

STRENGTHENING YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN ABORTION PREVENTION AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH POLICY REFORM

**Muhammad Kabiru Usman, Philemon Babylon*, Abubakar Salim Aliyu,
Hafsat Yahaya Hayat, Rabiatu Bello Badawaire, Alfred Andrew, Danjuma Gideon Matthew**

Gongola Health and Development Initiative, Jalingo, Taraba State, Nigeria

Abstract

Unsafe abortion remains a major public health problem in Nigeria and a major contributor to maternal morbidity and mortality among adolescents and young people. However, many young Nigerians are still facing problems on reproduction health despite all the efforts being made to improve their reproductive health, including lack of reproductive health knowledge, lack of access to youth-friendly services, poverty, stigma, gender inequality, and lack of participation in policy making processes. These factors make it more likely for a woman to become pregnant and risk unsafe abortions. This policy brief calls for more effective youth engagement in reproductive health policy reform, by identifying young people as active members of the community, peer educators and actors in policy implementation. The short makes the case for effective youth engagement in the goal of raising reproductive health awareness, improving community acceptance of prevention programmes, increasing access to reproductive health services and reducing unintended pregnancies and associated complications from unsafe abortions. In addition, it recommends policy changes that will institutionalize the involvement of children and adolescents, enhance reproductive health education, increase youth-friendly services, and encourage youth-led advocacy efforts, as part of an integrated policy framework to improve reproductive health in Nigeria.

Keywords: Youth Participation, Reproductive Health Policy, Abortion Prevention, Adolescent and Youth Advocacy

1. Introduction

Reproductive health is still a key area of public health and sustainable development in Nigeria. While there are significant gains and developments in access to reproductive health services and information, many adolescent and young people still face serious difficulties which impact negatively on their health and wellbeing. Unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortion, sexually transmitted infections, gender-based violence, and poor access to reproductive health services are among these issues. The issues facing these young people are exacerbated by their social, economic and developmental contexts (Sedgh et al., 2015; Izugbara et al., 2017). Research indicates that even though access to sexual and reproductive health information and youth-friendly health services have improved, the information is not always accurate, and social norms and stigma are not necessarily favorable for adolescents and young adults in developing countries, and poverty limits opportunities for them to receive high-quality health services (Chandra-Mouli et al., 2015; Hindin et al., 2016).

As a nation, Nigeria has one of the highest youth populations in Africa, and youth engagement is a key element in the success of public health interventions. Although young people are the main beneficiaries of reproductive health programmes, they are rarely engaged in policy processes to design, implement, or monitor their programme activities (Villa-Torres & Svanemyr, 2015; Mmari et al., 2018). Policies are often created for young people, but do not include their experiences, perspectives, and recommendations. Consequently, certain interventions do not acknowledge the realities and challenges of adolescents and youths in the various social and cultural contexts in which they live (Alukagberie et al., 2023; Obiezu-Umeh et al., 2021). Meaningful youth participation has been shown to increase

*Corresponding Author: Philemon Babylon, PhD
Email Address: pheelbylon@gmail.com

programme relevance, boost the effectiveness of the programmes, and increase acceptance and utilization of reproductive health services by youth (Patton et al., 2016; Oliver et al., 2022).

The importance of youth participation in reproductive health and sustainable development is gaining traction globally, as a right and good practice (Patton et al., 2016). Youth can be good sources of information about issues that matter to them and can be more successful in conveying reproductive health messages through their social circles (Villa-Torres & Svanemyr, 2015). Their participation can help to make a programme more relevant, ensure greater community ownership, improve service uptake, and bolster the sustainability of interventions (Chandra-Mouli et al., 2015; Mmari et al., 2018). The evidence suggests that youth led reproductive health advocacy helps to raise awareness, better health seeking behaviour and acceptance of prevention among adolescents and young adults (Oliver et al., 2022; Hindin et al., 2016). The enhancement of youth involvement in reproductive health policy reform is thus an important opportunity to decrease unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions and better reproductive health outcomes among Nigerian youth (Izugbara et al., 2017; Obiezu-Umeh et al., 2021).

2. Policy Context

There are a number of policies and strategic frameworks that have been developed in Nigeria to enhance reproductive health and ensure the wellbeing of adolescents and young people. These include the National Reproductive Health Policy, the National Adolescent and Youth Health Policy, the National Strategic Health Development Plan, the Family Planning Blueprint, the National Gender Policy and the Child Rights Act. These frameworks offer a platform for addressing reproductive health issues and enhancing access to reproductive health services for those at risk.

These policies acknowledge the need to address youth development and reproductive health promotion but there are still barriers in many communities to implementation. Lack of institutionalisation of youth participation in reproductive health governance structures in particular. Youth participation is often limited to the programme implementation phase and not throughout the policy cycle. This limited participation diminishes the chances for youth to give voice to their thoughts and experiences in designing interventions that impact them directly.

Additionally, barriers remain for young people accessing reproductive health information and services. Often, open conversation about sexuality and reproductive health is not encouraged in the culture and stigma against the use of reproductive health services deters many adolescents from seeking help. Lack of safe spaces for youth, concerns regarding confidentiality, and lack of awareness of services are other factors that affect poor health seeking behaviour among youth. The challenges noted above underscore the need to reform policies to go beyond provision of services to meaningful youth engagement as a key element of reproductive health governance and programmes.

3. Problem Statement

Unsafe abortions and unwanted pregnancies continue to be public health problems for Nigeria's young population. This is largely due to the lack of precise and complete information on reproductive health. Adolescents often access information about their reproductive health from peers, social media or from informal sources, and often receive misinformation and misconceptions that impact their decision making. Young people will be at a higher risk of engaging in risky behaviors that will put them at risk for unwanted pregnancies and health issues if they don't have the knowledge and guidance.

Access to and availability of youth-friendly reproductive health services is also poor in various parts of the country. Adolescents often voice privacy issues, provider negative attitudes, and fear of stigma as barriers to seeking reproductive health services. These barriers prevent the use of services and can make it more likely for adolescents to delay or refuse health care services.

These are exacerbated by social and cultural factors. Sexuality and sexual health topics are often sensitive and taboo in many communities, hindering young people's access to accurate information from trusted sources. Gender inequality also contributes to vulnerability to poor reproductive health outcomes, as do poverty, low levels of education and social pressures. For many adolescents, these factors combine with other factors to make pregnancy more likely and unsafe abortions more likely.

One challenge which is often understated and underestimated is the lack of youth participation in reproductive health policy and programme design and implementation. Although youth are the group most impacted by reproductive health challenges, they are least likely to have meaningful opportunities to engage in decision making processes. This exclusion will make interventions less effective and restrict the impact that the youth could have in supporting their community's reproductive health issues. Increasing the involvement of youth is thus an imperative policy requirement

and an opportunity for enhancing the possibilities of reproductive health outcomes and sustainable public health development in Nigeria.

4. Rationale for Strengthening Youth Participation in Reproductive Health Policy Reform

Involving young people in reproductive health policy reform is increasingly known to be a key strategy to enhance health outcomes and to advance sustainable development. Youth in Nigeria are a large population and are one of the most affected groups by reproductive health issues, such as unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, unsafe abortions, gender-based violence, and poor access to health care services for reproductive health. These issues are issues that affect the lives of young people and therefore they have a unique perspective which can make a significant contribution to the development of effective and responsive policies.

Effective youth involvement helps policy makers and programme implementers to gain insight into the lives of young people and adolescents. Youth more likely to know who the people are they see as role models, what is being conveyed to them, and what they are missing. Their experiences can therefore contribute to the design and implementation of reproductive health interventions, making programmes relevant, accepted and accessible to intended beneficiaries.

Youth engagement also contributes to the sense of community ownership of reproductive health programmes. Active participation in advocacy, awareness creation and policy implementation brings youth to the fore as active stakeholders and not passive beneficiaries. This 'feeling ownership' helps to foster programme loyalty and boosts community retention of behaviour change. Peers tend to communicate better with each other because they have similar social environments, language and experiences. This results in interventions being more accepted and engaged with by target groups, and often by youth themselves.

In addition, young people's participation in policymaking encourages democratic governance and social inclusion. Youth who participate in the process can acquire leadership skills, advocacy skills, and civic responsibility and contribute to the nation's growth. It also increases accountability, through the use of policies that take account of the needs and priorities of the population they are designed to serve. On the issue of reproductive health, youth participation can play a major role in reducing unintended pregnancies, encouraging responsible decision making, improve access to services and safe abortion.

5. Policy Goal

This policy reform programme aims to increase the involvement of youth in the development, implementation, advocacy and monitoring of reproductive health policies, and enhance their knowledge of reproductive health and their responsible reproductive health behaviours in Nigeria, with a particular focus on reducing unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortions.

This objective aims to engage youth as active collaborators in reproductive health governance and improve their ability to be community advocates, peer educators, and positive social change agents. Nigeria can achieve better reproductive health outcomes and help to promote overall national development through the development of supportive policy environments that will foster meaningful youth engagement.

Strategic Objectives

The first strategic goal is to embed effective youth engagement in reproductive health policy development, deployment and monitoring at national, state and local government levels. This objective acknowledges the need to engage young people in the policy cycle, beyond programme implementation to help create sustainable policy reform.

The second is to enhance access to quality, evidence-based, age-sensitive reproductive health information for adolescents and youth. Increasing reproductive health literacy will help youth to make informed choices around their reproductive health and wellbeing and minimise the impact of misinformation and harmful myths.

The third goal is to increase the opportunity for all young people to access affordable, confidential, accessible and responsive youth-friendly reproductive health services. Enhancing service delivery is key to closing barriers to adolescent reproductive health service utilization.

The fourth goal is to increase youth advocacy, community involvement and peer education efforts to reduce unintended pregnancies and encourage responsible reproductive health practices. This goal focuses on the need for the use of youth networks and peer influence as a tool for positive behavioural change.

The fifth objective is to improve inter-agency cooperation between the government, educational institutions, health, civil society, community, religious and youth institutions and organizations in order to successful implementation of reproductive health interventions and policy change.

6. Methodology

Qualitative data was gathered through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with adolescents and youth; community, religious, traditional, healthcare, educative, youth organization, civil society and government stakeholders with experience in reproductive health and youth development and policy implementation. The purposive sampling approach was utilized to recruit individuals who had knowledge and experience about reproductive health issues, youth involvement, community development and policy reform. Semi-structured interview and discussion guides were used to enable in-depth discussions about reproductive health education, unintended pregnancies, access to reproductive health services, youth's participation in policy processes, barriers to youth's participation, and opportunities for policy reform.

Face-to-face interviews and focus group discussion were used to collect data at selected communities in Taraba state, Nigeria. The data gotten was meticulously recorded and analyzed with thematic content analysis. Responses were reviewed, coded and clustered into thematic categories of reproductive health knowledge, access to services, community influences, youth participation, policy gaps, and policy recommendations for change. The findings were cross-checked among the stakeholder groups to look for common themes and areas of agreement. Existing literature, national reproductive health policies, and international best practices on youth participation and reproductive health promotion were used to gain additional insights. The evidence generated as a result, is the foundation of the policy recommendations in this report.

7. Proposed Policy Reforms

One of the major policy reforms suggested is the formal representation of youth in the decision-making processes of the reproductive health system at all levels of government. The youth representatives should be members of advisory committees, policy review panels, technical working groups and programme monitoring team. This should be represented in a structured, inclusive and well guided manner in order to achieve meaningful participation instead of symbolic involvement.

Yet another area of reform that is important is the inclusion of integrated comprehensive reproductive health education in school and community-based learning programmes. The educational interventions should be well-researched and contain accurate information regarding human development, reproductive health, healthy relationships, family planning, STI prevention, and responsible decision-making for youth. Such programmes should be culturally sensitive and be based on evidence and scientific facts.

Awareness creation and policy changes should also focus on increasing youth-friendly reproductive health services at primary health care facilities, schools and community health centres. Provide confidential mechanisms for health services to provide services, ensuring privacy and reducing stigma and discrimination among young people seeking services at health facilities. Healthcare workers need targeted training to build their ability to deliver non-judgemental and respectful care to adolescents and young adults.

Furthermore, Government should create specific funding arrangements for youth reproductive health initiatives. Many youth organizations have innovative concepts and community connections but are not able to find the resources to implement interventions that can be sustained. Capacity building programmes for youth-led organizations, innovation funds and establishing grants would enhance the reach and the community-based advocacy.

The policy framework should also support the creation of Youth Reproductive Health Advocacy Networks at the community, local government, state and national level. These networks would enable young people to share knowledge and information with government institutions, the healthcare sector, civil society and development partners. Youth networks can be involved in awareness creation, policy dialogue, community mobilisation and programme monitoring through coordinated advocacy.

A second key reform is to improve the involvement of parents and communities in the education of reproductive health. Demonstrate support for parents, religious, traditional, teachers and community stakeholders to engage in constructive dialogues on issues of reproductive health. Communication in the home and community can help to reduce misconceptions, stigma and provide supportive environments to encourage healthy behaviors for youth.

Digital technologies and social media must also be part of reproductive health promotion strategies. Digital platforms are growingly becoming a source of information and communication for youth. Government and development partners should thus fund youth-led digital campaigns, online learning materials, interactive platforms, and social media advocacy programs that deliver accurate reproductive health information and foster healthy behaviours.

Last but not least, policy modification should create monitoring and accountability systems to measure the effectiveness and quality of involving young people in reproductive health programmes. Indicators measuring the extent of representation, engagement, leadership and contribution of young people to policy outcomes should be established. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation will support meaningful, impactful, and national-reproductive-health-relevant youth engagement.

8. Implementation Framework

To ensure the effective implementation of policy reform for reproductive health that is child-friendly, a collaborative effort from multiple sectors and multiple partners is needed, from the government and development partners to civil society organizations, educational institutions and health care providers to youth organizations and community structures. The implementation should be based on the principles of inclusiveness, accountability, equity, sustainability and evidence-based decision-making.

At the national level, the strategic leadership, policy guidance, resource mobilization and oversight are to be given by the relevant government ministries, departments and agencies. National reproductive health programs should incorporate indicators related to youth involvement into planning, implementation and evaluation procedures. Current reproductive health policies need to be evaluated periodically to make sure that emerging needs and priorities are being met.

Implementation structures should be put in place at the state and local levels to enable youth to participate in planning, programme delivery, monitoring and advocacy activities. Local implementation mechanisms need to be developed to reflect community realities and ensure they are in keeping with national policy objectives. State and local governments should provide forums for youth to actively engage in youth and reproductive health-related conversations.

Collaboration between youth groups, the health care sector, schools, traditional institutions, religious groups, women's organizations and civil society organizations (CSOs) should be emphasized in community-based implementation. Community engagement strategies should promote dialogue, enhance social support networks, challenge harmful norms and promote positive reproductive health behaviours. There is a need to pay particular attention to marginalized and underserved groups such as rural youth, out-of-school adolescents, young women, persons with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups.

Capacity building activities need to be woven throughout implementation. Youth advocates need to be trained in leadership, communication, policy engagement, peer education, community mobilization, programme planning,

monitoring and evaluation and digital advocacy. They should be continuously mentored and supported to enhance their capacity as reproductive health champions in their communities.

9. Stakeholder Roles and Responsibilities

Government institutions should have primary responsibility for the development of enabling policy environments for youth participation in reproductive health governance. They are involved in policy making, resource allocation, co-ordination of programmes, regulation and monitoring implementation activities. To further encourage collaboration between stakeholders and to keep youth participation a key element of reproductive health programmes, government agencies should play a facilitating role. The role of healthcare providers in providing quality RH services to young people is very important. They are tasked with delivering youth-friendly services, confidential services, health education events, collaborating on referrals and working on community outreach initiatives. Health practitioners also have a vital role to play in capacity building through technical assistance to youth advocacy and community-based projects.

Schools play an important role in the promotion of reproductive health and empowerment of youth. All schools, colleges and universities should incorporate age-appropriate sex education into learning activities and encourage peer education programmes, youth clubs and awareness campaigns. Educational institutions can also serve as safe spaces for youth to talk about sexual health matters and build leadership skills. Technical assistance, financial support, research evidence, advocacy and programme implementation support should be provided by civil society organisations and development partners. These can engage youth, bolster community mobilization initiatives and play a role in policy dialogue at multiple governance levels.

Traditional and religious leaders have a high degree of influence in communities and hence an important role to play in influencing attitudes and behaviours. Their participation can help build the acceptability of reproductive health programmes within the community, decrease stigma, build positive social norms, and facilitate dialogue about sensitive reproductive health issues. It is especially crucial that they are involved in tackling the cultural and religious misunderstandings which can impede access to reproductive health information and services. Youth organizations and youth advocates are at the heart of this youth policy reform. Their work ranges from peer education programmes, attending policy discussions, to community mobilization, advocacy for reproductive health rights, awareness campaigns and programme monitoring and evaluation. Young people must be seen as partners (not beneficiaries) in the attainment of reproductive health goals.

10. Expected Outcomes

With the rollout of these policy changes, there are expected to be substantial changes in reproductive health outcomes for youth in Nigeria. The desired impact is to have more young people involved in reproductive health policy-making, implementation and monitoring. Youth will have more opportunities to be involved in decisions that impact their health and wellbeing through institutionalized participation mechanisms. Better adolescent/youth reproductive health literacy is a desired outcome, too. Better access to accurate information will help young people to make informed decisions about relationships, sexuality, family planning and health-seeking behaviours. This enhanced knowledge is anticipated to help improve the health of individuals and their susceptibility to reproductive health risks.

The reforms are also likely to improve access to and uptake of youth friendly reproductive health services. More young people will reach out for reproductive health information and health service support when they need it, as confidentiality will be improved, stigma will be reduced and service will be enhanced. As awareness, education and service access improves, there is expected to be a decrease in unintended pregnancies among adolescent and young people. This decrease is likely to help reduce unsafe abortion practices and abortion-related health problems. Enhancement of reproductive health outcomes will also help to lower maternal morbidity and mortality among young women. The policy reforms will also enhance the support provided for reproductive health programmes in the communities and, as a result, improve the involvement of stakeholders, communication and partnership between the

government, health care providers, educational institutions, civil society and community leaders. These integrated activities will also be useful for sustainability of the reproductive health interventions and the public health systems.

11. Monitoring and Evaluation Framework

Monitoring and evaluation are central elements in effective implementation and accountability of policies. An extensive monitoring system should be put in place to measure progress against policy goals and to chart out those areas that need improvement. Monitoring systems need to include both quantitative and qualitative measures to record all programme outcomes and impacts. Key indicators should capture the level of youth engagement in policy and programme structures such as the number of youth representatives in advisory committees, technical working groups and community health platforms. Other metrics should measure involvement in training programs, advocacy efforts and community mobilization efforts.

Reproductive health knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours indicators should be closely tracked regularly, as well. Surveys and assessments can be used to track reproductive health literacy, health services awareness, health-seeking behaviours and attitudes towards reproductive health problems. Monitoring data for reproductive health use among adolescents and youth should be gathered. Additional reproductive health outcomes like unintended pregnancy, family planning services use, maternal health metrics, and complications of abortions should also be monitored through monitoring systems. This information will guide policymakers in assessing the impact of interventions and in making future policy decisions. Youth need to be engaged in monitoring and evaluation activities. Their participation can enhance data quality, accountability, and incorporate youth perspectives and experiences in programme evaluations. Stakeholder review meetings to consider findings, lessons learned and plans for continuous improvement should be held regularly.

12. Conclusion

Increasing the participation of the youth in the creation of abortion and reproductive health policies is good investment of Nigeria's public health investments in the future. Young people play a key role in driving social and behavioural change in their communities and are also beneficiaries of reproductive health programmes. They can play a crucial role in the effectiveness, relevance and sustainability of reproductive health interventions through their role in policy development, implementation, advocacy, and monitoring. Service provision and policy development without youth participation is not enough to deal with challenges related to unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortion. To make sustainable progress it is necessary to involve young people in decision-making processes, extend reproductive health education, increase access to youth-friendly services and set up enabling environments for responsible choices in reproductive health. Nigeria, through institutionalization of youth participation, partnership building among stakeholders, and investing on youth leadership development, can develop a more responsive reproductive health system that will promote adolescents' wellbeing. These reforms will help to enhance health outcomes and will also support other aspects of social development, gender equality and national development.

13. Policy Recommendations

Youth should be formally institutionalized at national, state and local governance levels in reproductive health policy and programmes to facilitate meaningful and sustainable change. Youth should be involved in all stages of the policy cycle – planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

Reproductive health education should be extended, particularly in schools, communities and media to increase the reproductive health literacy of adolescents and youth in a comprehensive and age-appropriate manner. Education programs must be evidence based, culturally responsive, and available to youth of all backgrounds.

Improving confidentiality, training providers, increasing availability of services and outreach to the community should be emphasized in youth-friendly reproductive health services. Healthcare systems should implement strategies to promote willingness to engage in care among adolescents and young adults without fear of stigma or discrimination.

There is a need to create sustainable funding opportunities for youth-led reproductive health advocacy, peer education, and community engagement programs, among others, by both government and development partners. Youth

leadership development will enhance the ability of youth to play a meaningful role in reproductive health improvement.

Coordination and community ownership of reproductive health programmes should be encouraged through better partnerships between government institutions, healthcare providers and educational institutions, civil society organisations, traditional leaders, religious leaders, parents and youth groups.

Lastly, there needs to be good monitoring and accountability systems in place to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of youth engagement in reproductive health policy implementation. Ongoing policy development and improvement should be based on regular assessment and evidence-based learning, while also keeping the voice of youth at the heart of the policy reform process in Nigeria.

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