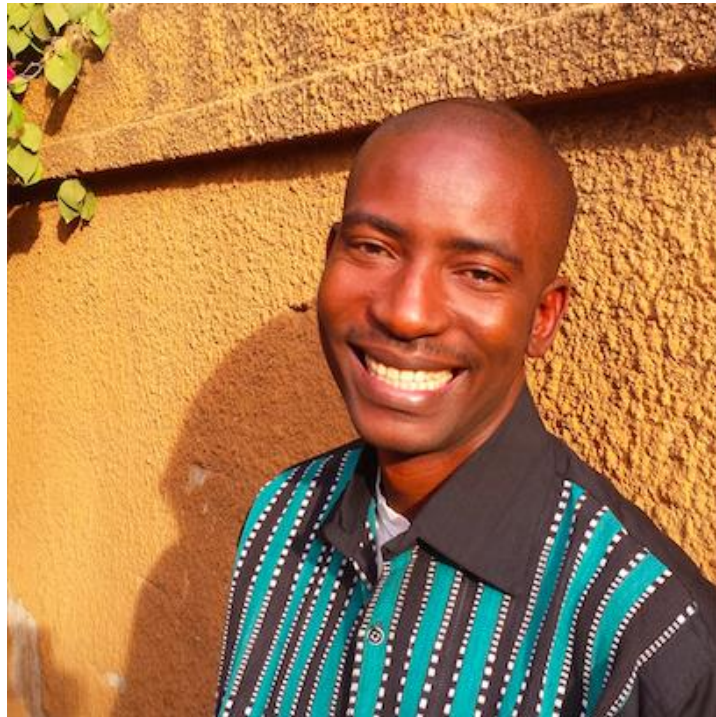


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“They say we shouldn't talk about sex because there are religious barriers. But the boys don't have those barriers. They hide behind us and escape accountability on our account. [...]

This is a sacrificed generation.”

Statistically, the absence of family planning is directly linked to level of education and socioeconomic background. Not too long ago, I attended a small party hosted by the organization my wife works for. Most of her middle-class colleagues had two children, sometimes three. When you looked at the guards or the drivers, their families had five, six, seven children running in all over the place. In larger families, particularly those in poverty, parents are quickly overwhelmed. Their children often have to raise themselves with their siblings. The father quickly no longer has the ability to house, feed, or clothe them correctly. He no longer has the mental or physical strength to follow, listen, and supervise them. In losing this role, he loses his authority. The children themselves begin to look for other figures to follow – with all of the risk that that brings.

“THERE ARE EVEN 13 OR 14-YEAR-OLD BOYS WHO GET GIRLS THEIR OWN AGE PREGNANT!”

I grew up in two neighborhoods on the outskirts of the Niamey, Complexe and Gamkallé. It was hotspot of misery, violence, and drugs. Lots of prostitutes too, mostly Ghanaian at the time. Fortunately for me, I was fortunate enough to join the Scouts which saved me from having bad company. At 19, I was trained in peer education on sexual and reproductive health; I regularly conducted community outreach, from one fada (meetings with groups of friends) to another. The young people were there in the street, gathered around tea to talking about both everything and nothing. To ease my presence and jumping into the conversation, I brought tea. I explained things, I played them radio broadcasts recorded on audio cassettes. There was also the famous wooden penis to explain the how to put on a condom. Some laughed, other paled, but since they all wanted to know a little more and feel reassured, they listened to the big brother anyway.

The fadas are still there, in 2017. Young people eat, dance, party until late at night, left to their own devices. And we'd be fools to think that nothing sexual happens in these spaces. There are

even 13 or 14-year-old boys who get girls their own age pregnant! However, peer education has disappeared due to a lack of resources and funding. Only the condom business remains, right next to the street vendors who sell cigarettes, aphrodisiacs and God knows what else. There is no sexual education in middle school. They say we shouldn't talk to them about sex because there are religious barriers. But the boys don't have those barriers. They often have multiple partners at this time. They hide behind us and escape accountability on our account. The youth of these neighborhoods are no longer a priority – this is a sacrificed generation that struggles to find their way without a roadmap.

“WHEN PARENTS OR THE AUTHORITIES GET INVOLVED, IT’S ALWAYS TOO LATE.”

I do not understand this collective blindness at the political, religious, and popular level. Sex is present everywhere on the internet and on social media. Advertisements put it out on the streets or on television for everyone to see. And by text, Twitter or WhatsApp messages, teens are already saying ‘my honey’ and ‘my sweetheart’. Why are we refuse to see this? When parents or the authorities get involved, it’s always too late: the girl is already pregnant and the boy is a young father. We have to get out of the silence, demystify sexuality, and explain that not all pleasures are synonymous with happiness. There is no point in lecturing them with ordinances. Young people do not completely understand what they have to lose – besides, they don't see a future in the country anyway. We must accompany them step by step and help them realize that in an instant they can disrupt their entire life, whether it is because of an STI or early pregnancy. As the older generation, it is our role to empower young people to take responsibility for their choices. We cannot stop now!