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A Qualitative assessment of adolescent-parent sex talk in Ghana

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Abstract

Young people's views on sexuality in sub-Saharan Africa are poorly understood. We know little about what they think of their sexual upbringing and how it influences their sexual and reproductive health decisions and behaviors. Guided by feminism and an intersectionality framework, the current study uses narratives from purposefully sampled adolescents and parents from rural households within Adaklu District, one of the eighteen districts in the Volta Region of Ghana, to examine parents' and young people's perceptions of young adolescents' acquisition of sexuality knowledge, their sexual encounters and experiences, and the overall dynamics in educating young adolescents aged 16-19 years about sex. Specifically, we explored the types of sexuality issues parents discussed with their wards at home, and where appropriate, analyzed the inherent gender disparities in these discussions. Generally, parents agree that young people should know about sex. However, they emphasized that sexuality education should be age-specific and should be guided by cultural values and religious faith. Adolescents' exposure to multiple sources, including parental upbringing, the media, and information from peers, determines the extent they either engage or not engage in sexual activities. Parent-adolescent conversations were structured along gender lines, emphasizing adolescent girls' needs due to their perceived vulnerability compared to boys. While some of the findings support earlier views in terms of a very conservative, morally scripted way of training young people, it also suggests that young people's sexual upbringing is not as repressive as previous studies would make it appear. Young people keep pushing the boundaries as they develop agencies to learn about sex from multiple sources. Therefore, policies seeking to promote young people's sexual and reproductive rights in Ghana should pay close attention to what young people know about sex and how they know what they know, recognizing that their knowledge-seeking is part of human development and not inherently "bad". *(Afr J Reprod Health 2022; 26[12s]: 146-160).*

Keywords: Sexuality; sexual behavior; adolescents; sexuality education; socio-cultural norms; reproductive health; Ghana

Résumé

Les opinions des jeunes sur la sexualité en Afrique subsaharienne sont mal comprises. Nous savons peu de choses sur ce qu'ils pensent de leur éducation sexuelle et comment celle-ci influence leurs décisions et leurs comportements en matière de santé sexuelle et reproductive. Guidée par le féminisme et un cadre d'intersectionnalité, la présente étude utilise des récits d'adolescents et de parents sélectionnés à dessein dans des ménages ruraux du district d'Adaklu, l'un des dix-huit districts de la région de la Volta au Ghana, pour examiner les perceptions des parents et des jeunes à l'égard des jeunes adolescents. l'acquisition de connaissances sur la sexualité, leurs rencontres et expériences sexuelles, et la dynamique globale de l'éducation sexuelle des jeunes adolescents âgés de 16 à 19 ans. Plus précisément, nous avons exploré les types de problèmes de sexualité dont les parents discutaient avec leurs pupilles à la maison et, le cas échéant, analysé les disparités inhérentes entre les sexes dans ces discussions. Généralement, les parents s'accordent à dire que les jeunes devraient être au courant de la sexualité. Cependant, ils ont souligné que l'éducation sexuelle devrait être spécifique à l'âge et guidée par les valeurs culturelles et la foi religieuse. L'exposition des adolescents à de multiples sources, y compris l'éducation parentale, les médias et les informations de leurs pairs, détermine dans quelle mesure ils s'engagent ou non dans des activités sexuelles. Les conversations parents-adolescents étaient structurées selon le genre, mettant l'accent sur les besoins des adolescentes en raison de leur vulnérabilité perçue par rapport aux garçons. Bien que certaines des découvertes corroborent les opinions antérieures en termes de manière très conservatrice et moralement scénarisée de former les jeunes, elles suggèrent également que l'éducation sexuelle des jeunes n'est pas aussi répressive que les études précédentes le laissent croire. Les jeunes continuent de repousser les limites en développant des agences pour se renseigner sur le sexe à partir de multiples sources. Par conséquent, les politiques visant à promouvoir les droits sexuels et reproductifs des jeunes au Ghana devraient accorder une attention particulière à ce que les jeunes savent sur le sexe et à la façon dont ils savent ce qu'ils savent, reconnaissant que leur

recherche de connaissances fait partie du développement humain et n'est pas intrinsèquement « mauvaise ». *(Afr J Reprod Health 2022; 26[12s]: 146-160).*

Mots-clés: Sexualité; comportement sexuel; adolescents; éducation sexuelle; normes socioculturelles; la santé reproductive; Ghana

Introduction

Sexuality education is important for improving young people's informed knowledge and decision-making skills and society's expectations of their behavior[1-4]. Yet, the lack of adequate information based on misconceptions[5,6] and repressive cultural norms continue to hamper young people's sexual knowledge in parts of Africa and limit their access to information that can be empowering to their sexual health and wellbeing[7-9]. The challenging difficulties not only present new opportunities and ways of knowing about what young people themselves think and know about their sexual upbringing, but also gives an understanding of how they develop innovative ways to help them navigate culture and other related challenges in an era epitomized by new patterns of human sexuality. The current study investigates young people and their parents' understanding of adolescent sexuality by privileging young people's voices firstly and that of their parents secondarily. The paper interrogates the views of both parents and adolescents about knowledge and perception of young people's sexuality by highlighting young adolescents' experiences of sexuality education, the contents of sexuality issues parents discuss with their adolescents, and the intersectional dynamics associated with these discussions. The findings will be useful for advocacy, programme planning, and policy-making on youth sexuality education, and power dynamics in discussing sex.

Across parts of Africa, sex/sexuality issues are often considered delicate and not openly discussed with adolescents[10-12]. Parents and significant others have traditionally played a role in sexuality discussions with adolescents[13,14]. Often, such discussions begin at puberty—around menarche for girls and considerably later for boys—and have centered on moral issues marked by cautionary messages and abstinence from early sexual activity[15-17]. The dialogues, however, have historically remained challenging and fraught with discomfort and power dynamics due to preconceived beliefs of the appropriateness of adolescents' age, their levels of curiosity, and generalized fear of "experimentation" on the part of the adolescents[10,18]. Even in families where open sexuality discussions occur, the literature shows that conservative socio-cultural/religious beliefs and gender norms dominate the discussions[5,11,19]. The limited knowledge that adolescents receive could be detrimental to a country's chances of attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 3), which aims to equip its population with the knowledge to realize their wellbeing and self-worth.

Power dynamics in adolescent sexuality in Ghana

Knowledge is power. Feminists, for example, explore power dynamics in society and seek to proffer solutions to address them. The solutions that are proffered largely depend on the perspectives/strands of feminism, such as liberal versus radical, depending upon the debate in question. For instance, intersectional feminism, which forms the core perspective that the current study is framed, first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, seeks to analyze women's and men's positions in society and the causes of their subordination. It discusses how systems of oppression (such as cultural norms, religious values, western education, and the media) overlap to create unique experiences for people with multiple identities[20,21]. This would mean that men and women, boys and girls, do not experience the same forms of vulnerabilities in spaces. Patricia Hill Collins reveals that gender relations are reinforced by patriarchal institutions and agents of socialization such as the family, school, and the media. Thus, for Collins, knowledge constitutes the lived experiences from which power is derived to reshape cultural beliefs. This would then mean that power is not static; power exists only when it is put into action. This means that the power is not simply a relationship between individuals; "it is a way in which certain actions modify others"[22]. Power thus can be a 'thing' one can discover based on the availability of multiple sources of knowledge. In

this context, how can multiple structures such as culture, religion, media, and new technologies/knowledge influence young adolescent vulnerability or empowerment by providing the context in which young people and their families discuss sexuality?

In Ghana, discussing sexuality issues is located in both feminism and in an intersectional debate. First, like many other African societies, sex is a culturally sensitive and taboo topic to discuss, in particular, in the open and also with younger people. Second, sexuality is a contentious and hotly debated topic, and there are different perspectives on it. There are those who promote a liberal attitude towards sex and believe that young people should know about sex but with caution and specific context[23]. Others (such as Christian and Islamic conservatives and radicals), on the other hand, mainly for purposes of instilling discipline, responsibility, and character development among young people, suggest that teaching young people about sex would mean inviting them to experience sex. Hence, they feel that it is better not to discuss sex with young people. Various policies such as the Adolescent Reproductive Health Policy and the Strategic Plan for Adolescent and Young People's Health and Development in Ghana are some policies aimed at promoting young people's health needs and sexual awareness. Yet, opposition to these policies have hindered its implementation. The oppositional notions towards discussing sex and sexuality with young people at the cusp of their sexual evolution, are widely held throughout the sub-region, where sociocultural obstacles continue to hinder the implementation of comprehensive sexuality education policy (CSE) policies[15,24]. Conflicts between cultural norms and the content of CSE policies have continuously hindered efforts at sexuality-related discussions and the incorporation of such policies into the educational curricula of schools in countries such as Nigeria, Ethiopia, Kenya, and South Africa[25-28].

The impetus for our work came in 2019, when some religious groups, traditional authorities, and anti-lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) movements protested the government's plans to incorporate a new CSE into the Ghanaian basic school curriculum[29]. The CSE policy aimed to introduce sexual issues such as relationships, gender awareness, sexuality, and the impact on sexual and reproductive health choices on school-aged youth between the ages of 5 to 18 years. This hotly debated agenda over the new policy divided the country, with questions surrounding the appropriateness of the CSE policy and its potential/dynamics to jeopardize the moral ethos of the Ghanaian culture. Interestingly, the views of the adolescents were not included in the public discourse, perhaps due to patriarchal norms that seek to normalize young people's sexuality as conformists to societal conscription of sexuality education.

This study, therefore, seeks to provide some inkling of young people's views on the missing narratives of adolescent sexuality education in Ghana. We particularly highlight adolescents' views on sexuality, because we feel as they transition through critical phases of their lives, they need to be well informed in making choices that impact not only their reproductive health but also their sexual self-concept, i.e., sexual feelings and behaviors. Therefore, we ask: what do young people know about their sexuality? How do they know what they know? What do parents think about adolescent sex education? What kind of sexuality-related issues do parents discuss with their wards, and what are the dynamics associated with these discussions?

Methods

Study setting and design

The study was conducted in Adaklu in the Volta Region of Ghana (Figure 1). Adaklu is largely a rural area[30] and the choice was based on data which suggests increased sexual activities such as unplanned pregnancies and unsafe abortions among young people in the Adaklu district[31].

We used a qualitative lens to explore sexuality discussions among adolescents and their parents at varying levels, using open-ended and probing questions to 'dig' further into issues that came up during the discussion. A qualitative research design was chosen not only because it is exploratory but because the interviewing process emphasizes an interpretive process that allows participants to freely express themselves, an aspect critical for studies of this nature.

Procedures

The participants were reached through key informants who were also community members.

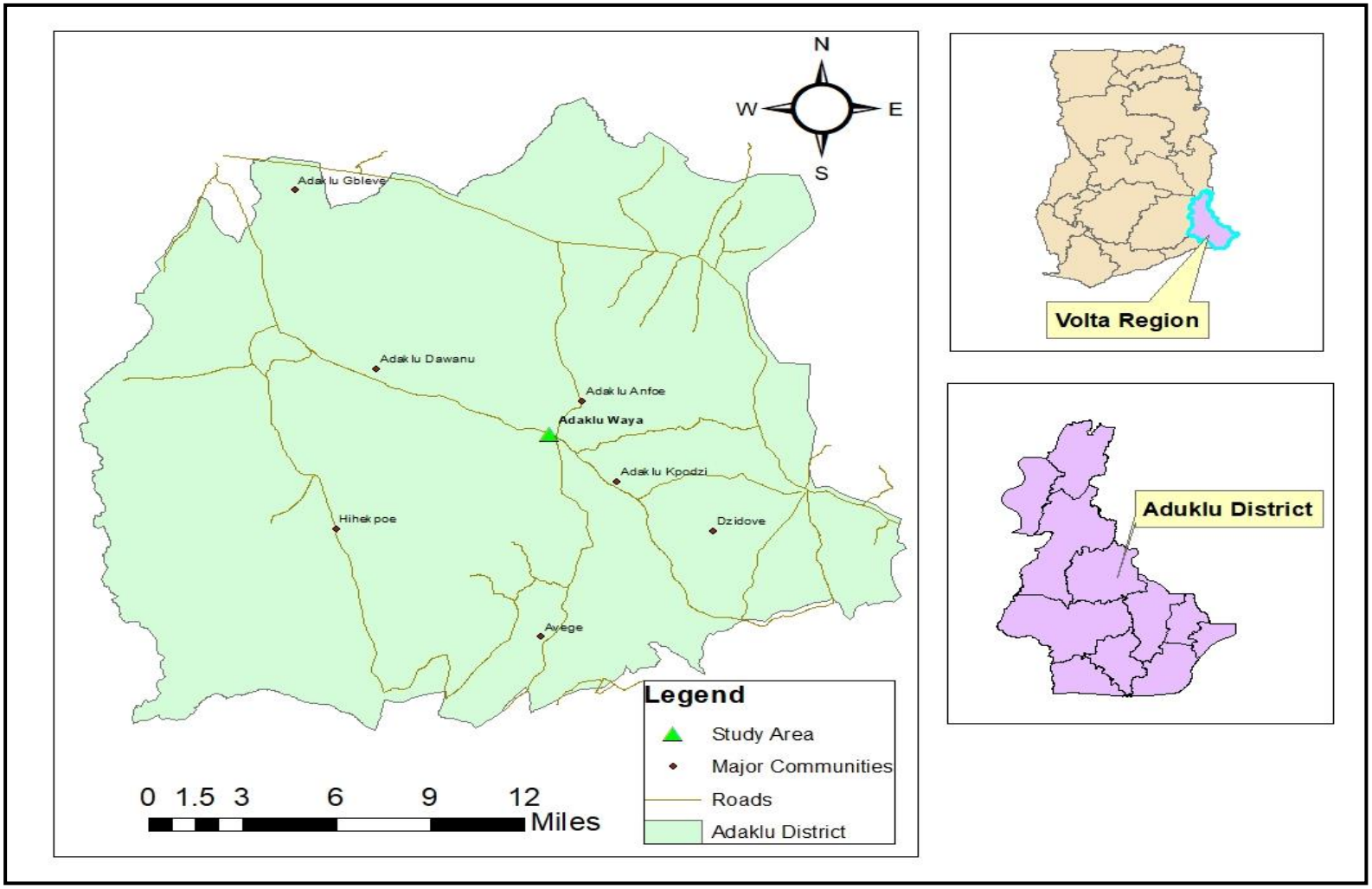

Figure 1: Map of Adaklu District

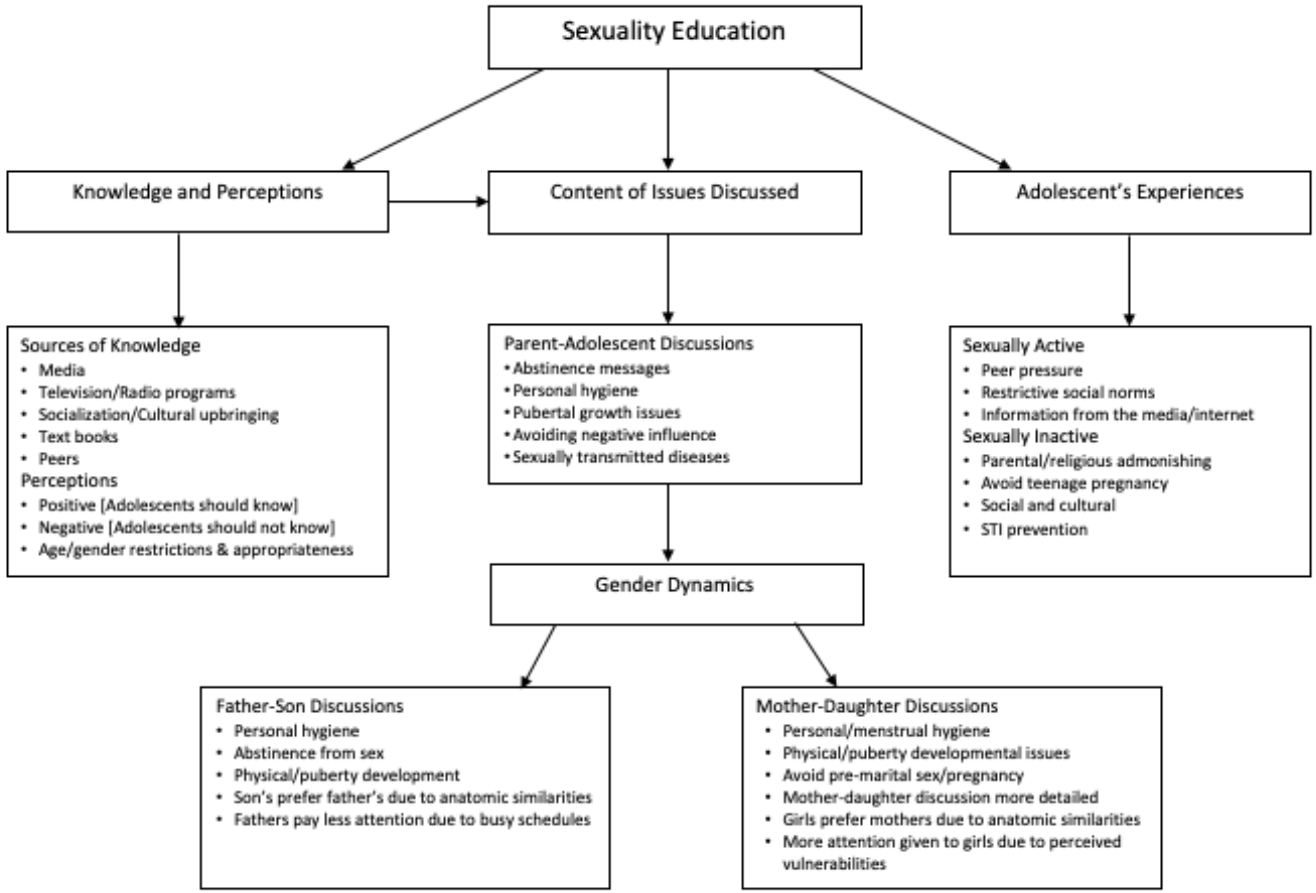

Figure 2: Coding frame of themes and sub-themes that guided the analysis

These key informants, who were assemblymen and youth leaders in the community, served as gatekeepers for the study, and assisted the researchers in the community entry process. They helped the interviewer gain access to parents and adolescents who resided within the Adaklu community. Purposive and snowballing sampling techniques were used to recruit the study participants[32]. The purposive technique allowed the interviewer to approach potential interviewees to have a general conversation about sexuality discussions. Purposive sampling was utilized to identify participants such as adolescents aged 16-19 who were willing to discuss their experiences on sexuality discussions. The snowballing technique was a useful referral technique that helped the interviewer reach out to individuals who shared or knew of others willing to participate in the study.

All interviews were conducted by the first author (ASA), who is a native speaker of the local language, "Ewe." The interviewer's fluency with the participants' native tongue helped build rapport, eliciting their trust and confidence[33], a dynamic crucial for such sensitive research. A semi-structured interview guide was used to guide the interviewing process. Some of the issues/questions we explored included: What is "sex education" in their view? What is young people's perception of sex education? What is the content of sexuality-related issues parents discuss with their wards? What do parents think about teaching young people about sex? What sexual experiences do adolescents have, and what are the dynamics associated with these discussions?

Twenty participants were recruited for the study. This number offered sufficient information addressing the research questions[34]. Interviews were conducted until we found it necessary to stop. Interviews were conducted as one-on-one and group interviews. The one-on-one interviews comprised twelve participants and were conducted with adolescents and parents. This technique allowed the interviewer to probe deeper during the interviews and gain insight into answers by exploring and explaining participants' experiences, feelings, and shared meanings they ascribed to sexuality issues. Four group interviews were also held for adolescents and parents separately. Each group was made up of two participants and was gender-based. The group interviews helped to elicit information from several interviewees simultaneously and presented the interviewer with the strategy of tapping into the collective opinions, shared meanings, and the underlying notions interviewees ascribed to sexuality discussions. The rationale for employing these approaches (i.e., one-on-one and group interviews) was to enhance the richness of the data and deepen our understanding and interpretation of the issues raised by the participants during the interview sessions. Interviews were conducted in convenient places for the participants based on their preferences and lasted between 40 to 60 minutes. Participants were assigned pseudo names to ensure they remained anonymous and that narratives could not be traced back to them.

The Institutional Review Board of the University of Cape Coast granted ethical clearance for the study (UCCIRB/CHLS/2019/38), and Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Data analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. With the help of the co-authors, a coding frame was manually developed (Figure 2). Using the thematic analysis approach, we were able to identify codes that helped emphasize emergent patterns of themes using the coding frame we constructed[32]. To investigate how disparities at the family level influence discourse on sexuality issues, an intersectional analytical lens was utilized to foreground adolescents' and parents' narratives[20,21].

Results

A total of twenty participants took part in the study. This comprised twelve adolescents and eight parents. Adolescents were made up of six males and females, respectively, and four parents—males and females each. All participants had attained some basic education. Nineteen of them identified as Christians and one Muslim. Six of the parents were married, two were divorced, and all adolescents had never been married (Table 1). The findings are structured in line with the themes that emerged from the analysis.

Knowledge and perception of adolescent sex education

The mainstream media (i.e., radio and television programs), social media/internet, the school,

Table 1: Socio-Demographic characteristics of respondents

Interviewee #	Pseudo name	Gender	Age	Educational Level	Religion	Status	Marital Status
R#1	Mrs. Sedem	Female	41	Tertiary	Christian	Parent	Married
R#2	Sagah	Male	52	Technical	Christian	Parent	Divorced
R#3	Vincent	Male	42	Tertiary	Christian	Parent	Married
R#4	Mrs. Eli	Female	50	Tertiary	Christian	Parent	Married
R#5	Enyonam	Female	39	Tertiary	Christian	Parent	Married
R#6	Mawulorm	Female	37	Tertiary	Christian	Parent	Married
R#7	Ernest	Male	52	Secondary	Christian	Parent	Married
R#8	Kumah	Male	42	Primary	Christian	Parent	Divorced
R#9	Elikem	Male	16	Secondary	Christian	Adolescent	Single
R#10	Mawunyo	Male	17	Secondary	Christian	Adolescent	Single
R#11	Elorm	Male	19	Secondary	Christian	Adolescent	Single
R#12	Alorse	Male	16	Secondary	Christian	Adolescent	Single
R#13	Ablah	Female	16	Secondary	Christian	Adolescent	Single
R#14	Esi	Female	16	Secondary	Christian	Adolescent	Single
R#15	Esinam	Female	16	Secondary	Christian	Adolescent	Single
R#16	Xornam	Female	17	Secondary	Christian	Adolescent	Single
R#17	Linda	Female	16	Secondary	Christian	Adolescent	Single
R#18	Dziedzorm	Female	17	Secondary	Christian	Adolescent	Single
R#19	Inusah	Male	19	Secondary	Muslim	Adolescent	Single
R#20	Emmanuel	Male	17	Secondary	Christian	Adolescent	Single

church, information from peers, and family upbringing/socialization were cited by adolescents as sources that they obtained knowledge about sex education from. For many adolescents, however, their peers were the most preferred sources of information on sex education. Because adolescents were still in school at the time of the work, the school environment (peers and teachers) emerged as significantly influencing their knowledge about sexual matters. They indicated lessons from subjects such as social studies, integrated science, and religious and moral studies further enhanced their understanding of reproductive health issues. Highlighting lessons from school as a source of knowledge, Linda, in a narrative expression, was of the view:

> **…** in Social Studies and Integrated Science, we are taught about reproductive health, personal hygiene, menstruation, and ovulation. For us, …girls, we are taught how to calculate our periods so that we know how to handle and take care of ourselves. Sometimes the teachers discuss sexually transmitted diseases and abstinence from sex, so we avoid teenage pregnancy and all these diseases as adolescents…. (16-year-old girl).

An adolescent boy also indicated that

> At school, our teachers teach us about some of these things. For instance, a unit in Integrated Science talks about reproduction. When we got to that unit, we learned about male and female reproductive organs, personal hygiene, and sexually transmitted infections… (Mawunyo: 17-years).

Parents also cited the mainstream media as their sources of knowledge, except they emphasized their own social, cultural, and religious upbringing as highly influencing how they socialize and raise their wards in matters relating to their sexual health. In the words of one parent:

> You know we all have been children before. When we were young, our parents taught us things like how to take care of ourselves. For instance, personal hygiene during menstruation, avoiding boys so we don't end up pregnant, and all that. Yeah, so as a parent now, I am responsible for doing that for my kids. So, I will say that training had a great influence on me. Those days there are certain issues as a child they won't tell you until you are mature. Because of modernity, we have such information all over the place… (Mrs. Eli: 50-year-old mother).

Parents with positive attitudes toward sex education indicated that such conversations were useful for adolescents as it equipped them with the requisite

skills and information needed to make informed choices about their sexual health and wellbeing. Highlighting this assertion, Enyonam, a mother, said:

> I will say young people should learn these things because when they know more about these sexual issues, it will help them to do the right thing. As parents, we should have such discussions with our children so that when someone tries to deceive them, they will know what to do. When they know about these things, at least they will know the consequences of whatever they do, so for me, sex education is good for young people… (39-year-old mother).

However, some parents, on the other hand, revealed that due to adolescents' age and immaturity, such conversations would rather encourage them to engage in sex. Highlighting this assertion, two parents articulated their views as:

> When it comes to these things, I don't think children at this age should know certain things. As young as they are, we can't be talking about sex issues with them. If you are not careful, they will want to try what you teach them. You know children are curious, so we have to be cautious about the things we tell them. So, for me, children shouldn't know about these things until they reach some stage…. (Sagah: 52-year-old father).

And:

> Sex education is good, but you can't be telling [discuss with] children at this age such things. They are not mature enough to know about it. Putting that in their mind alone can sometimes make them a bit curious… I think, for now, it is just okay that they know about abstinence. Let them stick to that, but when they are gradually becoming adults [age 21 and above], other sensitive issues can be introduced to them (Mrs. Sedem: 41-year-old mother).

The narrative of parents and adolescents portrays how knowledge sources and perceptions undergird discourse on sexuality issues among families in this part of Ghana. The findings show that sources outside the household (i.e., mainstream media and peers) are dominant sources of sexuality information for parents and adolescents. The narratives show that sources of sexuality information play a vital role in shaping the understanding and perceptions of individuals towards sexual health matters.

Content of sexuality discussion

Many adolescents stated that the sexuality issues they discussed with their parents primarily focused on socially acceptable sexual issues for adolescents. Physical growth and bodily changes during puberty, personal and menstrual hygiene, avoiding negative peer influence, abstinence from early sex, the consequences of becoming pregnant – girls becoming pregnant and boys impregnating girls – and how they can relate to the opposite sex were among the topics discussed. However, many avoided deeper discussions of their reproductive and sexual health and access, particularly pertaining to contraception methods and condom use, because they believed it would amount to bias that would paint them in an unfavorable light to their parents.

Adolescents mentioned concerns about being penalized or seen as "bad" if they initiated conversations about condoms, contraceptives, and other non-physiological sexual practices with their parents. These constraints drove them to seek alternate sources (i.e., peer groups) where they could explore and discuss various sexual concerns (sexual desires, acts, dating, and relationships) that they could not discuss with their parents. In a narrative expression, Elorm, an adolescent, explained:

> I discuss with my friends when it comes to these things. I can't discuss some issues with my parents because I don't want them to think negatively about me…. My friends, anytime we meet, we talk about many issues. …sometimes we discuss sex and relationship issues. Some of them talk about the things they do in their relationships. So, we discuss it a lot with my friends, and I think it's because we are all age-mates (16-year-old girl)

Some parents emphasized that such discussions should be part of a larger conversation about teenage sexual health and wellbeing, not isolated discussions. Parents believed that abstinence-only

messages were most suitable for discussions around sexual behaviors and practices, given the age of their children and the sensitive nature of some sexual matters. There was also a strong emphasis on staying away from what was referred to as "bad friends" in a group interview; parents Ernest and Kumah explained:

> I talk about pregnancy, personal hygiene, and staying away from friends who can lead them into bad behaviors that can result in pregnancy and all that… I always tell them to abstain from these things because it is not good for them… and I think it's the best thing for them. (Ernest: 52-year-old father).

> Oh! For my kids, I talk to them about how to take care of themselves and avoid… I talk to them about the consequences of engaging in sex and bad behaviors which can affect their education and all that… So, I always advise them to avoid friends who can lead them to engage in bad behaviors [sex]. (Kumah: 42-year-old father).

However, these views were not universally shared amongst the parents. A minority of parents acknowledged that adolescents' youthful exuberance and vulnerability to harmful sexual outcomes are reasons enough for them not to be denied access to accurate and reliable sexual information. A parent explained further:

> You know some children are sexually active, so they cannot abstain… so you give them the needed information so they can deal with any situation they might find themselves in. …you have to provide them with options. You can't say this issue is bad for them because they are not old enough to hear or learn about them. Children today learn many things from the media, so we should educate them on all the necessary information. We need to tell them everything they need to know. (Mawulorm: 37-year-old mother).

The views of parents and adolescents demonstrate the spectrum (or conflict) of conservative and liberal beliefs surrounding sexuality discussions among families. Parents with conservative upbringing were more inclined to limit sexual conversations to socially scripted messages appropriate for young people. Unlike conservative parents, parents with a liberal stance are more open to sexual discussions. The narratives of parents and adolescents should be read in light of their socio-cultural background, religious values, sexual socialization, and societal notions about adolescent sexuality. The findings support views that emphasize cultural upbringing and religion as enabling factors that influence parent-adolescent sexual conversations.

Gender dynamics

Gender roles and norms influenced the nature of the sexuality issues discussed by adolescents and their parents. Some adolescent boys, for example, stated that they felt more comfortable discussing sexual issues with their fathers. However, such conversations were limited to personal hygiene and puberty/physical development in boys (i.e., growth of pubic and facial hair and changes in their voice). Similarly, adolescent girls stated that they discussed such issues with their mothers because of their anatomic similarities. Esi, a 16-year-old adolescent girl, expressed her thoughts as follows:

> I feel confident when I have to go to my mum or when she discusses such issues with me. Unlike my father, who would just warn us, my mum goes into detail and talks about many issues. … my mother takes her time to educate us [sisters] on all these issues. Because we are girls, she takes her time to do this with us. She tells us that we should be careful and avoid friends who will lead us to engage in negative behaviors. So, I would say I prefer my mother regarding these sexual discussions.

Inusah, a boy feels more comfortable discussing sex with a male figure:

> I prefer my father when it comes to discussing these issues. I am close to my dad than my mum, so anything that worries me, I try and go to my father so he can explain it to me. My father is the quiet type so he will try to teach you once you go to him. I remember one day he asked me whether I had a girlfriend. It was someway…. but later, he advised me about the consequences of engaging in those

> relationship issues, how it will affect y academics, and all that… (19-years).

Some parents shared similar views their adolescents shared, except that they attributed the mother-daughter/father-son conversations to societal and cultural norms rather than biology or physiology. Some fathers, for example, stated that it was culturally improper for fathers to address sexuality issues with their daughters. Sexuality matters that are deemed feminine issues, they believe, should be discussed by women. Furthermore, several fathers reported that even attempting to address such issues with their daughters makes them uncomfortable because it is deemed inappropriate for men to be seen discussing such feminine issues. Vincent, a father, explained in a narrative that:

> Sometimes, when I want to discuss some issues with my daughters, I feel they are not comfortable, and you can see it on their faces. Ahaaa…. I think they don't expect you, the man, to be talking about issues like menstruation and issues that have to do with women with them... So, in a way, it has become a norm that mothers should only discuss some issues… and I think it makes them more confident. (42-years).

Some mothers also admitted to having sexual conversations with their adolescent girls. Mother-daughter conversations were more engaged than mother-son conversations for most mothers. Mothers revealed the focus on girls was due to their vulnerability to early/risky sexual consequences, such as unsafe abortions and unexpected pregnancies.

> The issues I discuss with my children differ. When it comes to girls, they are more vulnerable than boys… The emphasis of such discussions is usually on the girls because they might end up pregnant when you take your eyes off them for a moment. Yeah, so I can say such discussions differ even though it is important for boys and girls. (Enyonam: 39-year-old mother).

> Regarding these issues, … I give more attention to the girls because I feel they are more vulnerable than the boys. When anything goes wrong, the girls face most of the challenges. I think this is why I pay much [a lot of] attention to the girl. (Mawulorm: 37-year-old mother).

Adolescents' and parents' narratives are emblematic of how social expectations and gender roles contribute to inequalities and disparities in adolescent-parent conversations on sexuality issues. These gender roles and expectations founded on the assumption that some sexuality issues are best discussed between the respective genders (i.e., father-son and mother-daughter) limit and deemphasize the importance of sex education for young people. Unlike adolescent girls who receive adequate attention, adolescent boys are disproportionately affected and restricted in terms of their access to sexual information due to what they are taught and the training received at home. It was not surprising that the gender disparity in such discussions negatively influenced many adolescents, especially boys who engaged in early sexual activities.

Adolescents' experiences of sex education

The study found that fear of becoming pregnant – for girls or getting a girl pregnant – for boys, respecting family ideals of keeping chaste, not giving birth out of wedlock, admonishment from parents – mothers paying particular attention to girls, and fear of contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs) such as HIV/AIDS were reasons mentioned by some adolescents for not engaging in any sexual activity. For Xornam:

> I abstain from these things [sex] mostly because of the advice my parents give me. They talk to us about pregnancy and how getting pregnant at this stage can ruin our education. Sometimes, too, they talk about sexually related diseases. Sometimes, too, you don't want to do something negative that will make your parents disappointed in you and people in the community talk bad about you. This is why I try to abstain from all these things. (17-year-old girl).

According to another adolescent girl:

> I come from a home of great discipline. My parents always advise my sisters and me to stay away from behaviors that can result in

> pregnancy. They tell us how our education can be disturbed when we get pregnant, or something bad happens. I am the type of person I don't like to associate with people too much because of peer influence and all that… Besides, I know my education is important, so I am very careful about these things. You can drop out of school when you get pregnant… (Esi, 16-years).

Although parents were not directly asked whether they knew of their ward's involvement in sex and other sexual activities, inferences from their narrations showed that sexual discussions at home helped adolescents avoid sex and other sexual practices. For most parents, the positive impact of such conversations includes adolescents not being involved in risky behaviors that could have resulted in risky sexual outcomes such as unplanned pregnancy.

> I believe the talks we have at home are useful to them because here in this community; many girls have dropped out of school due to pregnancy… ahaaa. So, I think in a way, the little discussions we have will give them some knowledge about what they can and should not do… (Mrs. Eli, 50 years).

On the other hand, some adolescents listed sexual material from the internet, television shows, and peer information as sources that formed and influenced their sexual attitudes. Some teenagers claimed that the substance of sexual information they obtained from sources (such as their friends, television shows, and the internet) increased their sexual desire. The vivid nature and portrayal of sexual material – from friends and the media – pushed such adolescents to engage in sex.

> I discuss these sexual issues with my friends anytime we meet. The way they talk about it, you might be tempted… Some of them have had sex before, so they will try to convince you also to do it [sex]. Some will tease and even laugh at you because you haven't done it [sex] before. They will say you are a "dull boy." So, you will end up doing it [sex]. This sexual thing is not only about sex, but we think about it differently because of where we get the information and pressure from friends. (Alorse: 16-year-old boy).

While the source of adolescent sexual information influenced the development and formation of their sexual attitudes in part, the impulsive nature of information from such sources also impacted their behavior. Many young people were motivated to participate in early sex by curiosity sparked by negative social influence, peer pressure to be seen as "real boys or girls," and a desire to be accepted among their peers.

> I think peer pressure made me do it [sex]. When we meet with our peers and discuss these sexual issues, sometimes, the issues they will discuss will make you want to engage in some of these bad things. Because of how some of my friends described how kissing and sex is, I had a girlfriend, so I convinced her, and because she loved me, she agreed, so we did it [sex]. I know it's not a good thing, but sometimes too, peer pressure can make you do some of these things… (Inusah: 19 years).

Adolescents' views demonstrate how the proliferation of the media, religion, and culture plays a critical role in shaping their attitudes and behaviors in society. Young people's sexual socialization is still heavily influenced by cultural standards and religious ideals. Adolescents' training and accessibility to sexual information can lead to their involvement or non-involvement in sexual activities. Adolescents who have access to accurate information and training at home develop positive sexual attitudes, as opposed to adolescents who are bound by restrictive cultural and religious norms, who may want to seek alternative avenues to access sexuality information to explore their agency. This finding emphasizes the complexities surrounding sex education among families within this part of the sub-region.

Discussion

The study explored discourse on adolescent sexuality education and highlights what adolescents think about their sexual upbringing and how that impacts their sexual decision-making and behaviors. What is evident in the study is that

religious and cultural upbringing, adolescent age, and gender are factors that influence parent-adolescent discussions on sexual health matters[14,35]. While we are cautious not to oversimplify the discussion, the findings point to some promising directions towards understanding the dynamics associated with boys' and girls' sexuality education in Ghana.

We found that parents and their wards have divergent perceptions of young people's sexuality. Parents acknowledge the need for young people to have some knowledge about their bodies and sexuality but also emphasize the need for young people to be cautious in their exploration. Hence, parents' discussion of sex with their wards should be guided, including how they get to know what they know. For some adolescents, having unscripted access to sexual information from preferred sources such as the internet and peers gives them unlimited access and exposure to diverse sexual information, unlike adolescents who are inhibited by sources with limited access.

Young adolescents have knowledge of their sexuality and have experiences to share. The mainstream media, information from peers, and the internet are key sources of sexual information for parents and adolescents but now without some nuances. The findings show that while culture holds a stronghold controlling how young people get educated, information from multiple and interwoven sources such as peers and the internet equip some adolescents with the knowledge that helps them explore their sexual agency, particularly through surfing sexual content on the internet and peer group discussions. Indeed, these sources enhance adolescents' awareness of diverse sexuality issues, although some scholars argue about the credibility of such information[36]. The findings demonstrate that adolescents' preference for sources they are comfortable using to access sexual information also raises issues of inequality (i.e., what sources they choose and why they choose such sources). The inequality precipitated by the unequal access to sexual information influences the choice of sources young people deem convenient and appropriate to obtain such information. For feminist scholars such as Collins and Blige[21], this disparity has implications for young people's agentic sexual needs as they may be presented with conflicting messages from these numerous sources. There are power dynamics associated with young adolescents' sexuality education in Ghana, including what they choose to discuss. Adolescents' ability to discuss sexuality concerns with their parents is influenced by the content of the topics to be discussed as well as their age, gender, and cultural expectations of what constitutes appropriate sexual issues for young people[14,19]. Parents are receptive and open to sexual dialogue about less sensitive topics, something which was not previously tolerated due to norms and taboos. Yet, issues about dating and relationships, contraception, and condom use are still avoided. As evidenced by prior studies, this limits young people's access to sexual information[37] and makes them vulnerable to risky sexual outcomes[6,9]. Adolescents, in most instances, experience fear, guilt, and anxiety in freely expressing their views on sexual matters due to their sexual socialization primarily influenced by parents[13]. This means adolescents do not have autonomy over their sexual agency. For feminists such as Crenshaw[20], these uneven power relations limit dialogues on sexuality issues and inhibit adolescents from accessing sexual information that could be useful to their health and wellbeing. To ensure that adolescents receive comprehensive sexual health education, interventions that address these systemic distortions in adolescent sexual health education are required. For example, stakeholder engagement through adolescent health clubs such as SISTA's initiative and Alliance for Reproductive Health Rights are needed to capture adolescents' input that may help refine policies for their sexual health and wellbeing.

We noted gender dynamics in sexuality education, and this is rooted in cultural norms and gender roles. Adolescent boys and girls were more inclined to discuss sexual issues with their same-sex parents owing to comfort and connection and were inspired by patriarchal ideals. Fathers stated that sexuality matters that center around menstrual and puberty development in girls are better handled by mothers. Mothers emphasized girls' sexual vulnerability and the need to "keep an eye" on them. This translates to mean that adolescent girls benefit more from sexuality education due to patriarchal beliefs that allow the commitment of both parents towards empowering girls with knowledge, unlike boys, who receive little attention. However, this does not mean that boys are totally disadvantaged.

Rather, we think that while the emphasis on young girls creates an avenue for empowering them, it can also be empowering for young boys to develop what we regard as "creative agency". By creative, we mean that boys discover new ways of knowing about sex from multiple sources compared to girls, and this can be empowering to boys depending upon how "creative agency" is utilized.

To our knowledge, this study is one of a few to center on the voices of adolescents in the context of the CSE debate in Ghana. The results reflect the views of families in Adaklu and cannot be generalized to all parents and adolescents across the country. As a qualitative study, our research was meant to be exploratory and hypothesis-generating. Thus, we encourage more research on this topic in other parts of Ghana with larger sample sizes and/or hypothesis testing quantitative methodologies. Despite the limitations, our study has several strengths.

First, by using a qualitative lens and a combination of interviewing techniques, we were able to emphasize an interpretive process that allowed participants to freely express themselves on such a sensitive and contentious topic. We were able to highlight conversations that fell along gender lines, some between parents and their wards, and others deeming adolescent girls as more vulnerable than boys; the latter creating opportunities for targeted interventions that ensure that boys are not left behind in the formal and informal sexuality education curriculum; and girls are also not left "to blame" for whatever consequences befall the youth in their sexual explorations. Our techniques also conveyed how young people are pushing the boundaries to enhance their sexuality education from multiple sources, including the internet and social media. This finding suggests that these mediums should be incorporated into future interventions/implementation research endeavors that are aimed at this age group.

Secondly, including both parents and adolescents was another strength of the research. Often, researchers focus on one population or the other, but eliciting the views of both gave us the opportunity to compare and contrast the differences regarding sexuality education of young people in Ghana. Getting the buy-in of parents will be critical for implementation development and success. Finally, the selection of Adaklu was a major strength of the study. We chose the Adaklu region because it was noted by the GDHS/GHS reports as having increasing teenage pregnancy, abortion and (young)maternal mortality rates[31]. We hope that our findings will guide the formulation of strategies and policies aimed at abating these adverse reproductive outcomes for the young in this region. Additionally, the study may help researchers better understand the sexual socialization process for adolescents in such rural settings, which may be more rigid than in urban settings. Our findings may help sexual health researchers appreciate how rural folks carry out sex education, the lessons that can be drawn from this elucidation, and how such lessons can be used to improve sexual socialization and education to empower the youth in other settings, say urban youth, with the skills and knowledge to make informed choices about their sexual health

Conclusion

The study shows that parents' understanding of young people's sex education is culturally and morally scripted compared to adolescents. Young people have other sources of knowing about their sexuality, and that impacts their perceptions and experiences/behaviors towards sexual and reproductive health decisions/choices. The training young adolescent girls received, though restrictive in terms of sexual exploration, also offered them more agency regarding their sexual perception and behaviors than younger boys did. Scripted along gender lines, such training and conversations are mostly geared toward empowering adolescent girls and emphasizing their vulnerability, leaving boys to risky sexual outcomes due to the lack of attention and training. This makes adolescent boys susceptible to engaging in early sexual activities compared to girls who are somewhat empowered through their training and upbringing. This means that while the sexuality of young women can be restrictive due to their upbringing, young women can draw on their sexual training as a form of resistance mechanism in making informed choices about their sexual and reproductive health. Either we educate young people about sex, or they will seek information elsewhere, and they know they can. Gone are the days when adolescents just "suffered in silence". Therefore, policies seeking to promote young people's sexual and reproductive

rights in Ghana should pay close attention to their perceptions and sources of training as an agentic strategy they can draw from. In that direction, boys need special attention, just as cultures in Ghana do for girls in terms of their sexual upbringing.

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