

## Original Article

# Assessing Factors Influencing Early Sexual Initiation among Adolescents (13 to 19 Years) in Ghana: A Qualitative Study

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### Abstract

**Background:** The high prevalence of teenage pregnancies among in-school adolescent girls in particular, is a major concern for majority of parents, guardians and duty bearers in every country. The phenomenon of early sexual initiation among adolescents is a major contributory factor to these negative social and behavioural outcomes (teenage pregnancies, substance abuse, sexually transmitted diseases). In recognition of this behavioural and growth challenge that this study was conducted to appreciate factors influencing early sexual initiation among adolescents (13 to 19 years).

**Methods:** A qualitative approach was adopted using In-Depth Interview technique to unearth the factors influencing adolescents' acts of early sexual initiation. In-school adolescent boys and girls as well as out-of-school adolescent girls were purposively recruited. Overall, twenty-one (21) adolescents took part in the study. Senior High Schools (SHS) as well as Junior High schools (JHS) in the study area were randomly selected, and from which the study participants were drawn. A set of open-ended questions were designed to guide the interview sessions. Tape recordings as well as note taking were made during the interviews and subsequently transcribed.

**Results:** The study revealed several factors that motivate adolescents to engage in early sexual intercourse. These factors are broadly categorised into intrinsic and extrinsic factors and specifically included self-desire to experience sex (satisfy curiosity), social fitness, and economic challenges, broken homes/poor parenting, indecent media content, social/religious ceremonies, and the quest for high academic achievement.

**Conclusion and Recommendation:** This study served as a foundation and reference point for policy and program planning and implementation by duty bearers to ensure that comprehensive actions are taken towards promoting positive behaviour change among adolescents. It would further provide the basis for a thorough re-evaluation of approaches to the planning, designing and implementation of existing strategies and programs that seek to address adolescents' health.

**Key Words:** Behaviour, Sexual initiation, adolescents, Sexual intercourse, Peers

### Introduction

The World Health Organisation (WHO) describes adolescents as young people who are between 10 and 19 years old. This developmental stage of adolescence is characterised by emotional, physical, mental as well as psychosocial development (WHO 2014). This growth stage is prominently featured by a series of experimentation by these young adults as they make efforts at defining their values and well-being, and seek their independence. Unfortunately, such unguarded experimentations

culminate into risky behaviours such as early sexual acts and substance abuse that have negative implications for their health and well-being (Avert, 2010).

The WHO reported that about sixteen (16) million adolescents (15 to 19 years) who experienced their first sexual intercourse ended up with unplanned pregnancies. Additionally, about one (1) million adolescent girls from Low and Middle-Income countries give birth yearly (WHO, 2014). According to an annual report of the Ghana Health Service (GHS) about, 119,423

pregnancies were reported among adolescents (10 to 19 years) in the year 2013 (GHS, 2014). The prevention and control of unplanned pregnancies occurring among adolescents would require a multifaceted approach in programming and implementation of sex education messages such as abstinence and delay in sexual initiation. In situations where complete abstinence is deemed not feasible or unpopular among the adolescents, then the adoption of preventive strategies becomes critical (Oluwatoyin and Modupe, 2014).

Adolescents face varied but somewhat common challenges regarding their sexuality that have grave impact on their perception of issues and changes around them. The increasing observation of a reduction in the age at which adolescents initiate sexual intercourse is of significant public health concern. Observations of adolescents engaging in risky sexual behaviours and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS is a mark of a fundamental flaw or misunderstanding of the critical factors confronting adolescents and their sexuality (Adegoke, 2003). Several studies and researchers have noted factors such as family neglect, peer influence, substance abuse, and lack of parental guidance among others that influences adolescents to engage in early sexual activities (Blum and Mmari, 2005, Lee et al., 2006). It has been reported that Ghanaian females begin sexual activity a year earlier than their male counterparts do. According to GSS/GHS/ICF (2015), about 14% of adolescent girls (15-19 years) have engaged in sexual activities and are pregnant or are already mothers. Additionally, early childbearing is highly prevalent among adolescents with lower than secondary school level education than those with secondary or tertiary level of formal education (GSS/GHS/ICF, 2015).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The Socio-Ecological Model proposes that the interaction of interpersonal, intrapersonal, organizational and societal factors have both direct and indirect impact and influence on behaviour and lifestyle choices and the health outcomes of humans (CDC, 2013). No single theoretical model or framework could claim to comprehensively appreciate and offer complete solutions for the growth and behavioural challenges that confronts adolescents. A comprehensive understanding of behavioural

issues would therefore require the adoption and use of multifaceted theories and programs. Individual factors such as attitudes have been shown to relate to sexual behaviour. A school-based study conducted among adolescents, it was concluded that male participants who indulged initiated sex at a very early age held more permissive sexual attitudes than their female counterparts (Tobey et al., 2011).

Interpersonal factors play a very significant role in influencing adolescents' early sexual initiation. Changes in the family systems, education, communication and access to information as well unwholesome importation and adoption of alien cultures has significantly influenced the sexual behaviours of adolescents (Farid et al., 2015). The significant contribution of parents in the proper grooming and education of adolescents cannot be underestimated. Parents or family relations serve as role models and are in the right position to understand the challenges confronting these adolescents and offer proper guidance (Babalola et al., 2005, Biddlecom et al., 2009, Okigbo et al., 2015).

Studies conducted regarding adolescents' sexual behaviours usually involved the administration of interview questionnaires to participants. This approach even though it measures what is set to be achieved in a study, it however does not obtain a complete and deeper appreciation of the issues and sometimes do not wholly reflect the true experiences of the individuals answering the questionnaire compared to an approach that involves In-Depth Interviews (IDIs).

An important approach to better appreciating the factors influencing early sexual behaviours of adolescents would be to have the actors (adolescents) self-report the motivations that engender early sexual initiation via In-Depth Interviews. It is against this background that this qualitative study was conducted among adolescents (13 to 19 years) using In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) to obtain the lived experiences of adolescents regarding factors influencing early sexual intercourse initiation.

### **Methodology**

#### **Study Area**

The study was conducted in the Bongo district of the Upper East Region of Ghana. The Bongo district is among the districts in Ghana with reported incidence of teenage pregnancies

occurring among students in pre-tertiary schools thus resulting in high number of school dropouts.

### Study Sample

Twenty-one (21) adolescents aged 13 to 19 years participated in the study. The study participants were purposively selected and included adolescent boys and girls, as well as in- school adolescents and out- of- school adolescents. The recruitment was carried out based on set criteria: (1) Adolescents who have had sexual intercourse (2) Adolescents who have initiated sexual intercourse at a very early age (< 18 years). These adolescents were able to provide their lived experiences during the interview sessions. The sample size of the study was not pre-determined prior to the recruitment and start of the study. However, the total sample size was achieved at the point of saturation (Mack et al, 2005) when new information was not further provided by the addition of any new participant.

### Data Collection

Overall, fifteen (15) in-school adolescents comprising eight (8) boys and seven (7) girls were interviewed. In addition, six (6) adolescent girls who were out- of- school due to teenage pregnancy were purposively selected and interviewed. Two (2) pre-tertiary schools- Junior High Schools (JHS) and Senior High Schools (SHS) were randomly selected from which the study participants were drawn. The study took particular consideration of the willingness to express their personal experiences by the participants. For instance, adolescent girls and boys would feel more comfortable sharing their lived sexual experiences with their own gender. Interviewees who were shy to provide verbal responses were made to put into writing their responses in the presence of the interviewer. The interview questions explored adolescents' sexual experiences, reasons for early sexual initiation, and the role of families, the school, peers, and influence of culture in the early initiation of sexual intercourse by adolescents.

### Data Analysis

The responses of study participants were recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Tape-recorded verbatim transcription was performed particularly for interviewees who spoke the local language ('Gurune'). Additionally, written essay

responses by some of the interviewees were subsequently transcribed verbatim. The transcription was performed using Microsoft Office Word 2010, while an analysis of the responses was carried out using Microsoft Excel 2010. Since the study employed a qualitative approach, percentages and numerical values were not applied in the representation of the study outcomes. However, common responses of participants were indicated as majority if more than fifteen (15) out of the twenty-one (21) participants provided or shared a common view. The responses were then thematically presented. Significant views shared by the adolescents interviewed were stated in italics. Guided by key behavioural theories, an extensive discussion of the responses was made.

### Ethical Considerations

The study protocol was submitted to the health and education directorates for a review of the study protocol and permission solicited for the study to be conducted among the target sample population. Informed verbal consent was also sought and agreed upon by all study participants prior to their inclusion and participation in the study.

### Results

Generally, the responses of the adolescents could be put into two broad thematic areas: intrinsic factors (internal motivations) and extrinsic factors (external motivations). The intrinsic factors showed three domains that highlighted the reasons for adolescents' early initiation and engagement in sexual intercourse. The extrinsic factors also provided four themes from which an appreciation of the factors influencing adolescents' early sexual initiation could be inferred. A schematic illustration of the broad categorisation and interaction of the factors that promotes adolescents' engagement in early sexual activities are shown by figure 1.

### Intrinsic Factors

The In- Depth Interviews conducted revealed certain motivations for the early engagement in sexual intercourse by adolescents. For the specific intrinsic factors influencing this phenomenon of early sexual intercourse, the following themes emerged.

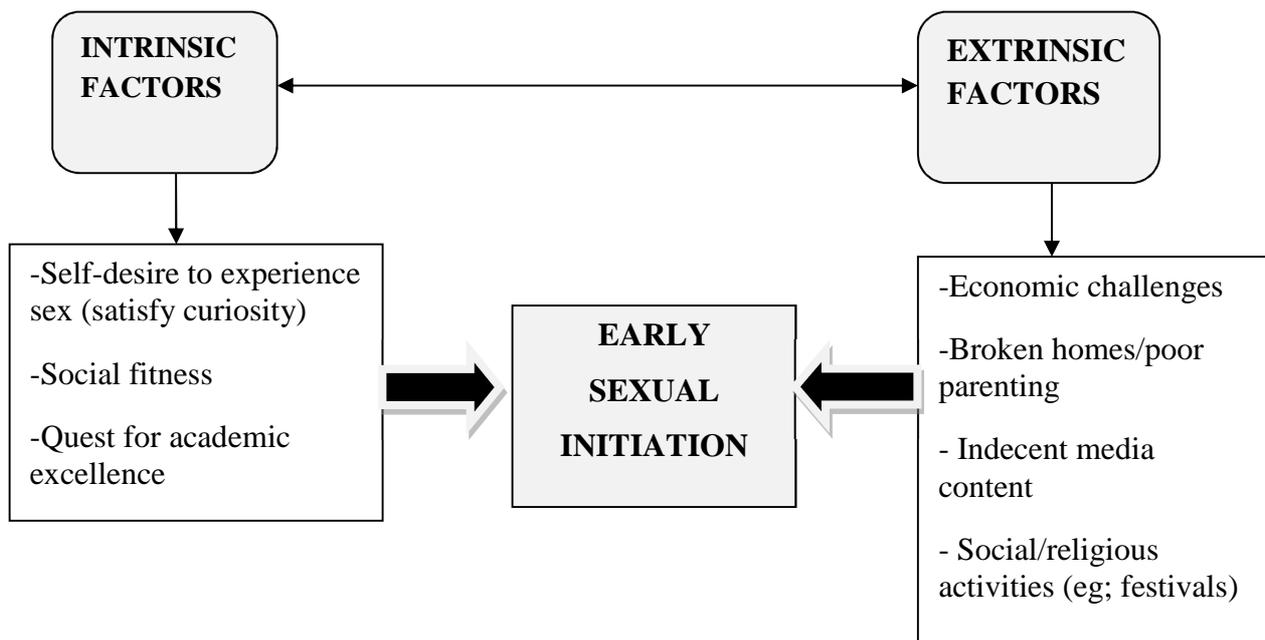


Figure 1: Pre-disposing factors influencing adolescents' engagement in sexual activities.

### Self-Desire to Experience Sex (satisfy curiosity)

Among the intrinsic factors that influence adolescents to engage in sexual intercourse included personal desire to satisfy their curiosity. Both in school and out-of-school adolescents and teenage mothers shared similar views as shown in the following remarks.

... "I just wanted to try it and feel how it will be, so that I can also talk when by peers are discussing about sex" ... [Female student].

"The urge for sex sometimes come-up and I am not able to resist it for long. Since I have a boyfriend, I am strongly tempted to satisfy my emotional feelings with him" [teenage mother].

... "As boys, the urge for sex is so strong such that I will want to experience it with a girl" ... [Male student].

### Social Fitness

The desire to have friends and belong to a social group is an innate feeling during the period of adolescence. These social groups and friends provide avenues for adolescents to share their personal feelings, worries, anxieties, and to find

solace and confide in friends for pieces of advice and solutions to their perceived challenges.

.... "If you are the only one among your friends who have not had sex before, they tend to tease you and that you are not a woman or you don't have feelings" ... [Teenage mother].

"Having sex with my boyfriend makes me feel loved, wanted and a beautiful girl" [female student].

.... "To be fully recognised and regarded by my friends as a man, I had to get a girlfriend and have sex so that I can also contribute to discussions and share my personal experiences" ..... [male student].

"Usually, those who have never had sex are called names, ridiculed and described as little babies by friends" [male student].

### Quest for Academic Excellence

One of the influencing factors of early sexual initiations that were peculiar to both in school and out-of-school adolescents was the desire to attain high academic achievements. According to the participants, this was goal was achievable by having brilliant colleague students as intimate friends.

....“Because I am intelligent, some of the girls do make advances at me so that so that I help them in their studies. The study relationship sometimes leads to sexual relationship”... [Male student].

“Eeii! Who do not want to have an intelligent boy as a friend, it is fulfilling for me since he mostly help me in my academic work. By extension, sharing and satisfying his emotional urge was only fair” [female student].

....“I do have some sexual feelings when I am sitting very close to a female friend studying mathematics”... [Male student].

The expectation of parents and close relatives for their children to achieve good grades in their final examinations partly puts undue pressure on the adolescents.

.... “I can’t afford to disappoint my parents in my final examinations. I have an intelligent boyfriend with whom we study together. The urge to have sexual intercourse comes up especially when we are studying alone at night”.... [Female student].

Almost all the adolescents that were engaged in the In-Depth Interview (IDIs) shared similar personal views regarding the reasons why they engaged in sexual intercourse at an early developmental age. Interestingly, most of the participants indicated that having sex was a natural ‘feeling’ to experience. However, where and when it would be practiced is left to the discretion of each adolescent whether to abstain from sex, engaging in masturbation, or engaging in real sexual intercourse.

### Extrinsic Factors

Participants in the study revealed motivations that drive their early sexual initiation, which were deemed to be beyond the immediate purview and control of the adolescents.

### Economic Constraints

Among the several challenges outlined by the adolescents, inadequate financial support from parents and relatives towards meeting their needs and wants in school compels them to enter into amorous relationships, which eventually results in the initiation of sexual intercourse.

....“Sometimes I am in need of items for school and cannot get them from my mother, so if my

boyfriend provides them and request for sex, I am oblige to agree”... [Female student].

“In school, I need to have a boyfriend who can offer me money to buy some groceries and stationery if I am ‘hard up’ and my parents cannot provide” [female student].

Some of the adolescent boys also indicated that they are sometimes under pressure to satisfy the financial demands of their girlfriends.

... “It is highly uncommon to find a girl who has a boyfriend in school and would not demand from him money to buy one thing or another”... [Male student].

“It is normal to spend on a girl because you would someday get emotional satisfaction from her” [Male student].

### Poor Parenting

It is undoubtedly a major challenge facing most single parents in particular to instil in their children all the virtues of life such that they would grow into adulthood being respectful, humble and well-behaved individuals free of blemish. This was corroborated in this study by the following remarks.

...“There is nobody in the house who would provide for me my needs. What will I do if am facing some growth and developmental challenges as an adolescent”... [Female student].

...”Mum and Dad are busy with work. This make us to have all the time to have fun and move around with friends who may lure us into unplanned acts such as sex”... [Male student].

### Indecent Media Content

Access to uncensored audio-visuals on television channels poses great threat to the efforts of both parents and adolescents at delaying sexual initiation.

“The content of movies on television do portray explicit sex scenes that makes us want to also try and see or it feels” [female student].

....“Pornographic materials are easily accessible on the internet and through phones. The next thing is for us to try what we see on videos”... [Male student].

... “Why, our bodies are not fuel wood. We have feelings hence what we see on movies will motivate us to try sex”... [Teenage mother].

### Social/Religious Festivities

The increase in social gatherings and activities in communities has its negative and positive ramifications on the youth. The celebration of traditional festivals and church programmes (conventions and all night programmes) attract majority of the youth who sometimes attend these programs with inappropriate intentions.

*“I once attended our local festival with my friends and had my first sexual intercourse there because we got drunk” [male student].*

*...“These occasions are opportunities for us to flee from our strict parents and “chill” with our boyfriends”... [Female student].*

### Discussion

The engagement in early sexual intercourse among adolescents is generally due to varied but similar reasons. The study assessed factors influencing early sexual initiation among in school and out- of- school adolescents aged 13 to 19 years. It is imperative to determine the motivations for early sexual initiation of adolescents since this behaviour have direct implications and consequences such as unplanned teenage pregnancies, STIs and unsafe abortions (Kaestle et al., 2005).

The factors are broadly categorised into intrinsic factors: Self-desire to experience sex (satisfy curiosity), Social fitness, and Quest for academic excellence. Extrinsic factors included economic challenges, broken homes/poor parenting, indecent media content, and social/religious activities (example; traditional festivals). Apart from the public health concerns and negative implications on the adolescent, the specific age during which sexual initiation begins is critical in the proper growth and development of an adolescent.

Overall, the study revealed factors that influence early sexual initiation among adolescents to include economic challenges, unregulated media content, poor parenting roles, and curiosity among others as reported in a study by Gilliam, 2007. Astonishingly, these factors so expressed by the adolescents are indicative of the seemingly lack of a comprehensive sexuality education for adolescents and sex education in general in schools and communities. Poor parenting and inadequate knowledge on sexuality is directly linked to these predictors of early sexual initiation. This is similar to the findings of

other researchers that revealed the important role parents play in promoting comprehensive sexuality education (Day, 1992, Hoyell et al., 1994).

A study by Gilliam revealed that the personal conviction of adolescents to delay or postpone sexual intercourse was far greater than the influence of parents and peers, which is at variance to the findings in this study (Gilliam, 2007). However, a study in Sub-Saharan Africa and among adolescents revealed that a major driver of sexual initiation was attributed to the desire of adolescents to belong to a peer group or maintain friendships by succumbing to their pressures and norms (Bingenheimer, 2015).

Similar findings were observed by other researchers regarding the significant role played by peer pressure and desire of adolescents to give in to perceived group norms for early sexual engagement (Selikow, et al., 2009, Wight, et al., 2006).

The urge to initiate sexual intercourse to satisfy their curiosity was commonly expressed and shared among the adolescents in this study. Majority of the adolescents indicated that they wanted to experience how it ‘feels’ to have sexual intercourse. In a bid to satisfy their curiosity these adolescents search for and view pornographic media which are easily accessible. This is consistent with the findings of other similar studies (Farid et al., 2015, Odeyemi, et al., 2009). Among out-of-school female adolescents in this study, majority of them indicated among other factors, economic challenges as the major driving factor for their early initiation of sexual activities. A study conducted involving out-of-school female adolescents in Nigeria revealed similar outcome (Asekun-Olarinmoye et al., 2011).

Even though majority of the adolescents engaged in early sexual activities, the motive somewhat varied from one individual to the other. It is expected that in-school adolescents would somewhat have a delay in initiating sexual intercourse compared to out-of-school adolescents. Interestingly, in- school adolescents in this study indicated that staying in the school far away from parents and relatives have its own challenges for them. They sometimes just need someone they could trust to confide in to express their emotional experiences with that person.

## Strengths And Limitations

The study included only adolescents who have had sexual intercourse and are in either school or out-of-school. This was done in order to gain a deeper understanding of the motivations and factors influencing early sexual initiation among the adolescents. Additionally, the participants were somewhat representative and views so expressed by the adolescents in this study could be applied to others. Discussing intimate issues such as sexual intercourse and emotions in this part of the world is quite uneasy. The study participants excluded other category of adolescents who could have also provided critical insight into the issues under consideration.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Understanding adolescents' behaviour change and designing and implementing appropriate programs aimed at addressing them requires a multifaceted approach. The school setting is an appropriate environment that could be used to implement comprehensive adolescent sexual and reproductive health programs. The presence of Teachers and Guidance and Counselling Departments in schools are appropriate personnel and structures that could be used to implement these programs. It is unfortunate to observe that majority of schools lacked these structures or in cases where they existed, they are not well equipped and utilised. For instance, how knowledgeable are the Guidance and Counselling Coordinators in schools on adolescent health and reproductive issues? Additionally, the apparent absence of Adolescent Corners in our schools to provide comprehensive sexuality education does not support the proper comprehension by adolescents regarding their physical and emotional changes, and how to adjust to these changes experienced. The involvement of adolescents themselves in programming and implementing sexuality education activities is critical. The formation of active and well-resourced peer counselling groups in schools and communities would significantly promote good knowledge regarding adolescent sexuality in schools and communities.

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