Bone health in Gambian women: impact and implications of rural-to-urban migration and the nutrition transition

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Urbanisation and the associated nutrition transition have been linked with the rapid and recent rise in osteoporotic fragility fracture incidence in many countries\textsuperscript{(1)}. Predictions indicate that hip fracture incidence will increase 6-fold in Africa and Asia by 2050, partially attributed to demographic transition and population ageing\textsuperscript{(2)}. Differences in areal bone mineral density (aBMD) between rural and urban locations indicate that urban regions of high income countries (HIC) have lower aBMD and a higher incidence of hip fracture\textsuperscript{(3)}. The few studies conducted in low and middle income countries (LMIC) provide inconsistent results; in contrast to HIC, most have found higher aBMD in urban populations\textsuperscript{(4)}.

In order to investigate the impact of migrating to an urban environment, we have conducted detailed studies of bone phenotype and factors affecting bone health in two groups of pre-menopausal Gambian women: urban migrant (n = 58) and rural (n = 81). Both groups spent their formative years in the same rural setting, urban women were known to have migrated when aged $\geq 16$ years. Bone phenotype (bone mineral content (BMC); bone area (BA); areal bone mineral density (aBMD), and size-adjusted BMC (height, weight and BA) of the whole-body, lumbar spine and hip) was measured by dual energy x-ray absorptiometry (DXA) with further characterisation of bone phenotype by peripheral quantitative CT (pQCT). Data were also collected on anthropometry, body composition, food and nutrient intakes, physical activity, socio-demographic characteristics, vitamin D status and 24hr urinary mineral outputs (Na, K, P and Ca).

Mean age and height of rural and urban migrant groups were not significantly different ($p > 0.05$). Urban migrant women were significantly heavier ($p < 0.01$). Significant differences in BMC and aBMD were found between groups at all skeletal sites, with urban women having higher BMC and aBMD; BA was not significantly different. The greatest difference in BMC was found at the lumbar spine ($8.5\% \pm SE \ 3.0$, $p < 0.01$). After adjusting for size, the differences between urban and rural spine BMC remained significant ($6.2\% \pm SE \ 2.1$, $p < 0.01$). These results indicate that rural-to-urban migration is associated with higher BMC, with differences mostly attenuated by adjusting for body size, particularly weight. In this African population, higher SA-BMC may affect future fracture risk.

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