

Gender differentials in adolescents' perceptions of sexual risk and protective factors in urban poor Accra

Adriana A. E. Biney - *Regional Institute for Population Studies (RIPS), University of Ghana*

Introduction

Adolescents living in urban poor communities are a vulnerable group, susceptible to exacerbated sexual and reproductive health challenges as a result of the combined effect of poverty and the urban environment (Dodoo, Zulu, & Ezeh, 2007; Madise, Zulu, & Ciera, 2007; Zulu, Dodoo, & Ezeh, 2002). These challenges also have their socio-economic implications as they perpetuate the negative cycle of low educational attainment, unemployment and poverty. Consequently, all this hinders the nation's progress in achieving several of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), namely, goals two to six (Ringheim & Gribble, 2010; Williamson, 2013). With just about one-half of Ghana's population being under 20 years, and the increasing rate of urbanization and migration to urban poor settings, it is necessary to focus on improving the sexual and reproductive health of these youth (Ghana Statistical Service, 2013).

A range of theories have been propounded to explain disadvantaged adolescents' early initiation into sex. The rational adaptation theory proposes that adolescent or premarital sex results from poverty, with youth using sex as a means to "achieve certain goals" (Meekers, 1994, p. 48) such as provide for their basic or material needs, or secure a husband (Grant, 2012; Verheijen, 2011). The social disorganization theory states that various influences, namely modernization, urbanization, Westernization, education, and the media, have resulted in the disintegration of adult control over children in the society; thereby resulting in their engagement in sex (Djamba, 1997; Meekers, 1994). Coercion and forced sex are also means through which adolescents initiate sex (Henry & Fayorsey, 2002; Koenig et al., 2004; Manzini, 2001), and their sexual abuse may even result from exploitation through transactional sex (Williams, Binagwaho, & Betancourt, 2012).

These theories suggest types of sexual socialization adolescents' face, which tend to be gendered. Gender socialization results in boys conducting themselves in sexual manners that differ from girls. These differentials may lead to behaviors that render adolescent girls at higher risk of encountering negative reproductive and sexual health outcomes. In this study, I hope to consider the agents and factors, norms and beliefs in our present society and manner of socialization that encourage or discourage negative reproductive health outcomes. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate adolescents' perceptions about sexual initiation and activity among their peers in an urban poor community in Accra, where young people may not exhibit the healthiest sexual behaviors. I ask the following questions: What are adolescents' perceptions on the risk and protective factors to early sexual initiation among youth in their community? In addition, how do adolescents' views about the risk and protective factors differ by gender? To explore this I rely on qualitative data, focus group discussions with adolescents residing in an urban poor community in Accra. I present findings about their thoughts and experiences on risk and protective factors to sexual initiation in their context.

Data and Methods

I was part of a research team that conducted eight focus group discussions (FGDs) with adolescents in August 2011. The eight groups were segmented by gender (male and female), age group (12-14 years and 15-19 years), and school status (in-school and out-of-school). The FGD participants were mostly older (52% were ages 15 to 19) and male (54%). Although some adolescents were out-of-school, they all had some formal education (primary and junior high school). Most adolescents identified their religious affiliations as Christian, were in the Ga ethnic group, and lived with one or both parents (70%) at the time of the group discussion.

During the group interviews, we asked participants about the factors that influenced adolescent sexual engagement in their community, and the factors that prevented adolescent sexual engagement in their community. The adolescents also decided together on the main “sex influencers” and “sex deterrents” among adolescents in their localities. The discussions lasted between 50 minutes and two hours and were tape recorded and later translated and transcribed. The transcripts were coded with codes initially generated from the notes that captured adolescents’ responses during discussions.

Preliminary Results and Discussion

Each group decided on the main sex influencers and preventers in their communities. Table 1 displays boys’ and girls’ choices. They were grouped under the following themes: poverty, pornography, personal choice, parents, peers and positive social institutions.

Table 1: Main risk and protective factors categorized into six themes

Group	Risk Factors (Influencers)		Protective Factors (Preventers)	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Younger In-school	Pornography	Personal choice	Positive social institution (School)	Personal choice
Younger Out-of-school	Pornography	Poverty	Positive social institution (Church)	Parents (Family)
Older In-school	Peers	Poverty	Parents (Family)	Parents (Family)
Older Out-of-school	Parents (Family)	Poverty	Parents (Family)	Personal choice

Poverty: Three groups, all female, mentioned poverty as the main reason for adolescent engagement in sex in their community. The strong emphasis of this from girls does speak volumes about their perceived vulnerability, and sometimes also assertiveness (Verheijen, 2011). The rational adaptation theory discusses how poverty renders young girls in sexual relationships to meet their material needs, to secure a husband, and so on. This ascribes a transactional nature to the relationship (Djamba, 1997; Meekers, 1994). One 19 year old stated: “...since I don’t have money, so when a guy propose to me I will accept it and he would not give me the money free, it will be in exchange for sex.”

The girls’ statements showed their pro-activeness in the process when a 15 year old mentioned: “Some children also need help so if they don’t get it then they engage themselves

in sex if their parent cannot provide for them”. Others also said: “**Participant 5:** ...due to school fees, if the parents are not able to pay, the child may try to get it and pay so that they don't be a drop out. **Interviewer:** So are you saying because the parents cannot pay the fees that's why they engage themselves in sex? **Participant 3:** Yes, because they are not working to pay their own fees and you can't do anything without money these days.” Thus, the girls recognized that their financial needs could be met once they were in relationships and they would have to give sex in exchange for material gain.

Pornography (or sexually explicit materials): Although all the boys' groups discussed the role of sexually explicit movies in their early engagement in sex, the two younger boy groups stated it as their main influencer. This is understandable since studies suggest men are visual creatures and are aroused by things they see. One 14 year old boy stated: “Some people go to watch pornographic films and after that they go in search for girls.” “...the impact of the nudity in the movies we watch influences us, and also pornography is prevalent amongst the youth who use the internet.”

Malamuth (1996) discussed how men seeing naked women and sexual acts can lead to their reproductive success. The social disorganization theory as it relates to adolescent and premarital sex also states that modernization, education, and also the media have promoted premarital and adolescent sex. The youth no longer listen to their elders but learn from their these other sources, to the detriment of the society (Malamuth, 1996; Meekers, 1994).

Parents (or the family): The main protective factor mentioned by both boys and girls was the family – bringing to light the impact of parents', relatives', or caregivers' attitudes and actions on adolescents' sexual involvement. Abbott & Dalla (2008) emphasize the importance of parental variables such as monitoring, and the permissiveness of their attitudes toward sex on their children remaining abstinent. The participants discussed a variety of means parents could promote or prevent their wards' sexual engagement. Their choices ranged from parent's giving sex education to their guidance and monitoring, as well as their financial and emotional support. Groups with older adolescents mentioned: “...the advice that we get from parents prevents us from engaging in sexual activities” and “... charity begins at home, if they are taught properly about sex education, they will abstain themselves from it”. In their paper, Bingenheimer, Asante, & Ahiadeke (2015a) assessed adult-adolescent relationship sub-scales and found their monitoring and conflict to be significantly related to their adolescents' sexual activity.

Peers: While seven out of the eight groups cited peer pressure as a promoter of sexual activity, only one group of boys selected it as their main influencer. This group of 16 to 18 year old in-school boys stated friends' teasing as a means of drawing others into sexual activity: “Sometimes your friends call you names and say you are daft if you don't have sex”. Friends also teach about sex: “The more they say the good things about sex they more they influence you and draw your mind to it” and “It is like the more a teacher teaches one subject the more it sinks in”. Finally, boys also gave insight into transactional relationships

enticing others into it: “*When a friend engages in sex and gets money that will also lead you into it*”.

Studies cite a number of ways peer relationships influence deviant behavior, including sexual activity (Bingenheimer, Asante, & Ahiadeke, 2015b). Adolescents in this community seem to influence others through actual pressure than by adolescents’ perceptions of their friends’ actions and attitudes. There was an absence of discussion about them using their networks to find potential partners for each other which may also occur in this setting.

Positive Social Institutions (specifically school and church): Attending school and church are prosocial behaviors that young boys said could prevent early sexual engagement. There is a vast amount of literature that supports the roles of religion and education in promoting abstinence (Abbott & Dalla, 2008; Bingenheimer et al., 2015b). FGD participants alluded to them being key institutions which offered them advice and reproductive health education. The in-school boys stated, “*The teachers tell us it is bad, so we see it as bad and should not be done*” and “*We see it as something that can bring you diseases which are expensive to treat like cholera and others*”. One out-of-school boy mentioned that “*attending church puts the fear of the Lord in you*”.

Personal Choice: Only girls talked about one’s choice as both a promoter and preventer of sexual initiation. These young girls discussed personal agency, one’s own decisions to stay chaste or become a delinquent, as well as exerting one’s will, remaining strong or giving in to social pressures. Abbott and Dalla (2008) found that youth who remained abstinent gave personal choice as their reasons for doing so. It is interesting to note that only girls discussed this issue of asserting autonomy in sexual relations. The in-school young girls especially felt that engaging or refraining from sex boiled down to simply choice. One cited, “*Children who decide within themselves to stay chaste will not engage in sex*”.

Conclusion

Youth in this urban poor setting had some gendered views about sexual initiation in their community. While young boys were influenced by pornography, girls discussed the role of poverty in their decisions to have sex. The role of the family was also key in promoting sexually healthier youth. Interventions, whether tailored to adolescents or adults in the community, should take into account their gendered reports.

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