

Exploring the Factors Influencing Adolescent Sexual Behavior in Plateau State Nigeria

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Abstract Background: While many factors such as poor negotiating skills, low self esteem, gender norms and peer pressure have been identified to influence the sexual behavior of adolescents in Nigeria, the influencing factors differ according to the context in which adolescents in Nigeria live. **Methodology:** The study was a qualitative exploratory study using a focus group discussion among adolescents. Eight FGDs were conducted among adolescents between the ages of 18 and 19 years who were purposively selected from schools and communities. They were divided into males and females, those in school and those out of school in two LGAs of Plateau State, Nigeria. **Results:** The adolescents in this study reported sexual debut from ages 10 to 15 years. Those who were in school mostly mentioned pleasure love and peer pressure as reasons for their sexual act while majority of those out of school reported forceful sex and transactional sex as major reasons for their sexual activities. Transactional sex as a reason for sex was reported by both sexes. Most males reported curiosity and show of power as influences to their sexual activity, while females reported trying to please the males as a reason for having sex; this was concurred by majority of the females. **Conclusions:** This study found that adolescents initiate sex quite early most of which is unsafe. The various reasons for their sexual activities differ clearly according to their sex, and the context in which they live.

Keywords Adolescents, Sexual behavior, in school, out of school, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Nigeria has a growing population of young people, with adolescents constituting an important proportion of the population. About 28% of adolescent in Nigeria are said to be sexually active. [1-4] Although there are a number of findings reporting sexual debut at earlier age, the median age has been 15 years with adolescents between the ages of 15 to 19 years engaging more in sex. [1, 5, 6, 7]

Despite their early sexual initiation and being sexually active, many adolescents in Nigeria lack the skills to delay the onset of sex and to negotiate safe sex. This is of concern considering that age at first sexual intercourse is an important indicator of the possibility of unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases among adolescents. [2, 8]

We all have the right to a satisfying and safe sex life and the freedom to decide when to do so but without ill health. However, for most adolescents, the decision to initiate sex and have a protected or an unprotected sex is influenced by many factors such as poor access to correct sexual and

reproductive health information and services. [9, 10]

Correct knowledge of contraceptive use is relevant in addressing the sexual and reproductive health problems of adolescents. A study that was conducted in the central part of Nigeria revealed that very few adolescents could precisely identify when a girl is likely to get pregnant. [11] Likewise, less than 50% of adolescents had good knowledge of contraceptive. Even among those who had some knowledge, male condom was the most popularly known contraceptive. [12, 13]

Many factors act as drivers to adolescent sexual initiation and reasons for sexual behavior. Among the top reasons given by adolescents who participated in a national survey across 12 states in Nigeria for their sexual activity were; the show of love, to derive pleasure, to have fun and to satisfy curiosity. Others on the other hand said they were forced into sex, or had sex for the financial and material gain. [5, 14]

Evidence of differences in the sexual behavior between the literate and the illiterate adolescents have been reported, others have also viewed economic status, a proxy for poverty as an important influence to adolescent sexual behavior mainly among adolescents who are out of school. [15-17]

Studies in Nigeria have proven that socially defined role and power ascribed to men and women affect the reproductive health of adolescent differently. [18, 19] The inequality faced by Nigerian females on the basis of the

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gender norm that places the male child above the girl has been reported from studies to affect the ability of the females to assert their right to negotiate sex or condom use. This is because of the perceived superiority of the man and the expectations that a female should always submit to the demands of the man. [20-22]

The sexual behavior of adolescents in Nigeria has exposed them to the risk of unintended pregnancy, STI and HIV. Studies have shown that most pregnancy among adolescents in Nigeria are unintended as a result of inconsistent and incorrect condom use which has ended with unsafe abortion. [23, 24] Nigeria reports a yearly abortion rate of 25 abortions/1000 women. More than a quarter of these abortions are from adolescents, resulting from unintended pregnancy. [25, 26] In the southern part of Nigeria, about 32% of the cases of unsafe abortion was among adolescents. [27-29]

Unsafe sexual practices as a result of the influences to the sexual behavior of adolescents has been attributed to the unacceptable rate of STI and HIV documented to be 17% among adolescents in the southeastern part and 14% in the northern part of the country. [24, 30, 31]

The study aimed at exploring and understanding the different influencing factors to adolescent sexual behavior based on their sex and the context of either being in school or out of school. This is geared towards recommending an appropriate intervention that will address the underlying factors and target the different categories of adolescents based on their peculiarity.

2. Methodology

The study was a qualitative exploratory study that was conducted among adolescents between the ages of 18 and 19 years in two Local government areas (LGAs) of Plateau State; Jos North and Bassa LGAs. The two LGAs were selected out of the 17 LGAs in the State. Jos North was purposively selected being the LGA where the capital city, Jos is located while Bassa LGA was selected through a simple random sampling technique by balloting out of the four LGAs (Mangu, Jos East, Jos South and Bassa) situated around Jos metropolis.

The researchers collaborated with Voice for the girl child, a local Non Governmental Organization (NGO) working with adolescents in Plateau State to identify communities, schools and adolescents for the study. Two communities and two schools were selected in each of the LGAs for the study.

Permission was taken from the principals of the schools after explaining the reason for the study; afterwards a list of senior students between the ages of 18 to 19 years was generated as the sampling frame. From the list, one student was contacted who also contacted others in a snowball manner and 12 males and 12 females who gave their informed written consent in each of the schools were included in the focus group discussion. For adolescents out of school, we worked together with the youth leaders in the

two communities to identify 12 adolescent males and 12 adolescents females from each of the communities who gave an informed written consent to be part of the study.

Eight FGD were conducted, 4 FGD with adolescents in school and 4 FGD with adolescents out of school. The selection ensured homogeneity in the group by separating them base on sex and those in school and out of school for the FGD. Two adolescents, one male and one female were trained as facilitators for the FGD and with the permission of the participants; notes were taken and an audio tape recorder was used to record the discussion.

An FGD guide questions adapted from UNFPA and WHO data collection instruments for adolescent sexual and reproductive health survey was used for the study. The FGD explored the sexual behavior of adolescents, factors influencing their sexual behavior and gender issues affecting their sexual behavior. Confidentiality was maintained and real names were not used. Both participants and researchers used nicknames to address each other to allow the adolescents speak freely. The FGD was conducted after school hours for those in school and at a time and place chosen by the adolescents for those out of school.

Data was transcribed after the close of each day. Common themes were generated from the responses and categorized accordingly, it was entered into excel sheet and given codes based on the themes and similarities in the responses. The results were presented according to the majority and important minor responses. Verbatim quotes were then used to illustrate important responses.

Because it was a qualitative study, percentage/proportions were not used but where 8 or more participants out of the 12 participants responded to a question or agreed to a response, it was considered majority.

Important responses indorsed by the participants were written in italic (quotations).

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethical Review board of the Royal Tropical Institute in the Netherlands and the Jos University Teaching Hospital Ethical committee in Nigeria. Permission was obtained from the ward heads of the two communities, the principals of the secondary schools and an informed consent was obtained from the participants before commencement of the study.

3. Results

The findings from the FGD conducted with adolescent in school and out of school and according to their sexes on the various reasons for their sexual activities are presented below with important quotes in italics. All the adolescents were between the ages of 18 to 19 years.

Age at sexual debut

The age at sexual debut (age at first sexual intercourse) was similar for females and males, most of the females reported 10 to 15 years while most of the males reported 11 to 16 years as age of sexual debut. There was no difference in the responses of those in school and those out of school.

"Females begin sex from age 10 to say 15 years"

(Female out of school)

"Ahhh, males here start having sex from 11 to 15 years"

(Male In-school)

Reasons for adolescent sexual behavior

The adolescents in this study cited various reasons for having sex or being sexually active. The reasons were slightly different for males and females and also for those in school and out of school except for a few similar responses.

Fun, pleasure and love

Majority of both males and females cited pleasure, love, influence and pressure from friends and peers as reasons for sexual activities.

"Sometimes you cannot control yourself and want to have sex, so you do so for fun and pleasure. It is part of the show of love for your guy" (Female in school)

"When you love a guy you have to prove it by having sex when he asks for it" (Female out of school)

"My friends pressurize me into having sex, they tell me I am missing out" (Male in school)

Transactional

Money or material gain (transactional sex) was reported by both sexes as reason for going into sex especially with older partners who are much older than them

"You have sex with older women and they settle you with money"

(Male out of school)

Girls have sex with older men to get money and gift, we call them ATM machine" (Female out of school)

Watching pornography or nude activities

Other common reasons given by adolescent males were; watching pornography, uncontrollable urge for sex and curiosity, a similar response was given by the females in school but the females out of school mostly mentioned watching films with some nude activities as a trigger to sexual act.

"Watching movies makes some females want to have sex and among friends they put pressure and say if you don't have sex you are a small girl" (Female out of school)

"Sometimes guys want to have sex just out of curiosity or wanting to experiment" (Male in school)

"My uncle introduced me into pornography and since then I can't stop and I even find more sight on my own, I have more than 7 girlfriends and have sex all the time" (Male in school).

A lady I went to help get drinking water offered me food and while I was eating she put a pornographic movie and she called me to rub her back, from there I did not know when I had sex with her, that was the beginning of my having sex with older women. (Male out of school)

Gender and power relations

Most males in school reported sexual act as a proof of their manhood and to show their capabilities to friends while the males out of school mentioned it was an expectation to fulfill

as a man. The females out of school mostly reported being forced by older men including family members to have sex, following an abuse.

"When I was in primary 4, ladies look down on me so I had to prove something to them by having sex with them" (Male in-school)

"My friend sleeps around and it is because her uncle forced her to have sex with him and because of anger and feeling that there is no need behaving as a good girl, she now has sex with anybody, even if it is not her boyfriend" (Female in school)

A man who is older gives you gift and forces you to have sex and most times you cannot say anything, this is common here. (Female out of school)

Peer pressure, vengeance and influence of drugs

Peer pressure was a common reason given by all the groups for engaging in sex. Most mentioned that they were influenced by their friends to initiate sex to show they were matured and catching up with what friends were doing. The males, mostly those out of school mentioned that they desire and have sex or even forcefully have sex when they take alcohol and other drugs. Interestingly is the act of vengeance and anger as a reason for sex given by some females who said they agree to have sex with other partners who are not even their boyfriends just to hurt their boyfriend who has offended or cheated on them with another girl.

"When you don't have sex your friends will say you are not mature" (Female in school)

"You can have sex with another man when you want to get back at your boyfriend and he will be jealous and come back" (Female in school)

"When you take drugs or alcohol you will have sex and we put drugs inside drinks like tramol and have sex with the females" (Males out of school)

Reasons for unsafe sexual practices

Almost all the adolescents expressed that it was not intentional to have unprotected sex. Majority said condoms were not readily available to them, others said they are either stigmatized or judged when they go to purchase condom while some said they were only told to abstain from sex and never informed about protected sex. More than half of the females out of school however reported their inability to negotiate for safe sex and forced sex by older men as reasons for unprotected sex.

"It is not easy to buy condom without people judging you, we have to use coded languages or make some signs when you go to the stores to buy condom so that people will not know" (male in school)

"It is difficult to discuss condom, so if you don't want the man to get angry, you just allow him skin to skin without condom" (female out of school)

Reason for not having sex

Few of the males and females in school gave reasons for delaying sex. Some reasons were; religious believe, to earn respect from future husband and the fear of disease and death

“It is good for a girl to remain a virgin until she marries so that her husband can respect her” (Female in school).

“We don’t want to get disease or get pregnant so it is better not to have sex and you know a girl will not have money to take care of herself or her baby and may even die during abortion so is better to avoid it” (Female in school)

“I don’t do such things and I don’t keep bad friends, it is against my religion” (Male in school).

I read books a lot, there is a book I read that says you should not give your self cheaply, true love waits for the right time. (Female in school)

4. Discussion

It is obvious that not all adolescent go into sex for the same reason, various factors influence their decisions for sex and this is dependent on the context in which they live and the circumstances surrounding them.

We see here that for some adolescents, the expression of love, pleasure and fun was the reason for the sexual initiation. However, while these were the reasons given by most males and females in school, it was not so for most females out of school who were not given the right to decide when to have sex but had to go into sex because they were forced into it or because of what they perceived was societal expectations. This is a repeated findings from literatures. [7, 31, 32] it is clear that their different contexts defined the reason for their sexual behavior.

Some personal behavior like alcohol consumption and the use of drugs was identified as a clear influence for risky sexual behavior among adolescents. [32, 33] These were obvious findings reported by the adolescent especially those out of school. It is not surprising considering that those out of school are more expose to drugs and the tendency is to engage in risky behavior including unprotected sex when under the influence of drug.

What adolescent’s watch, listen to and the sources of their information also determine their sexual behavior. The Internet and social media, which is readily available to adolescents has provided them with so much information which can not be verify to be correct and appropriate for adolescent. This in addition to the access to pornography has been found to influence to a great extent the sexual behavior of adolescents. It has been documented too that adolescents from highly sexualized homes tend to try out sexual act they watch their parents openly display. This is not different from the findings in studies conducted in southern and southwestern part of the country. [34, 35]

It is important to say that adolescents face different challenges base on the gender roles and unequal power relations the society has ascribed. While male adolescents as seen in this study went into sex to satisfy the expectations of society or as a show of manhood and maturity, Some females were forced to have sex and most who were out of school could not negotiate condom use when forced into sex. Which implies that unprotected sex is not entirely a deliberate act.

These situations are in line with similar findings from other parts of the country. [35-37]

The role of gender and unequal power relations can also be linked to economic disadvantage state of adolescents, resulting in their inability to negotiate safer sex. When both sexes involved in cross-generational sexual relationship, it deters the practice of safe sex. [5, 38] Although some school of thought have contested the argument that economic benefit is the reason for sexual behavior, this may be slightly different in the context of Nigeria. This study just like others have given some evidence that poverty was a driving force for sexual activity. This was especially among out of school adolescents who go into sex for the money or material gain. [39, 40]

An interesting finding here are two distinct roles of self-esteem, while the males mostly reported feeling superior to the females as a reason for their sexual act, females reported respect for the males and the desire to please the men as a reason for accepting sex or even willing to remain virgins. The females felt less important than the men and felt obligated to respond to the man’s demand who is believed to be superior, while the males consider females lower than them and should therefore always have their way. [39-41]

Despite the growing desire for adolescents to experience sex and the documented evidence of early age at sexual debut, some adolescents have reasons to delay sex. Some of the reasons gathered from this study and other studies were; religious beliefs, fear of disease and pregnancy and the desire for a girl to gain respect from the future husband. [5, 7, 42] This obvious is an indication that sexual behavior differ among adolescents.

5. Conclusions

Adolescents in this study have proffered diverse reasons for their sexual behavior. Although there are similarities in some of the reasons mentioned by the different groups, a distinct difference exist in the factors that influence the sexual behavior of males and females, adolescents in school and out of school. It is important to take into cognizance these differences when providing interventions to address the sexual health challenges of adolescents in order to prevent outcomes such as STI, unintended pregnancy and unsafe abortion in the different groups.

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