



# Sexuality Education for Adolescents, Between the Forbidden and the Permitted: The Case of the Ndogpassi II Neighbourhood in Douala

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**Abstract:** Sexuality is an integral part of human life and is constructed throughout the life of a human being. In adolescents, sexuality education is crucial, as sexuality is a new field of knowledge influencing their sexual behaviour and orientation, but delicate because of the disruptions related to their age and the paradigm of digitised sexuality. Many young people adopt risky behaviours leading to unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. Adolescents and families, faced with an emancipating social environment and a more or less static cultural field, are caught in a vice of the forbidden (cultural values) and the permitted (social values), making sexuality education difficult. Hence the research question: How do householders and adolescents integrate the forbidden and the permitted in the sexuality education of adolescents? To answer this question, a descriptive qualitative study was carried out over a period of 4 months (September 2020 - January 2021) among heads of households and adolescents in the NDOGPASSI II neighbourhood in the city of Douala, Cameroon. A non-probabilistic data collection technique by reasoned choice was adopted, and the size was based on the saturation principle. Using a semi-structured interview guide, the parents responsible for the families and the adolescents concerned were interviewed. The data obtained was subjected to a content analysis. Two theories underpinned the interpretation of the data, namely social representation theory and structural-functional theory. The results of this study show that both heads of households and adolescents articulate constraints (structural and functional) to adolescent sexuality education and strategies for integrating the permitted and the prohibited. Regarding structural constraints, families and adolescents absorb information on sexuality from social institutions, as well as from social networks that provide spaces for virtual and informal exchanges. Regarding functional constraints, social representations of sexuality and data are culturally embedded. With regard to strategies for integrating the permitted and the forbidden, we noted the debate of convenience, sexuality as a space reserved for insiders and the absence of communication techniques. All this leads both adolescents and parents to avoid discussing it; a silence develops, a stress of the forbidden/permissible. This favours strategies of freedom of operation for adolescents, of openness to ICT, thus disrupting family responsibilities in relation to the sexuality education of their adolescents. Adolescents have a tendency to explain and contextualise everything.

**Keywords:** Socio-Cultural Constraints, Sexuality Education, Adolescents, Ndogpassi Douala

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## 1. Introduction

WHO considers adolescence to be the period of human growth and development between childhood and adulthood, between the ages of 10 and 19. Adolescence is a period of physical, psychological, emotional and social transition where the construction of the personality is completed and the young person seeks to create his or her identity by

exploring new areas, including the sexual world [1]. Moreover, the lack of parent/child communication and modesty about sexuality, particularly exchanges between adolescents and their fathers, is very little observed in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in Burkina Faso, where only 14% of girls and 8% of boys talk about sexuality with their parents,

the proportions being roughly the same for discussions with other family members [2].

In Africa as elsewhere, sexuality education remains taboo in many families, regardless of social background, religion or country. In less developed countries, at least 39% of girls marry before the age of 18 and 12% of them before the age of 15 [3].

Among young girls aged 13 to 19 in Cameroon, the statistic obtained at the Yaoundé gynaecological –obstetric and paediatric hospital are chilling. It indicates that 308 out of 3868 girls admitted are pregnant, i.e. 7,96% [4].

To ensure the sexual education of adolescents, national and international organisations, the Cameroonian government, and schools have set up means and methods for the prevention of early pregnancies and unsafe abortions. To this end, parents have a role to play in the education of their children and are a point of reference. The general observation is therefore that there is a lack of dialogue between parents and adolescents. However, many parents still consider sexuality to be a taboo subject that cannot be discussed with children at the risk of perverting them before they are mature.

Adolescents are increasingly exposed to reproductive health problems due to a combination of factors such as early puberty, lax parental supervision and the taboo nature of sexuality in Cameroonian cultures. However, it is important to talk about it with an adolescent when he or she has many questions. Having a discussion about sex with parents also helps to avoid certain preconceived ideas and to make the situation less complicated.

Sex education still seems to be a socio-cultural constraint surrounded by myths. Parents refuse to discuss the subject with their teenagers and sex education is almost non-existent. As a result, many young girls reach sexual maturity without having a good knowledge of how their reproductive system works and less knowledge of their fertile period.

## 2. Methodology

A descriptive qualitative study was conducted over a period of 4 months (September 2020 - January 2021) among heads of households and adolescents in the NDOGPASSI II neighbourhood in the city of Douala, Cameroon. A descriptive qualitative study was carried out during 4 months (September 2020 - January 2021) among heads of families and adolescents in the NDOGPASSI II neighbourhood in the city of Douala, Cameroon. A non-probabilistic data collection technique by reasoned choice was adopted, and the size was based on the principle of saturation, i.e. thirteen (13) heads of households and ten (10) adolescents. Using a semi-structured interview guide, the parents responsible for the families and the adolescents concerned were interviewed. The data obtained was subjected to content analysis. Two theories underpinned the interpretation of the data, namely social representation theory and structural-functional theory.

To obtain information from our respondents, we used two interview guides, one for the heads of households and one for the adolescents. These interview guides included several

themes: the socio-demographic profile: age, region, religion, number of adolescents in the family, marital status, level of education, number of years of marriage in order to know each couple and whether or not to include them in our research. Constraints to sexuality education in order to know the different constraints to sexuality education at the structural and functional level that the heads of the family and the adolescents have. Finally, the second theme dealt with strategies for integrating the permitted and the forbidden in the sexuality education of adolescents.

The interview took place either in the living room, in the yard, in the garden or on the balcony, depending on the preferences of the heads of household and the adolescent. The average duration was between 30 and 60 minutes. After agreement on the recording of the interviews, the data was transcribed immediately after collection. The content analysis consisted of coding.

We would like to note that we had some participants that after we parted, they felt dissatisfied with the answers they gave us and sent someone to call us to readjust further information.

The data was collected with a tape recorder, tabulated (transcribed) and confirmed by the participant and processed manually. We used a ballpoint pen, paper, ordinary pencil, eraser. The text was entered using Microsoft Word 2010 on Windows 8. Data analysis was done using content analysis. Research ethics and human rights were observed during this study.

## 3. Scientific Criteria

Authenticity: all interviews were recorded.

Credibility: the research results truly describe the phenomenon of the study. Internal validity: after the transcript was completed, we went back to the participants to present the verbatim, and to see if the transcript was accurate in order to be validated by them. Transferability: Our research is based on a well-defined population, and it will be difficult to generalise the results to the whole population. Triangulation: we used several publication sites in our literature review (Pubmed; Cairn. info; Google scholar; Hinari), then we used the social representations theory and the structuro-functional theory, and finally, we used various sources of information, namely: interviewed heads of households and adolescents from different social classes; different genders, different social and cultural groups.

Ethical considerations: As a prelude to our investigation and in accordance with the respect of the ethics of our work and the protection of human rights, we will take the following authorisations: after the issue of the favourable opinion of the ethics commission of the Catholic University of Central Africa/SEA, on 24 August 2020 bearing the number 2020/0201041, we had recourse to the authorisation of the head of the district of NDOGPASSI II, and of the director of the Saint Léonie hospital.

## 4. Results

The results show the constraints (structural and functional) to the education of adolescents on sexuality and the strategies for integrating the permitted and prohibited.

### 4.1. Constraints to Adolescent Sexuality Education

This section discusses structural and functional constraints on adolescent sexuality education.

#### 4.1.1. Structural Constraints

Addressing structural constraints means highlighting the structures that are open to the popularization of sex and sexuality education. This is the dimension of the 'licence' of sexuality through social networks, the media and educational institutions.

##### (i). Banalization of Sexuality and Sex Through Free Access to Social Networks and Media

The data collected show that adolescents discover sexuality in virtual, formal and informal spaces.

In terms of virtual exchange space, many social networks such as YouTube, WhatsApp, pornographic websites...

"Social networks give us the possibility to discover sex and to have information about sexuality. We sometimes look for information either to bid for it, to educate ourselves and to solve a specific sexual problem" (AD 03, 1st F5, 16 years old).

Many media offer films, TV series, commercials, clips and pornographic channels. These spaces are accessible to adolescents and very often sharpen their sexual desire. This informal impregnation with information about sexuality influences sex education, as this informant said:

"Television in most cases gives us opportunities to discover sex and its uses. Through TV series. Unfortunately we do not always have the capacity to appreciate and discern. This sometimes leads us to want to experiment without measuring the extent of the consequences" (AD 03, 1st F5, 16 years old).

In addition, some informants pointed to sexual cybercrime. "It is common to receive emoticons in our phones related to sexuality, sex, pornographic images, messages related to sexual intercourse. Sex and sexuality become messages imposed by pornographic sites through WhatsApp, Facebook". (AD 01, 1st A, 15 years old).

##### (ii). Training in Education for Life and Love in Educational Institutions

Some informants noted that school institutions as a formal space are of great importance for the education of children.

##### (iii). Education for Life and Love in School Institutions

Some informants noted that school institutions as a formal space are spaces where sex and sexuality are subjects included in the curriculum from the 6th grade. One informant stated that:

"In the training programme of Catholic schools, there is a course called Education for Life and Love (EAL). This

introduces the young adolescent to certain aspects of sexuality. It is obvious that faced with this openness, our parents have no choice" (AD 03, 1st F5, 16 years old).

Moreover, the informal dimension is very active among the young people.

#### 4.1.2. Functional Constraints

Functional constraints refer to the functioning of Cameroonian families. Here, we have noted the social representations and culturally anchored data.

##### (i). Social Representations of Sexuality

The data collected show that each head of household gave his or her view of how they understand adolescent sexuality in their culture. For the heads of household, sexuality must be done in a mature way, because it cannot be done anywhere, anyhow, and with anyone, one does not play with sex, because it is a sacred thing, one must respect it and have sound knowledge. We find this in the following lines:

"For one of the cultural values is that sexuality is something sacred. To enjoy one's sexuality, one must do so in a mature way. It's not something you're called upon to do just any old how and with just anyone. It cannot be done anywhere, anyhow, anytime and with anyone. There are specific times for this. Especially when I do it with my wife I hide. You can't play with it, it's not an object of play and pleasure. You have to respect it, you have to have a holy knowledge of it. A woman doesn't laugh in any way". (CF 01, East: 47 years).

##### (ii). Culturally Anchored Data

Talking about sexuality to adolescents is not culturally anchored, it is a taboo subject. If a parent commits to doing so, they use coded language. Informant CF 01 gives an illustration in the following statement:

"for most of our families, sexuality is not a subject that can be discussed. It's something that is taboo, that we don't share easily with the children because we don't talk about these things to the children and in front of the children. You always have to want to hide. Even when we want to talk to the children about these things, the parents will always look for coded language so as not to hurt their feelings too much, but sometimes the children are already too far ahead of the programme, of the parent himself, because what the parent wants to talk about in code, the young person has 1000 codes to express it" (CF 11, Littoral, 50).

Parents avoid creating opportunities for exchanges about sexuality. This attitude disrupts any attempt by the teenager to communicate in case of difficulties. The words of one teenager are quite revealing in this regard:

"Communication is not easy. She doesn't want to be approached, I feel a certain discomfort, difficulty in expressing myself around her. One day, I took my courage in both hands to try to talk to my mother, she scolded me that day and told me that I should not talk about this subject at home, that it is for grown-ups. And that it's forbidden to talk about that, especially as when I was your

age I didn't talk about that. (AD 05, 3rd ESP, aged 13).

#### **4.2. Strategies for Integrating the Permitted and the Prohibited**

##### **4.2.1. Debate of Convenience, Because No Appropriate Space**

According to the data collected, support is convenient in the sense that sexuality is discussed at home during a favourable situation, such as a TV series, a commercial or a star appearance. Parents very often jump on these occasions to pass on the message about sexuality. This message is sometimes not very precise, oriented towards a position simply to provoke a debate. Despite this, dialogue is not always easy. We note this in the adolescent when he says:

"Communication in connection with sexuality starts at home most often when we have seen a series that is related to sexuality and we start to debate, everyone gives their point of view, but communication in this case is rather complex for me. I prefer not to say anything in any case" (AD 04, 1st D, 15 years old).

##### **4.2.2. Sexuality as an Insider's Area**

Some adolescents find it difficult to discuss sexuality with their parents, as it is a contextual subject, which young people are not allowed to talk about or which is restricted to adults. This is the case of the adolescent when he states:

"We parents find this subject a bit weird and sexuality is something reserved only for adults and those who are in marriage. Weird because we don't feel comfortable talking about it with the children" (CF 05, West, 52).

##### **4.2.3. Education for Adults Only**

In some cultures, sexuality is only discussed with adults, because adolescents are still young, and it is only when they become men, when they are responsible, that sexuality is discussed with them. But it is up to the parents to often slip certain words to the teenagers when they walk together. If a girl is getting married at 14, she is already responsible, so we can talk about sex with her. We can talk about sex with her. This is confirmed by the words of informant CF 01:

"In my culture, we can't talk about sexuality, it's for adults. An adolescent is still considered a child in our culture. It's from the moment he becomes a man, he takes on certain responsibilities that we can talk about sexuality according to the culture, it's not a matter for adolescents, but for adults. It's for someone who is responsible. Even if a girl at 14 years old he leaves in marriage, she is already responsible, but from the moment she is a child, she has the chest any way, she is still a child."

##### **4.2.4. Missing Communication Techniques**

Sexuality is not at all easy for heads of households, as they do not know the different ways and techniques of dialogue or the different issues to discuss with teenagers about sexuality. The latter in turn do not know how to seek help from parents on sexuality. They turn to their peers/friends to discuss sexuality and seek solutions to their difficulties or problems. We note this from the head of the family who says:

"At home there is no communication about sexuality, we have never talked about it, it is a difficult subject to discuss with parents. It's a difficult subject to discuss with parents. And what's more, I don't have the courage to stand in front of my parents to discuss it. It's the adults who talk about it among themselves and it's not done anywhere or anyhow" (AD 09, 1st D, 15 years old).

In addition to this, other parents find that talking about sexuality with adolescents is a bit strange, and is reserved only for adults and those who are married.

We note this with the head of the family who says:

"We parents find this subject a bit strange and sexuality is something reserved only for adults and those who are in marriage. Weird because we don't feel comfortable talking about it with the children. (CF07, West, 57).

## **5. Discussion**

In this section, we first present the constraints on adolescent sexuality education and strategies for integrating the permitted and the prohibited.

### **5.1. Constraints on Adolescent Sexuality Education**

#### **5.1.1. Structural Constraints**

In this section, we discussed social networks, the lack of a space for exchange, and the absence of appropriate support techniques.

##### **(i). Trivialisation of Sexuality and Sex Through Social Networks and the Media**

Generally speaking, adolescents discover sexuality by watching pornographic films, which make them feel excited. However, some authors take the opposite view when they say that television can either reinforce norms or offer insight into alternative ways of thinking [5]. Some WhatsApp groups do not respect the ethics of sexuality. By the way, these media talk about sexuality in any way, send images of scenes of sexual pleasure, all things that allow adolescents to be sometimes very edified about sexuality early, even without prior preparation. It is in this same vein that Yaron [6] makes it clear that the use of smartphones and tablets gives access to images, photos and videos relating to sexuality. If these previous elements are associated with alcohol consumption, then the risk of deviant sexual behaviour is high (Ibis). In the same vein, Ashcraft [7] believes that pornography, the dominant model in social networks, is likely to generate in adolescents a desire to engage in sexual acts. In a societal context where values are being flouted, Nisand [8] invites the entire educational community to ask itself the following question: what should we transmit to our young people?

##### **(ii). Education for Life and Love in Schools**

In Cameroon's school curricula, there is a subject entitled Education for Life and Love (EAL) from the sixth grade. The rationale is to promote the sexual health of young adolescents. In the same vein, Houndjo [9] believes that sexuality education is a guarantee of development for adolescents,

even if it is not always easy to take the step. This approach to education raises many questions among adolescents, which unfortunately do not find favour with their parents. The short-term consequence is that they seek solutions from friends.

### **5.1.2. Functional Constraints**

#### **(i). Social Representations of Sexuality**

For the heads of the family, sexuality must be done in a mature way, because it cannot be done anywhere, in any way, and with anyone, one does not play with sex, because it is a sacred thing, it must be respected and one must have sound knowledge. Adolescents should not learn anything about sex; rather, they should learn about sex in marriage. Because it is forbidden to talk about sexuality with children and it is a subject that cannot be talked about in any way, anywhere and with anyone, and therefore it is a taboo subject. On the other hand, Mossi [10] makes us understand that the lack of information and dialogue on sexuality can have serious consequences for young people. Other teenagers say that it is a difficult subject to discuss with parents and the teenager lacks the courage to approach his parents to discuss it with my parents and it is the adults who talk about it and the conversation takes place in a very specific place. In the opposite sense, Guene [11] tells us that, in the context of the parent-child dialogue on sexual and reproductive health, she continues, parents are called upon to familiarise themselves with the characteristics of their children and to take them into account. They must learn to know and treat children with respect and consideration worthy of a human being.

In the culture of the Eastern Region, sexuality is only talked about with adults, because children are still small, it is from the moment he becomes a man, that he is responsible that we talk about it with him. On the other hand, Ngandu [12] tells us that Lushu families (from Lumumbashi) who dare to talk openly about sexuality can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Parents and children are ashamed of such a subject and hardly talk about it. This situation has the effect of opening a gap for young people to trust instruction from the street. The family, which is the cell par excellence of preparation for adult life, does not play this primary role. The fear of parents is that if they talk to their children about sex or sexuality, they lose the authority they have over them.

#### **(ii). Culturally Embedded Data**

The subject of sexuality should not be discussed with adolescents, as it is a waste of time because it is something that is not easily shared with adolescents given that it is a taboo subject. Even if the parent wants to talk about sexuality with the adolescent, he or she still has to look for a coded language. In Burkina Faso, however, only 14% of girls and 8% of boys talk about sexuality with their parents, the proportions being about the same for discussions with other family members [2]. A study in the Democratic Republic of Congo shows that in seeking sexual and reproductive health information, medical personnel, religious leaders and teachers are far preferred to parents [13]. Peer influence can

increase exposure to risky behaviours.

From the data collected, we noted a communication ban from parents on sexuality. In order for individuals to limit risks or change their behaviour, they also need to develop specific skills and feel supported by the environment. Lack of information and dialogue about sexuality can have serious consequences for young people [9]. The existing literature therefore tends to show that sexual risk-taking by adolescents is primarily due to a lack of sexual education, although other factors are also at play. Other teenagers say that it is a difficult subject to discuss with parents and the teenager lacks the courage to approach his parents to discuss it with my parents and it is the adults who talk about it and the conversation takes place in a very specific place. In the same sense, the sociologist Guene [11] tells us that, in the context of the parent-child dialogue on sexual and reproductive health, she continues, parents are called upon to familiarise themselves with the characteristics of their children and to take them into account. They must learn to know and treat children with respect and consideration worthy of a human being. Every adult responsible for the education of children must know that the child is not a miniature adult. The child is a developing being with a personality of its own.

### **5.2. Strategies for Integrating the Permitted and the Prohibited**

#### **5.2.1. Debate of Convenience, Because There Is No Appropriate Space**

According to the data collected, support is convenient in the sense that sexuality is discussed in the home during a favourable situation, such as a TV series, a commercial or a star appearance. Parents very often jump on these occasions to pass on the message about sexuality. This message is sometimes not very precise, oriented towards a position simply to provoke a debate. Despite this, dialogue is not always easy.

#### **5.2.2. Sexuality as a Space for Insiders**

Some adolescents find it difficult to discuss sexuality with parents, as it is a contextual subject, which is either forbidden to young people or allowed to adults.

In some cultures, sexuality is only discussed with adults, because adolescents are still young, and it is only when they become men, when they are responsible, that sexuality is discussed with them. But it is up to the parents to often slip certain words to the teenagers when they walk together. If a girl is getting married at the age of 14, she is already responsible and can be talked to about sex.

On the other hand, Mariam [14] tells us that Lushu families (from Lumumbashi) who dare to talk openly about sexuality can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Parents and children are ashamed of such a subject and hardly talk about it. This situation has the effect of opening a gap for young people to trust instruction from the street. The family, which is the cell par excellence of preparation for adult life, does not play this primary role. The fear of parents is that, if they talk to their children about sex or sexuality, they will

lose the authority they have over them. In the theory of social representations written by Moscovisi in 1961 the mental elements that are formed by our actions and that inform our actions and subsequently allow us to construct a common meaning.

### 5.2.3. Lack of Appropriate Support Techniques

With teenagers is a bit strange, and it is reserved only for adults and those who are in marriage. In the same idea, a study conducted by Snegroff [15] makes us understand that, although many parents realise the importance of educating their children about sexuality, many of them are unable to approach the subject comfortably. In addition, lack of knowledge about sex education is also thought to play a very important role in the lack of sexual communication between parents and adolescents. The participatory research conducted by FCI [16], states that parents feel that they do not have accurate information and that they lack an appropriate method to address this topic. As communication is described above as the most important element of education, the scarcity of communication on sex education is evidence of the lack of sex education for adolescents in the NDOGPASSI II neighbourhood. In addition, some parents present their discomfort by saying they are concerned about how their children would feel about discussing sex with them. Parents who are unwilling or unable to discuss this important and sensitive part of life with their children present sexuality negatively and as a taboo rather than as a natural part of being human.

## 6. Conclusion

The study focuses on the education of sexuality in adolescents, between the forbidden and the permitted. It shows that sex education for adolescents remains a public health problem because, despite the efforts of the government and non-governmental organisations, the lack or inadequacy of sex education for children continues to cause havoc (abortions, early pregnancies, STIs). For this reason, we propose to analyse the sexuality education of adolescents, between the forbidden and the permitted in the NDOGPASSI II neighbourhood. To do this, we asked ourselves the following research question: How do heads of households and adolescents integrate the forbidden and the permitted in the sexuality education of adolescents?

Methodologically, we carried out qualitative research using a clinical method, conducted over a period of two months. Data collection was carried out using an interview guide with thirteen (13) heads of household and ten (10) adolescents.

The results of this study for both the heads of household and the adolescents allowed us to analyse sexuality education between the prohibited and the permitted. To do this, we have highlighted the constraints (structural and functional) on the education of adolescents about sexuality and also the strategies for integrating the permitted and the forbidden in the education of adolescents about sexuality (the debate of

convenience, sexuality as a space reserved for insiders, absent communication techniques).

Our study took place only in the littoral region in the city of Douala and not in all regions of Cameroon. This study would have had more impact if it had been conducted in all regions of Cameroon. To this end, we propose to carry out a similar large-scale study in all regions. At the end of this work, we are far from feeling a sense of total satisfaction, as we recognise that some aspects of our research have been overlooked and could be the subject of future investigations. The results of our work constitute an additional contribution to the efforts made so far by the Cameroonian government for better education on child sexuality.

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