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"Schoolage Pregnancy,  
the International scene"

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School age pregnancy - How do we rate on the international scene?

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Summary

An International survey of the legal position regarding consent to intercourse, provision of contraceptives and availability of abortion to the under sixteen age group revealed wide variation in practices and in the role of 'the law'. Inconsistencies and anomalies were widespread as was an ambivalence in attitude towards teenage sexuality in that girls may be regarded as responsible adults, able to leave school and choose their sexual partners while at the same time unable to marry or use contraceptives. Schoolage pregnancy rates revealed falling rates in Northern Europe and rising rates in Southern and Eastern Europe. Greece had exceptionally high rates, rising faster than other European states, while Italy had a very good record of improved contraceptive services and a dramatic fall in pregnancies. The model which we would do well to emulate is that of Sweden where an open approach to schoolage sexuality coupled with excellent family planning services has reduced unwanted pregnancies to the lowest level in Europe.

## Introduction

School age pregnancy has recently become the focus of British public attention. The media have widely publicised the six year controversy over young girls and the 'pill', the so called Gillick dispute. The house of Lords decision on Gillick v West Norwich Health Authority coincided with transmission of a BBC2 documentary, "Schoolgirl Mum", and the soap opera schoolgirl pregnancy of Michelle in 'Eastenders'

Other countries, notably the USA, Canada and Sweden have acknowledged the problem of schoolage pregnancy for some time and have conducted numerous surveys to investigate possible avenues of help for adolescents at risk of early pregnancy. In this country, we have largely ignored schoolgirl mothers perhaps because sexual intercourse under the age of sixteen is 'illegal' and therefore pregnancies under this age 'should not happen'.

How do we compare with other countries in respect of pregnancy rates and to what extent do legal issues influence the situation?

### Data collection

In order to confront this problem, a questionnaire was sent to fifty consulates picked at random from the London telephone directory. Replies were received from 64% and information was obtained from other sources on another 12% thus data was eventually available on 76% of countries, a higher rate than had been expected. Interestingly the first replies, by return of post, came from Saudi Arabia and Israel, two of the least sexually liberal states. Eight countries replied within a week including Sweden, Finland, Turkey, Spain, France and Bulgaria. France provided data on several other states, bringing my total number of researched countries up to 45, and actually supplied more statistics on British births than had been forthcoming from our own official sources! (ref 1)

### School leaving age

School leaving age obviously has an important bearing on the situation. In England secondary school education has only been compulsory for girls up to fifteen since 1944 and the school leaving age was raised to 16 in 1972. Internationally the school leaving age ranges from 17 in the USSR to 12 in Turkey, Venezuela, Mexico and Trinidad. Girls in Saudi Arabia, Jamaica, Kenya, Ghana and Nigeria have even less education since there is no compulsory minimum period of schooling in these countries. In many African countries it varies from one state province to another. (ref 2)

The position in the USA is very complex; the average school leaving age is 16 but girls and boys are able to

leave school as young as 14 in Mississippi while having to stay on until 18 years in California. Infact those children born in Mississippi prior to 1976 are not covered by mandatory attendance reflecting the poor educational prospects of the poorer black community.

#### Marriage and 'Age of consent'

Much controversy exists regarding the 'age of consent'. At what age is a girl deemed capable of consenting to sexual intercourse? There appears to be no general agreement between cultures on this vital point, there is no magical stage at which girls can be regarded as sexually responsible. English Law sets the age of 'consent' at 16 years concurring with 1 in 4 of surveyed states. A further 1 in 4 cited ages older than 16 and the remaining 50% set a lower age level. West Germany does not have a legally laid down 'age of consent' and regards consent to sex as a moral and personal issue rather than a legal one. Wider acceptance of this view would, in my opinion, be helpful. The development of adolescents is by no means uniform and some young girls are certainly emotionally mature and able to make decisions regarding their sexuality when their peers are at a much earlier 'childlike' stage.

In India, Hedaya law (moslem) allows a girl to consent to intercourse from the age of 9 and she may marry at that age. She is however allowed the option of revoking the marriage when she reaches 18 years. For Christian girls in India the age of consent is 18 and for Parsi girls it is higher, at 21. In New Zealand a girl of 12 is deemed capable of consenting

if her sexual partner is younger than herself while in Mexico any girl of 12 is able to consent. The USA has a wide age range; the lowest age of consent is 13 years, perhaps aptly, in Virginia with Wyoming topping the scale at 19 years.

Anomalies are evident in the rulings governing sex, marriage and school leaving. Brazil, presumably as a result of a linguistic error, quoted a minimal age of marriage at 16, with 18 as the age of consent! Does it take two years to consummate a marriage in Brazil or is this a new form of family planning? In Virginia, a girl may consent to sex at thirteen but cannot marry until three years later at which time she still has one further year at school. Is the law thus encouraging premarital sex? Turkey allows 12 year olds to leave school, they presumably then enter the world of adulthood and are exposed to sexual pressures, however they may not marry until 16 with their parents blessing, and cannot choose their own partners until they have reached 18. Such rulings are widespread and make little sense.

In Israel and Saudi Arabia premarital sex is not allowed, hence there is no stated age of consent. Women may only 'consent' to sex with their husbands. Israel allows marriage at 17 and girls leave school at 14, contraception is only available to married couples and abortion is illegal. Saudi has no fixed years of schooling, allows earlier marriage under Moslem law but even after marriage, contraception and abortion are not allowed.

Many people in Britain tend to regard early marriage as a feature of third world countries, however girls of thirteen may marry in New Hampshire (USA) and marriage at 14 is

possible in Australia and some provinces of Canada. In contrast Ghanaian girls may not marry until they are 18.

### Contraception and abortion

How do other cultures view the provision of contraceptive services to young people? Almost two thirds (62%) of nations allow contraception to be provided to under 16s without parental consent. Spain, Turkey and Poland set the limit at 18, Austria and some US states at 19, and Pennsylvania does not allow a girl to obtain contraceptives without parental approval until she is 21. India actively promotes contraception for the young and has very well documented statistical information on family planning services. "Family planning is an essential part of our strategy of enlarging welfare. And we need it not because we are against more children but because we want every child to have the best opportunity possible in life...." Indira Gandhi. (ref 3).

If contraception is not available to the young what fate befalls those who have unprotected sex? How easy is it to obtain an abortion? In Jamaica abortion is only allowed in cases of rape but fortunately contraception is freely available. In Poland, Austria and Turkey under 16s may not have contraception but are allowed abortion, parental consent for which is only required in Turkey. Less fortunate are the young in Spain, Israel and Saudi who have no access to abortion facilities.

### Pregnancy rates

In the decade 1972/1982, rates of schoolage pregnancy have varied from an almost unmeasurably low level in Japan to very high levels in some Arab countries, with the United States of America heading the league of non Arab states. In Japan, the contraceptive pill is not allowed but strong emphasis is placed on use of the condom. Prostitution is accepted and the attitude towards sex is that it is an essential human function and not a moral or legal issue. Adolescent sexual experimentation has been limited as young girls have been closely supervised by their families. The number of births to Japanese 15 year olds in 1972 was only 0.03 per thousand. This number doubled in the next ten years as western influences pervaded Japanese culture, however the rate in Japan is still the lowest in the world.

At the other end of the scale, Tunisia had 46.3 births per thousand 15 year olds in 1972, a similar rate to other arab states and one that has dropped slightly over the following decade.

Rates vary between differing population groups in the same country; for example, in Israel the rate for non-Jewish (ie mainly Arab) Israelis was 9.4/1,000, ten times that of Jewish girls. In India 23% of births in Madras are to teenage (under 20) mothers while only 1.3% of births in Calcutta are to teenagers. The USA has maintained an overall rate of 16-14/1,000 15 year olds but the rate for black American girls has consistently been higher than that for white. In South Africa rates for 'coloured' girls are approximately eight times



that for whites although no figures are available on births to black women. It is estimated that the life expectancy for a black South African woman is 14 years less than for a white woman but that she is likely to have nearly three times as many children and begin childbearing earlier. It is difficult to see how health care can be provided for these young mothers if statistics are not kept regarding their deliveries.

Rates in the 'Old Commonwealth', New Zealand, Australia and Canada, have been relatively high with 1972 levels at 9, 6 and 6 per thousand 15 year olds respectively. Births have fallen in all except Canada where the abortion rate for under 15s fell by 30% causing an upward swing in the birth rate.

The United Kingdom lies between the above level and that of the Scandinavian countries. In 1972 there were 3.9 births per 1,000 15 year olds in the UK, compared to 0.9 in Sweden, 1.3 in Finland and 1.6 in Norway. In ten years, there has been a 31% fall in the UK rates while Sweden has seen a fall of 65% and incidentally also had a fall of 36% in the previous year 1971/72. The Swedish open approach to sexuality and sex education must be admired for helping to bring about this change. The emphasis being "to equip (young people) to experience sexual life as a source of happiness and joy in fellowship with others and to strive for relationships characterised by responsibility, consideration and concern" (Swedish State Commission on Sex Education 1974).

The general picture in Europe has been that schoolgirl pregnancy rates have more than halved in middle and northern Europe, while they have increased in southern and

eastern Europe. The rise in Eastern Europe may partly be accounted for by 'protonatalist' policies, ie governments encouraging childbirth and larger families. (ref 4) A clear example is provided by the two Germanys. The birth rate to 15 year old mothers has fallen by 60% in West Germany while it has risen by 30% in East Germany. High Rates in Southern European countries may be attributed to lower socioeconomic conditions. Generally speaking in Southern Europe the rural communities are poorer and have higher rates of early childbirth, whereas in Northern Europe deprivation ,and schoolgirl pregnancy is a feature of urban life.

There are exceptions to the above 'rule'; Iceland has consistently had a schoolgirl pregnancy rate ten times that of Sweden and rates have barely fallen. Perhaps the long cold winters, high alcohol consumption and lack of entertainment for young people can be blamed for the popularity of sexual pastimes! In contrast young Italian girls have been much more successful at avoiding unwanted childbirth. 1974 saw a peak in births to Italian 15 year olds at 5.5/1,000, at which time the rate for 20 year olds was 95/1,000. Five years later the rate for 15 year olds had fallen to one sixth of the previous level ie 0.9/1,000 (comparable with Swedish rates) while the rate for 20 year olds had fallen by only one sixth, to 77/1,000. Italian girls have become more 'sophisticated', there has been a move away from the rural communities where early marriage was favoured, the general standard of living has improved and contraception and abortion have become more acceptable.

In Italy girls have been liberated from the burden of early childbirth, at the same time the control of the Catholic church on everyday life has diminished. Greece has the worst record in Europe, in fact practically the worst in the world. Since 1972 births to 14 year olds have gone up by 30% and are ten times Italian rates, births to 15 year olds have increased by 50% and to 16 year olds by 40%. It remains to be seen whether improvement in economic conditions, or a lessening influence of the orthodox church will bring an improvement in the lot of Greek women.

TABLE 1

EXAMPLES OF AVAILABILITY OF ABORTION TO YOUNG PEOPLE

<u>NOT ALLOWED</u>	<u>ALLOWED *</u>
WEST GERMANY	AUSTRIA (limit 12 weeks)
SOUTH AFRICA	SWEDEN
SPAIN	FINLAND
SWITZERLAND	NORWAY
ISRAEL	HOLLAND
SAUDI ARABIA	DENMARK*
VENEZUELA	USSR
MEXICO	POLAND
BRAZIL	TURKEY* (limit 12 weeks)
GHANA	AUSTRALIA
KENYA	NEW ZEALAND
TRINIDAD	CANADA
	USA (most States)
	FRANCE
	JAMAICA* (only for rapes)
	INDIA*
	ITALY*

\* = parental consent required for under 16s.

TABLE 2

SCHOOLAGE PREGNANCY - BIRTHS PER 1,000 15 YEAR OLDS  
1972 POSITIONS AND DIRECTION OF MOVEMENT 1972/1982

50 .		key
40 .	TUNISIA -	-- marked fall in rate
30 .		- falling rate
20 .		= rate same
		+ increase
		++ marked increase
	USA ==	
	---	
11 .		
10 .		
9 .	ISRAELI ARABS -	
	NEW ZEALAND -	
		ICELAND -
8 .		
7 .		
6 .	AUSTRALIA -	RUMANIA +
	CANADA =	GREECE +++
5 .		YUGOSLAVIA -
		ITALIA - -
4 .	UNITED KINGDOM -	HUNGARY +
	AUSTRIA -	PORTUGAL +
3 .		
2 .		SPAIN ++
		CZECHOSLOVAKIA
	DENMARK -	POLAND +
	IRELAND =	W. GERMANY -
1 .	ISRAELI JEWS =	FRANCE -
		NORWAY - -
		HOLLAND -
		FINLAND - -
		SWEDEN - -
0 .	JAPAN +	EAST GERMANY

TABLE 3

SCHOOLGIRL PREGNANCY RATES  
COMPARATIVE POSITIONS

(1982 figures births per 1,000 15 year olds)

15 .	USA
14 .	
13 .	
12 .	
11 .	
10 .	
9 .	
8 .	GREECE
7 .	
6 .	
5 .	ICELAND
4 .	SPAIN
3 .	AUSTRALIA
2 .	UNITED KINGDOM
1 .	EAST GERMANY
	FRANCE
	ITALY
0 .	JAPAN SWEDEN

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