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Gender Relations : Ghana

This three lesson Topic looks at aspects of gender relationships, ranging from boyfriends to body language, marriage plans to teenage pregnancy, abortion, and HIV and AIDS, in the West African country of **Ghana**.

Lesson 1 : Marriage plans, friendship and body image

Lesson 2 : HIV and AIDS

Lesson 3 : Teenage pregnancy and abortion

Ghana



Human beings have inhabited the land which is now present day Ghana from about 1500 BC. The territory includes what was once the Empire of Ashanti, one of the most influential states in sub-Saharan Africa before colonial rule. Later, modern day Ghana was the first place in sub-Saharan Africa where Europeans came to trade, first in gold, later in slaves. In 1854 Britain proclaimed the territory as a crown colony, the Gold Coast. It remained so until 1957, when Ghana became the first black African nation in the region to achieve independence. The country is now a democracy, and often seen as a model for economic and political reform in Africa.



- **President** John Atta Mills (elected 2008)
- **Population:** 23.8 million (UN, 2009)
- **Capital:** Accra
- **Area:** 238,533 sq km (92,098 sq miles)
- **Major languages:** English, African languages including Akan, Ewe

- **Major religions:** Christianity, indigenous beliefs, Islam
- **Life expectancy:** 56 years (men), 57 years (women) (UN)
- **Monetary unit:** Cedi
- **Main exports:** Gold, cocoa, timber, tuna, bauxite, aluminium, manganese ore, diamonds
- **GNI per capita:** US \$670 (World Bank, 2008)
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Marriage and Courtship (Lesson 1)

The average age at which Ghanaian women marry is at twenty, and around a sixth of women marry even younger, whilst still teenagers. Huge importance is attached to having children and preserving the family line; this means that marriage is held in the highest regard, with unmarried women considered to have a significantly lower status than married ones.

However, increasingly - and especially in the more developed southern areas of the country such as Eastern Region where these recordings were made - it is becoming more common for girls to attend school and begin a career before considering marriage. All these teenagers in the recordings are attending secondary school, and Margot (Lesson 1 Track 3) says she wants to become a caterer, whilst Edu (Lesson 1 Track 1) has ambitions to be a journalist. All would also like to marry and have children, but not until they are in their mid to late twenties. And whilst changing social and economic conditions have not diminished the traditional Ghanaian desire to procreate, family planning is becoming more widely used, and research shows that most Ghanaians now consider that four is the ideal number of children, as compared to over eight in the past. Benice and Edu (Lesson 1 Track 1) both say that they would like to have three children.

This part of Ghana is still a conservative and strongly Christian society (unlike in the north, where many people are Muslim). But Eastern Region is only just over an hour's drive from the capital city Accra, and these teenagers have easy access to western culture through television, radio and internet. Make-up and hair care products are increasingly available, and there is a moderate move towards dating and romance before tying the knot. In Lesson 1, girls talk about having boyfriends, and clearly enjoy looking their best (Beyonce is mentioned as a role model).

HIV and AIDS (Lesson Two)

In March 1986, the first case of acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) was reported in Ghana. By 1994 the figure had risen to 12,500, placing Ghana second only to neighboring Côte d'Ivoire as the second worst affected country in West Africa, and today it's estimated that around 260,000 people in Ghana are

HIV positive, almost three-quarters of them female. (UNAIDS) While the rate of new HIV infections in sub-Saharan Africa has slowly declined in recent years - with the number of new infections in 2008 approximately 25% lower than at the epidemic's peak in the region in 1995 - the number of people living with HIV has slightly increased, in part due to increased longevity stemming from improved access to treatment with antiretroviral drug therapy.

Now the Ghanaian government and many Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) run widescale awareness AIDS campaigns on radio, television, and using billboard advertisements. Children are being taught in school about the reality of the disease, and learning about how it is spread. However, whilst awareness has increased dramatically, still fear and stigmatization of HIV-positive people remains high. Benice (Lesson 2 Track 1) talks about how many people won't even shake hands with someone who is known to have the virus.

HIV/AIDS is not just a health issue, it is also an economic and developmental one, and the impact of HIV/AIDS on households and families is immense. For example, in cases of prolonged illnesses, livelihood is lost and families have to care for their ill relation. Business and schools suffer when the most productive sector of society (human resources) aged between (15-49) are lost to HIV/AIDS related illnesses.

Despite all the awareness work, the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS is continuing, and with the number of non-reported cases thought to be more than reported cases, it is very difficult to identify carriers. Margot (Lesson 2 Track 5) is very aware of the problem, and unusually brave in saying that she would suggest to potential suitors that they both go to the hospital and have a blood test before embarking on a relationship.

<http://countrystudies.us/ghana/56.htm>

Teenage Pregnancy and Abortion (Lesson 3)

Even in this conservative society, many young men are reluctant to take on the responsibility of early marriage, and teenage pregnancy is common. It's estimated that around a third of all births in the country are to teenage mothers, and many girls end up raising the child alone and in poverty. Unlike in the UK, where teenage mothers get state benefits, help with housing and so on, in Ghana they get no such financial assistance, nor is the father legally bound to provide support. However, in Ghana a girl might be more likely to get help from her extended family. Benice (Lesson 3 Track 1) describes what happened to her friend when she became pregnant. To avoid such a fate, many teenage pregnancies are aborted. However, abortion is illegal and disapproved of, so the practice is unregulated and often leads to complications and deaths. It is estimated that as many as two-thirds of all terminations are unsafe and large

numbers of women are dying and suffering serious medical repercussions, as we hear in Lesson 3 Track 2.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/crossing_continents/6246303.stm