

# Motivation for First Sex

## Agency, Consent, and Coercion: Young People's Experiences of First Sex in Ashanti and Northern Regions, Ghana (QRS24)

### An Analysis Brief from The DHS Program

#### Why study the motivations that lead young people to have sex for the first time in Ghana?

Having sex for the first time is often viewed as a personal milestone. There are many factors a person considers when making this decision, which affect a person's motivations around sex. This study focuses on the motivations of young people in Ghana to have sex for the first time. This qualitative study interviewed young people in the Ashanti and Northern Regions of Ghana.



#### What are the key results?

**Young people's motivations for first sex vary, from wanting to express love for their partner to curiosity.** Most respondents thought of having sex for the first time as a way to demonstrate love or commitment to their relationship. This was consistent for young people in both regions, married couples, and unmarried, established couples. Married women also spoke of several motivations at the time of first sex, including the expectation of sex within marriage and starting a family. Some respondents also spoke of their interest in exploring their own sexual desires.

**Many young people in established relationships, particularly young men, believed having sex for the first time would show commitment to their partner.** About 80% of respondents had sex for the first time while in established relationships. Many unmarried young women, particularly those in the Northern Region, believed that having first sex was a sign of love and an indication of future marriage with their partner. Young

people who experienced high coercion often described first sex as necessary to "prove" their love, or as a "test" by their partner, and implied that if they did not sex, the relationship would either end or there would be another negative consequence. Coercion is defined as the lack of choice to pursue other options to avoid sex without severe social or physical consequences. In general, married women felt that they had to have sex with their husbands to show commitment to the marriage.

*Interviewer: So what really motivated you and you had sex with her? You could have chosen a different girl, but you chose [partner's name].*

*Respondent: At that time, she was the one I loved and had intentions for. And she also wanted to get married to me.*

- 20 year old man, rural area, Northern Region



**Young people generally fall into three groups regarding pregnancy at first sex: those who feared becoming pregnant, those who wanted to get pregnant, and those who did not think about the risk of pregnancy.** Most respondents reported a fear of pregnancy at first sex, particularly young people whose first sex was with non-married partners or non-partners. Young men were concerned about the financial and personal responsibilities of getting someone pregnant. Young women spoke of the negative consequences they would face if they were to become pregnant, such as a delay in their education, difficulties taking care of themselves and a baby, and stigma from their communities. Some women mentioned that when they expressed these fears to their partners, their concerns were not taken seriously. Respondents who experienced high coercion at first sex frequently expressed fear about becoming pregnant.

*Interviewer (I): Now I would like to ask you about the first time you had sex. What were your thoughts about pregnancy then?*

*Respondent (R): Yes I was afraid though.*

*I: You were afraid. So did you tell him you could get pregnant?*

*R: Yes.*

*I: Did he listen to you?*

*R: Yes he said nothing will happen.*

- 19 year old woman, urban area, Ashanti Region

Married women, (all of whom came from the Northern Region in this study), generally wanted to become pregnant at first sex, for reasons such as solidifying a place in the husband’s family, strengthening the relationship, or societal pressure. Some unmarried respondents did not consider the risk of pregnancy at first sex. This unconcern appeared to be from a lack of knowledge about sexual and reproductive health.

*Interviewer (I): Now, we want to talk about contraception and pregnancy. The time you first learnt about sex, what were your thoughts on pregnancy?*

*Respondent (R): I used to pray to God that if He is going to give us a child, it should be a child that is going to be good for both of us.*

*I: So, you wanted to get pregnant?*

*R: Yes, I wanted to get pregnant.*

- 23 year old woman, rural area, Northern Region



**Qualitative Research Studies No. 24 (QRS24)** is a qualitative study embedded within the 2022 Ghana DHS. This study explores themes around young people’s first sexual experience in the Ashanti and Northern Regions of Ghana, their relationships with peers and adults, their partner’s attributes,

relationship type, and coercion. **This brief summarizes chapter four of QRS24** and is in a series of five briefs analyzing the findings of QRS24. To learn about other key findings from this study, read:

- [Overview of QRS24](#)
- [Relationship Context of First Sex](#)
- [Contraceptive Use at First Sex](#)
- [Experiences of Coercion at First Sex](#)

This brief summarizes The DHS Program’s Qualitative Research Studies Report 24, by Kerry LD MacQuarrie, Sara Riese, Jeffrey Edmeades, Peter Takyi Peprah, Priscilla Opoku, Nana Akosua Owusu-Ansah, Emmanuel Boateng, Afra Adomako Kwabiah, Martin Wiredu Agyekum, Frank Kyei-Arthur, and Jones Apawu with funding from The United States Agency for International Development through The DHS Program implemented by ICF. For the full report visit: <https://dhsprogram.com/publications/publication-qrs24-qualitative-research-studies.cfm>. For the 2022 Ghana Demographic and Health Survey, visit: <https://dhsprogram.com/publications/publication-fr387-dhs-final-reports.cfm>.