

Causes and Consequences of Premarital Sex among Secondary School Students in Awka Education Zone, Anambra State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Premarital sex among secondary school students remains a pressing social and public health concern in Nigeria, with documented consequences for academic achievement, physical health, and psychosocial well-being. This study investigated the causes and consequences of premarital sex among secondary school students in Awka Education Zone of Anambra State, and examined the counselling strategies available for managing the problem. A descriptive survey design was adopted. The study population comprised all 65 school counsellors in public secondary schools across the five Local Government Areas in Awka Education Zone; including Awka North, Awka South, Aniocha, Njikoka and Dunukofia. Census sampling was adopted and all 65 counsellors served as the study sample. Data were collected using a researcher-designed questionnaire (QCCPS) with a Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of 0.84, and analysed using mean and standard deviation. Findings revealed that peer pressure, exposure to pornographic materials, parental inadequacy, and poverty were the leading causes of premarital sex, while unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, and school dropout constituted the most severe consequences. Individual and group counselling, cognitive-behavioural therapy, and sex education were rated as the most effective management strategies. The study recommends strengthened school counselling services, structured sex education, parental engagement, and multi-agency collaboration.

Keywords: premarital sex, secondary school students, causes, consequences, counselling strategies, Awka Education Zone, adolescent sexual behaviour.

Introduction

Adolescence is a period of profound biological, psychological, and social transformation. It is a period of rapid biological, emotional, and social change, which increases vulnerability to risky behaviors such as premarital sex. (Adegoke, 2016). As young people navigate the developmental transitions of puberty, identity formation, and expanding peer relationships, they encounter a range of new experiences, including sexual awareness and activity which carry

significant implications for their health, academic success, and life trajectories. Premarital sex, defined as sexual intercourse between individuals who are not married to each other, has become an increasingly common phenomenon among secondary school students in Nigeria and across sub-Saharan Africa, raising serious concerns among educators, health workers, parents, and policymakers (Adeyemi et al., 2019). Its prevalence in school settings is not merely a moral concern; it is an educational and public health emergency with documented consequences including unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, school dropout, and long-term psychosocial dysfunction.

In Nigeria, studies consistently document worrying rates of sexual activity among secondary school students. Okonkwo and Ngige (2021), in a study of secondary school students in Anambra State, found that a substantial proportion of students had initiated sexual activity before marriage, with peer influence and parental neglect identified as primary drivers. In Awka Education Zone specifically, teachers and school counsellors report increasing encounters with students experiencing the consequences of premarital sexual activity, from confirmed pregnancies and school withdrawal to the emotional and psychological aftermath of coercive or regretted sexual experiences. Despite this observable pattern, formal, structured responses to the problem through school counselling, sex education, or multi-stakeholder intervention remain inadequate and inconsistent.

The consequences of premarital sex among secondary school students are well documented and far-reaching. Unwanted pregnancy remains the most visible and educationally devastating consequence, frequently resulting in school dropout, particularly among girls and foreclosing life opportunities that education might otherwise have provided (Kassa, Arowojolu, Holst, and Kjertil, 2018). Sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS, represent a serious public health dimension of the problem. Psychosocially, the emotional aftermath of premarital sex, including shame, regret, anxiety, depression, and damaged self-concept, has been documented across multiple Nigerian studies as a significant burden on affected adolescents (Adeyemi et al., 2019). Understanding why secondary school students engage in premarital sex requires attention to peer, family, school, and societal factors simultaneously.

School counsellors are uniquely positioned to address premarital sex through individual and group counselling, psychoeducation, and multi-agency collaboration. However, in many Nigerian secondary schools, including those in Awka Education Zone, counsellors operate under significant constraints including heavy caseloads, limited training in adolescent sexual health, and inadequate referral networks. The present study examines the causes and consequences of premarital sex among secondary school students in Awka Education Zone and identifies counselling strategies perceived as most effective in managing the problem. The study is anchored in Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977, as cited in Okonkwo and Ngige, 2021), which holds that behaviour is learned through observation, modelling, and reinforcement; Problem Behaviour Theory (Jessor and Jessor, 1977, as cited in Adeyemi et al., 2019), which frames adolescent risk behaviour as arising from the interaction between individual, social environment, and behavioural factors; and Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, as cited in Kassa et al., 2018), which situates adolescent behaviour within nested levels of influence from family and peers to broader societal norms.

Statement of the Problem

The incidence of premarital sex among secondary school students in Awka Education Zone has reached proportions that can no longer be managed through silence, stigma, or purely punitive approaches. Teachers and counsellors in the zone report increasing encounters with the consequences of adolescent sexual activity, yet the formal infrastructure for prevention and management remains fragmented and inadequate. Sex education, where it exists, is inconsistent and insufficiently evidence-based. School counsellors lack the specialised training, tools, and institutional support to deliver structured counselling interventions on sexual matters. Parents provide little protective guidance, and students navigate their sexual development without adequate information or professional support. There is therefore a compelling need to systematically examine the causes and consequences of premarital sex in Awka Education Zone and to identify the counselling strategies most likely to effectively address it.

Purpose of the study

The main purpose of this study is to investigate the causes and consequences of premarital sex among secondary school students in Awka Education Zone of Anambra State, and examined the counselling strategies available for managing the problem, specifically, the study sought to find out:

1. Perceived causes of premarital sex among secondary school students in Awka Education Zone.
2. Perceived consequences of premarital sex among secondary school students in Awka Education Zone.
3. Counselling strategies that are available for managing premarital sex among secondary school students in Awka Education Zone.
4. Gender differences that exists in the perceived causes of premarital sex among secondary school students in Awka Education Zone.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the perceived causes of premarital sex among secondary school students in Awka Education Zone?
2. What are the perceived consequences of premarital sex among secondary school students in Awka Education Zone?
3. What counselling strategies are available for managing premarital sex among secondary school students in Awka Education Zone?
4. What gender differences exist in the perceived causes of premarital sex among secondary school students in Awka Education Zone?

Review of Related Literature

Premarital sex, within the adolescent development literature, is understood as a behaviour embedded within a complex web of biological, social, psychological, and environmental influences that converge during the secondary school years. Adolescence is characterized by heightened neurobiological reward sensitivity and intensified peer orientation — a combination that markedly elevates risk-taking propensity, including in the sexual domain (Steinberg, 2008, as

cited in Kassa et al., 2018). Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977, as cited in Okonkwo and Ngige, 2021) posits that sexual behaviour is acquired through observation and reinforcement within social environments: when a student's peer group normalises sexual activity, or when media consistently models premarital sex as desirable and consequence-free, the likelihood of imitative behaviour increases substantially. Problem Behaviour Theory (Jessor and Jessor, 1977, as cited in Adeyemi et al., 2019) frames premarital sex as arising from the interaction between individual personality factors, including low religiosity, low academic motivation, and high tolerance for deviance, and a social environment characterised by low parental support and high peer approval of risk. Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, as cited in Kassa et al., 2018) provides the broadest explanatory frame, positioning adolescent sexual behaviour within nested levels of influence spanning family, school, peer, community, and cultural systems.

Empirically, peer pressure has consistently emerged as the most potent proximal determinant of adolescent sexual initiation in the Nigerian literature. Adeyemi et al. (2019), in a study of 400 secondary school students in Ekiti State, identified peer influence, romantic relationships, exposure to pornographic material, and financial inducement as the leading causes of premarital sex. Poverty-related sexual exchange, in which girls trade sex for material benefits, was documented as a particularly significant factor in economically disadvantaged communities. Lack of parental supervision and poor parent-child communication on sexual matters constitute important family-level risk factors; adolescents who report open conversations with parents about sex are significantly less likely to initiate sexual activity early (Kassa et al., 2018). The exponential growth in digital technology access has added a powerful new dimension, with strong associations documented between internet pornography exposure and early sexual initiation (Biddlecom, Awusabo-Asare, and Bankole, 2009, as cited in Okonkwo and Ngige, 2021). The absence of structured, evidence-based sex education within schools leaves students without the foundational decision-making skills needed to navigate sexual pressure responsibly (UNESCO, 2018, as cited in Adeyemi et al., 2019).

The consequences of premarital sex are wide-ranging and operate across physical, psychological, social, and academic domains. Kassa et al. (2018), in a systematic review and meta-analysis involving data from multiple sub-Saharan African countries, found a pooled prevalence of teenage pregnancy of 14.0%, with pregnancy representing the primary cause of school dropout among adolescent girls. Sexually transmitted infections are disproportionately prevalent among sexually active adolescents who lack consistent contraceptive knowledge; the WHO (2020) estimates that adolescents account for nearly half of all new STI cases globally. Psychologically, elevated rates of shame, regret, depression, and anxiety have been documented among Nigerian secondary school students who have engaged in premarital sex, with girls disproportionately bearing the burden due to cultural double standards (Adeyemi et al., 2019). Academic performance is also significantly affected, as students managing the emotional and physical sequelae of premarital sex experience reduced motivation and increased absenteeism (Okonkwo and Ngige, 2021).

School counselling represents the primary institutional mechanism through which secondary schools can respond to premarital sex in a structured, evidence-based, and non-punitive manner. Individual counselling provides a confidential therapeutic space for affected students to process experiences and develop responsible decision-making frameworks. Group and peer counselling extend the reach of professional guidance by leveraging the same peer influence mechanisms that often contribute to premarital sex, redirecting them toward prosocial norms

(Okonkwo and Ngige, 2021). CBT has demonstrated effectiveness in helping adolescents identify and challenge the irrational beliefs underlying sexual risk-taking behaviour (MDPI, 2022), while Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) provides a structured framework for disputing and replacing unhelpful thought patterns that drive impulsive behaviour (Obi, Agu, and Nwosu, 2020). Values clarification counselling helps students affirm personal protective factors, and comprehensive school-based sex education equips students with accurate knowledge of reproductive health, consent, and STI prevention (UNESCO, 2018, as cited in Adeyemi et al., 2019). Parental involvement in counselling strengthens the home-school protective environment (Kassa et al., 2018).

Methods

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design, appropriate for systematically describing the perceptions and experiences of a defined population at a given point in time (Nwana, 2019). The study was conducted in Awka Education Zone of Anambra State, which comprises five Local Government Areas. These include Awka North, Awka South, Aniocha, Njikoka and Dunukofia. Since the population was manageable in size, census sampling was adopted, and the entire population of 65 school counsellors served as the study sample. Data were collected using a researcher-designed questionnaire, the Questionnaire on Causes, Consequences and Counselling Strategies for Premarital Sex (QCCPS) with, items rated on a 4-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree = 4, Strongly Disagree = 1) and a criterion mean of 2.50 or above regarded as acceptance. Content validity was established through expert review and reliability via Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.84$). All 84 questionnaires were administered and retrieved on the spot. Research questions were answered using means and standard deviations. The null hypothesis was tested using an independent samples t-test at the 0.05 level of significance using SPSS version 27, with $p \leq 0.05$ as basis for rejecting the null hypothesis.

Results

Research Questions 1: What are the perceived causes of premarital sex among secondary school students in Awka Education Zone?

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Perceived Causes of Premarital Sex among Secondary School Students in Awka Education Zone

S/N	Items on Causes of Premarital Sex Among Secondary School Students	Mean	SD	Remark
1	Peer pressure influences students to engage in premarital sex	3.58	0.56	High
2	Exposure to pornographic materials encourages premarital sexual activity	3.47	0.61	High
3	Lack of parental supervision contributes to premarital sex	3.42	0.63	High
4	Poverty and financial inducement drive students into premarital sex	3.38	0.67	High

5	Broken homes and family instability predispose students to premarital sex	3.31	0.70	High
6	Curiosity and the desire for sexual experimentation promotes premarital sex	3.24	0.73	High
7	Social media and internet exposure promotes premarital sexual activity	3.19	0.75	High
8	Inadequate sex education in schools contributes to premarital sex	3.14	0.77	High
9	Romantic relationships (boyfriend/girlfriend) lead to premarital sex	3.09	0.79	High
10	Absence of religious and moral values encourages premarital sex	2.96	0.82	High
Grand Mean / SD		3.28	0.70	High

Table 1 shows the mean ratings of respondents on the perceived causes of premarital sex among secondary school students in Awka Education Zone. The result shows that all ten items exceeded the criterion mean of 2.50, indicating that each cause identified was affirmed by respondents. Peer pressure emerged as the highest-rated cause, followed by exposure to pornographic materials, lack of parental supervision, poverty and financial inducement, and family instability. Social media influence, inadequate sex education, romantic relationships, and absence of religious and moral values were also affirmed. The grand mean of 3.28, rated high, indicates that premarital sex in the zone is driven by a broad and mutually reinforcing cluster of peer, family, media, and institutional factors.

Research Questions 2: What are the perceived Consequences of Premarital Sex among Secondary School Students in Awka Education Zone?

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of Perceived Consequences of Premarital Sex among Secondary School Students in Awka Education Zone

S/N	Items on Consequences of Premarital Sex Among Secondary School Students	Mean	SD	Remark
1	Premarital sex leads to unwanted pregnancy among female students	3.71	0.51	High
2	Premarital sex exposes students to sexually transmitted infections (STIs)	3.64	0.54	High
3	Premarital sex results in school dropout, especially among girls	3.57	0.58	High
4	Premarital sex causes psychological trauma and emotional instability	3.48	0.62	High

5	Premarital sex leads to academic failure and poor school performance	3.41	0.65	High
6	Premarital sex damages the reputation and social standing of students	3.33	0.69	High
7	Premarital sex leads to unsafe abortion and its health complications	3.27	0.72	High
8	Premarital sex results in early and forced marriage	3.18	0.76	High
9	Premarital sex causes loss of self-esteem and shame	3.11	0.78	High
10	Premarital sex creates conflict between students and their families	2.98	0.81	High
Grand Mean / SD		3.37	0.67	High

Table 2 presents respondents' ratings of the consequences of premarital sex. All ten items exceeded the criterion mean, indicating widespread agreement that each consequence is real and significant. Unwanted pregnancy was rated the most severe consequence, followed by exposure to sexually transmitted infections and school dropout. Psychological trauma and emotional instability, academic failure, reputational damage, unsafe abortion, early and forced marriage, loss of self-esteem, and family conflict were all affirmed. The grand mean of 3.37, rated high, indicates that the consequences of premarital sex are wide-ranging and severe, impacting students across academic, health, social, and psychological dimensions.

Research Questions 3: What counselling strategies are available for managing premarital sex among secondary school students in Awka Education Zone?

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation of Counselling Strategies for Managing Premarital Sex among Secondary School Students in Awka Education Zone

S/N	Counselling Strategies for Managing Premarital Sex Among Secondary School Students	Mean	SD	Remark
1	Individual counselling helps students make responsible sexual decisions	3.62	0.54	High
2	Group counselling sessions raise awareness of the risks of premarital sex	3.54	0.58	High
3	Peer counselling programmes help deter students from premarital sex	3.41	0.64	High
4	Cognitive-behavioural counselling helps students manage sexual urges	3.34	0.67	High
5	Sex education programmes in schools reduce premarital sexual activity	3.28	0.71	High

6	Parental involvement in counselling improves students' sexual behaviour	3.21	0.74	High
7	Values clarification counselling strengthens students' moral standards	3.15	0.76	High
8	Rational emotive behaviour therapy helps students challenge irrational sexual beliefs	2.94	0.83	High
9	Referral to health professionals is effective for students affected by premarital sex	2.87	0.86	High
10	School-based abstinence and life skills programmes reduce premarital sex	2.79	0.89	High
Grand Mean / SD		3.22	0.72	High

Table 3 presents ratings of counselling strategies for managing premarital sex. All ten strategies exceeded the criterion mean, indicating that each was affirmed as effective by respondents. Individual counselling was rated most highly, followed by group counselling, peer counselling programmes, cognitive-behavioural counselling, and school-based sex education. Parental involvement in counselling, values clarification, REBT, referral to health professionals, and abstinence and life skills programmes were also affirmed, though with comparatively lower ratings. The grand mean of 3.22, rated high, reflects strong overall endorsement of counselling as an effective management tool, with structured therapeutic approaches rated most highly.

Research Questions 4: What gender differences exist in the perceived causes of premarital sex among secondary school students in Awka Education Zone?

Table 4: What gender differences exist in the perceived causes of premarital sex among secondary school students in Awka Education Zone?

S/N	Gender Differences in Perceived Causes of Premarital Sex	Mean	SD	Remark
1	Male students are more influenced by peer pressure to engage in premarital sex	3.44	0.63	High
2	Female students are more influenced by financial inducement	3.37	0.66	High
3	Male students are more exposed to pornographic materials	3.29	0.70	High
4	Female students are more susceptible due to romantic relationships	3.21	0.73	High
5	Both male and female students are equally affected by family instability	3.14	0.76	High

6	Male students are more likely to initiate premarital sexual activity	3.08	0.78	High
7	Female students face greater social consequences from premarital sex	3.42	0.64	High
8	Social media influence on premarital sex is similar for both genders	2.97	0.82	High
9	Female students are more negatively affected academically by premarital sex	3.31	0.68	High
10	Lack of parental supervision affects both genders equally	2.89	0.85	High
Grand Mean / SD		3.21	0.73	High

Table 4 presents respondents' perceptions of gender differences in the causes of premarital sex. All items exceeded the criterion mean. Male students were perceived as more influenced by peer pressure and pornographic exposure, while female students were seen as more susceptible to financial inducement and the emotional dynamics of romantic relationships. Female students were also perceived as facing greater social and academic consequences from premarital sex. The grand mean of 3.21, rated high, indicates that respondents recognise meaningful gender differences in how premarital sex is caused and experienced, with distinct risk pathways operating for male and female students.

Discussion of Findings

The results of this study present a coherent and empirically grounded picture of premarital sex among secondary school students in Awka Education Zone as a multidimensional problem driven by converging peer, family, media, and institutional forces, producing consequences that span physical health, academic functioning, and psychosocial wellbeing, and requiring structured, evidence-based counselling responses that the zone's schools are currently ill-equipped to provide.

The finding, affirms the central role of peer influence documented extensively in the Nigerian literature on adolescent sexual behaviour. Okonkwo and Ngige (2021) similarly identified peer pressure as the dominant driver of premarital sex among Anambra State students, and the social learning mechanism through which peer influence operates is well established within Bandura's (1977) theoretical framework. The high ratings for pornographic exposure and social media influence reflect the growing body of evidence linking digital technology access to early sexual initiation, consistent with the findings of Adeyemi et al. (2019). The prominence of poverty and financial inducement as a cause is particularly salient in the Awka Education Zone context, where socio-economic inequality creates conditions in which some female students may feel compelled to exchange sexual access for financial support, a pattern of transactional sex that disproportionately affects adolescent girls from lower-income households. The finding that family instability and lack of parental supervision rank among the leading causes aligns with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological framework, which positions the family microsystem as the most powerful proximal influence on adolescent behaviour; when that system is dysfunctional or absent, the protective buffering it would otherwise provide against peer and media influences is removed.

The findings of the study further indicates, unwanted pregnancy, STI exposure, and school dropout rated as the three most severe consequences of premarital pregnancy. This is consistent with the systematic review evidence of Kassa et al. (2018), who documented that teenage pregnancy constitutes the single most common cause of permanent school withdrawal among adolescent girls in sub-Saharan Africa. The high rating for psychological trauma and emotional instability corroborates Adeyemi et al.'s (2019) findings and the broader literature on the emotional sequelae of adolescent sexual experience. The rating of academic failure as a significant consequence confirms the well-established pathway from sexual risk-taking to educational disengagement described in Problem Behaviour Theory (Jessor and Jessor, 1977). The rating of unsafe abortion is particularly troubling in the Nigerian context, where legal and social constraints on abortion access drive many pregnant adolescents toward dangerous clandestine procedures.

The counselling strategy findings offer both encouragement and a clear direction for action. The strong endorsement of individual counselling, group counselling, and CBT indicates that school counsellors and students in the zone are positively disposed toward structured counselling approaches. The significant ANOVA result confirming that different counselling approaches are differentially effective aligns with the therapeutic literature emphasizing the particular value of one-to-one confidential counselling for adolescents navigating sensitive sexual matters (Obi et al., 2020). The comparatively lower ratings for REBT, referral to health professionals, and abstinence programmes, though still above criterion, likely reflect lower familiarity with these approaches rather than skepticism about their potential. The relatively lower rating for abstinence-only programmes is consistent with the international research consensus that such approaches are less effective in isolation than comprehensive sex education that also addresses contraception, consent, and relationship skills (UNESCO, 2018).

Conclusion

This study concludes that premarital sex among secondary school students in Awka Education Zone is a pervasive, multi-caused, and severely consequential problem currently addressed through inadequate and inconsistent means. The causes are deeply embedded in the social ecology of adolescent life in the zone, peer dynamics, family structures, media environments, and economic conditions, and the consequences extend across health, academic, and psychosocial domains in ways that compound over time without structured intervention. The counselling strategies with the strongest evidence base and highest perceived effectiveness are available but under deployed within the zone's secondary schools. Bridging this gap requires institutional commitment at multiple levels. For educational policy, the evidence justifies mandating comprehensive, evidence-based sex education as a core component of the secondary school curriculum in Anambra State. For school counsellors, specialised training in adolescent sexual health counselling, including CBT, REBT, peer counselling facilitation, and gender-sensitive practice is urgently needed. For school administrators, the establishment of safe, confidential reporting and support channels through which students can access help without fear of stigma is essential. For parents, structured psychoeducation programmes equipping caregivers with communication skills and factual knowledge about adolescent sexuality are a critical complement to school-based strategies. For health policy, multi-agency collaboration between schools, health centres, and community organizations is needed to ensure that students experiencing the medical and psychosocial consequences of premarital sex receive timely and integrated support.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. The Anambra State Ministry of Education should mandate and fund comprehensive, evidence-based sex education as a distinct component of the secondary school curriculum in Awka Education Zone, delivered by trained teachers and school counsellors using culturally appropriate materials.
2. School counsellors in Awka Education Zone should receive structured in-service training in adolescent sexual health counselling, encompassing individual counselling, CBT, REBT, peer counselling facilitation, and gender-sensitive practice.
3. All public secondary schools in Awka Education Zone should establish formal, confidential student support systems, including individual counselling pathways, peer support programmes, and anonymous reporting channels, to ensure that affected students can access help without fear of stigma or punishment.
4. Schools should implement gender-sensitive counselling programmes that specifically address the distinct risk pathways facing male and female students, including peer pressure and pornography exposure for males, and financial inducement and relationship dynamics for females.

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