

**Title:** Vulnerability of Young Mothers to HIV/AIDS: The Case of Kassena-Nankana District of Northern Ghana

**Authors:** Fabian S. Achana , Cornelius Debpuur, Patricia Akweongo, John Cleland, Martine Collumbien

**Institution:** Navrongo Health Research Centre, Upper East Region, Navrongo, Ghana

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**Objectives:** The objective of this study was to explore the personal and social context in which sexual activity among young mothers and their husbands take place in the Kassena-Nankana district and to examine the way traditional sexual culture influences exposure to HIV/AIDS.

**Design:** We used a qualitative study that draws on interpretative principles with emphasis on “un-packing” and understanding young mother’s views, the role of social and cultural rules and expectations in determining women’s sexual conduct and vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. Twenty nine young mothers in their mid twenties to early thirties (22-30 years) were purposively selected for **repeated semi-structured interviews**. These women were visited on **average, two** times to build sufficient rapport and to enable them to talk about their sexual lives and reproductive health choices. Similar fourteen interviews were conducted with men married to young mothers to understand how men integrate alternative meanings in sexual decision-making. We also conducted five **group interviews with mother in-laws** to elicit their views on their role of sustaining marital relations and how these traditional structures expose young mothers to the risk of HIV/AIDS.

**Analysis:** The interviews were tape recorded, transcribed and analysed. We used the QSR Nvivo qualitative software to organize and manage the data for analysis. A pragmatic mix of methods of analyses was utilised, starting with thematic content analysis, coding and categorising common and recurrent themes. Interpretation of the results was done by comparing within and between cases as well as relating results to findings of other studies. By comparing and contrasting the individual and group accounts of different informants, we built a picture of underlying cultural categories that structure the individual ways of interpreting and representing concepts such as ‘risk’ and ‘protection’.

**Results:** Young mothers in this study setting are confronted with complex realities, as childbearing obligations require women to prove their fertility making protective sexual intercourse less optional. Among the Kassena-Nankana, male extramarital sexual intercourse is condoned and less assertive young mothers succumb to these cultural practices with least resistance. However, more assertive young mothers are exploiting preventive sexual practices such as modern contraceptives as a safe net to reduce men’s extramarital affairs during post-partum. More assertive women especially those with higher formal education are increasingly defy existing cultural sexual norms that regulate sexual activity in marriage and insist their husbands use condom where they perceive themselves at risk

**Conclusion:** The results suggest that women are capable and are making decisions and taking viable actions to protect themselves against risk of pregnancy and diseases. Indeed, risk both perceived and real, vests power in women to demand safe sexual conduct from

men. Vigorous HIV/AIDS educational campaigns on protective measures especially on correct and consistent condom use combined with improved opportunities for formal female education and economic empowerment will greatly enhance women ability to avoid STI/HIV infection and contribute to the attainment of the millennium development goals in Africa.