this program are geared towards respect of the principle of citizenship and from the political perspective of social control. In this way, Instituto PAPAI acts in partnership with various institutions and in various contexts, such as: The Women’s Forum of Pernambuco, AIDS Articulation in Pernambuco, the Movement of Brazilian Adolescents, the Movement of Women Rural Workers, the Network of the Young People of the Northeast, the Integrated Movement of Professionals who work with Adolescents, the Brazilian Association of NGO’s, among others.

Important partnerships have been established with other non-governmental organizations, taking the experience of this organization to other groups, other cities and other countries. One of these partnerships is *Program H*, which together with ECOS (São Paulo), Salud y Género (Mexico) and with the coordination of Instituto PROMUNDO (Rio de Janeiro), a series of 5 thematic manuals and a video for working with young men has been produced. In the manual on fatherhood and care giving, the views and direct experiences of Instituto PAPAI have been reflected.

Successes

All the experiences that have been gathered during these past few years working with young fathers in public health institutions has allowed for a better understanding of the needs of this population in the field of health, citizenship and reproductive rights. In this time, different strategies of action were tried out based on waiting room methodologies with the aim of instigating discussions with the young fathers in issues related to conception and contraception, gestation, child bearing and child caring, all of which are generally considered “women’s issues”.

It has been possible to break the “wall of silence” which were identified in the institutions that work directly or indirectly with the young male populations. Young fathers and their needs were heard, enabling strategy development of communication and sensitization adapted to identified needs and issues.

During the last few years it was also possible to establish a network of professionals and institutions in the area of health, emphasizing the need to include young males in issues regarding sexual and reproductive health.

The theme of fatherhood in adolescence is now part of the public policy agenda in adolescent health, and this in turn has created a demand by health professionals who do not have methodological or technical resources to carry out projects in this area since they are solely accustomed to working with young pregnant women and with young people in prevention.

Challenges

The main obstacle to be overcome is the resistance from health professionals to acknowledge the need to implement actions in the scope of fatherhood, especially within the context of teenage pregnancy. Although most professionals recognize the importance of this theme, few consider themselves trained to deal with this theme or are willing to invest in this. Therefore, it is necessary to create strategies to attract the attention of professionals and institutions in order to work with this segment of the population. In this manner Instituto PAPAÍ will be undertaking direct actions with these institutions as well as participating in civil society forums, governmental and non-governmental institutions, particularly the Adolescent’s Health Program, Family Health Program and Program of Community Agents. There will also be direct community actions to stimulate their participation in the planned activities.

Sources

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