



Coercion at 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 young people's experience of coercion at first sex in Ghana?

Young people's first sexual experiences take place under a range of conditions – they may be welcome experiences or they may be highly coercive. Coercion is not a “yes” or “no” experience, but instead exists on a continuum, ranging from rape to manipulation and mild pressure. Respondents in this study were grouped into three categories of coercion at first sex.

High coercion means that a young person's first sex included physical force or an attack, threats or severe pressure to have sex, or the respondent reported that they could not refuse sex. Young people who experienced moderate coercion at first sex faced manipulation, moderate pressure, or could only refuse sex with consequences. No or low coercion means both partners wanted to have sex, there were some ambiguous feelings towards sex, or there was mild pressure, but the respondent could refuse sex without consequence. This qualitative study interviewed young people in the Ashanti and Northern Regions of Ghana.

What are the key results?

Experience of coercion at first sex is high. Overall, many respondents, the majority being women, experienced medium coercion at first sex, which does not include physical force or restraint but does include pressure or manipulation. Importantly, many respondents who experienced medium coercion felt they could refuse sex, and many of them did on multiple occasions, however their partners' continued pressure to have sex ultimately wore down many respondents, who yielded to the pressure to have sex for the first time.

Coercion is a gendered experience. Typically in coercive settings at first sex, young men are the perpetrators of coercion while young women are subjects of coercion. This is especially true for the most highly coercive sex. There were several accounts of forcible rape in this study, and more instances in which physical restraint or violence was used. In some cases, forced sex followed a young woman declining the perpetrator's proposal for a relationship. While less common, some men experienced coercion, describing manipulative scenarios, being pressured into having sex, or grappling with ambiguous feelings about sex.

Young women want to have sex, but rarely initiate. Young women in the study expressed a desire for sex. Yet, even when they were interested in having sex, young women rarely initiated sex with their partners.

Defining Coercion

High coercion

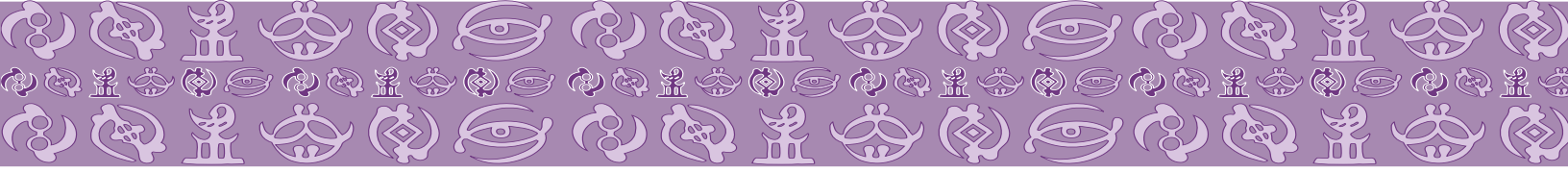
- Physical force or attack
- Severe pressure
- Could not refuse sex

Moderate coercion

- Manipulation
- Moderate pressure
- Could refuse sex only with consequences

No or low coercion

- Wanted to have sex
- Ambiguous feelings
- Modest pressure
- Could refuse sex without consequences



There is a lack of communication about sex, especially around consent. Young people often do not discuss sex before first sex. Importantly, they do not have or use a language around consent. Instead, respondents consistently described the use of non-verbal cues to show interest or intention to have sex. Young men often interpret a lack of active resistance as a sign of consent to have sex.

Young people, particularly young women, desire more agency and autonomy during sex. Young people who experienced coercion at first sex regretted not having control over their sexual experience. Meanwhile, young people who experienced little or no coercion at first sex were satisfied and had more positive reflections on their first sexual experience.

Societal expectations limit young people’s ability to refuse sex. The only married respondents in this study were young women from Northern Region. Even if married respondents did not experience coercion directly, they experienced moderate coercion indirectly in the form of societal expectations (e.g., sex is expected within marriage, a wife should not refuse sex). Unmarried young men in both regions occasionally felt pressured to have sex even if they were not interested, to maintain the social perception of men always being interested in sex.

Peers can contribute to coercive environments at first sex. Friends sometimes create or manipulate situations that make having sex possible, or create the expectation for sex to occur. Respondents described playing group games which led to opportunities for non-partners to interact sexually, or friends arranging situations for a couple to be alone.

Transactional sex was an occasional component in coercive sex. While accounts of purely transactional sex were rare, a social expectation of giving money or gifts as a sign of commitment indirectly sets expectations for sex. Young women received money or gifts from partners, and sometimes experienced coercion.

Respondent (R): That was why I said that he did not take it easy, but later I allowed him.

Interviewer (I): Okay, later you allowed him. Why did you allow him?

R: Okay, I really did not know, but I just gave up.

I: Okay, you just gave up. But I want to know, you did not agree but at a point you just gave in, that is what I want to know why you gave in.

R: I don't really know why.

- 19 year old woman, urban area, Ashanti 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 three 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](#)
- [Motivation for First Sex](#)
- [Contraceptive Use 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>.