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Adults' Qualitative Accounts of Adolescent Sexual Activity in A Resource-Constrained Urban Setting: What Role Does Social Disorganization Play?

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abstract

Sexual risk-taking behaviour among adolescents in urban resource-constrained communities has in recent times been deemed more pervasive than in the past. This study sought to interrogate this in an indigenous Ga community in Accra, Ghana by (i) identifying the perceptions on past and present patterns in adolescent sexual behaviour, and (ii) unearthing the factors accounting for the changes in adolescent sexual behaviour over time. We carried out two focus group discussions comprising 18 parents of adolescents and five individual interviews with elders (aged 50 and above) in the study community. The transcripts generated from the interviews were analysed thematically. Parents and elders alluded to adolescent sexual activity not generating as many negative reproductive health consequences in the past as it is in recent times; with adolescents engaging in public sexual acts unlike before. Individual, family and community/structural-level factors accounting for the changes in adolescents' sexual behaviour over time include child indiscipline, lack of parental care, influence of the media, poverty, population growth, and community features. The changing nature of the urban space has been identified as a potential source of weakening adults' control over adolescent sexual behaviour. The findings indicate that most of the changes taking place in the community are explained by social disorganization. The solutions to improve their sexual and reproductive health behaviour and outcomes require individual, family and community/structural-level programs and interventions.

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Introduction

Adolescent sexual activity in the low-resource environment has been well documented over the past few decades as a challenge to development and a negative consequence of urbanization, especially in sub-Saharan Africa (Anarfi, 1997; Beguy, Kabiru, Zulu & Ezeh, 2011; Biney & Dodoo, 2016; Biney, Ewemoje & Amoateng, 2020; Dodoo, Zulu & Ezeh, 2007; Greif, Dodoo & Jayaraman, 2011; Marston, Beguy, Kabiru & Cleland, 2013; Obeng Gyimah, Kodzi, Emina, Adjei & Ezeh, 2014; Okigbo, Kabiru, Mumah, Mojola & Beguy, 2015). Adolescents residing in these settings are more prone to sexually risky behaviours which include early sexual activity, multiple partnerships, and condom non-use. These sexual behaviours result in increased susceptibility to HIV/AIDS and other Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), unintended pregnancies with concomitant unsafe pregnancy terminations and adolescent childbearing (Anarfi, 1997; Biney et al., 2020; Dodoo et al., 2007; Greif et al., 2011; Obeng Gyimah et al., 2014). Studies, especially those carried out in informal settlements, indicate that context is important in dealing with the sexual behaviour of adolescents (Anyanwu, Akinsola, Tugli & Obisie-Nmehielle, 2020). Individual characteristics of adolescents explain behaviour to some extent; however, family, school, and community environments play a role in their life outcomes, including sexual and reproductive health behaviour (Govender, Naidoo & Taylor, 2020; Upchurch, Aneshensel, Sucoff & Levy-Storms, 1999). More so, with community characteristics, the context largely influences family and individual experiences which, in turn, affects behaviour. For example, Dodoo, Sloan & Zulu (2003) found that young people living in informal settlements in Nairobi are more prone to early sex because the nature of their setting exposes them to sexual activity at early ages.

A number of studies (Anyanwu et al., 2020; Dodoo et al., 2003) on this subject have been conducted in informal settlements. However, indigenous low-resourced communities, in particular, have a peculiar nature that warrants investigation. Urban migrant informal settlements are associated with poverty, low educational outcomes and crime, and are considered to be unhealthier for adolescent development. Nonetheless, indigenous group settings which connote safer spaces may not necessarily exude risk-free enclaves for the youth. Modernity, education, the media, and urbanization have been cited as pervading practices, especially in the urban settings where communities uphold traditions. The 'connectedness' from social cohesion which promotes positive social values, thus protecting individuals, are slowly eroding. This may also be the reason for the early engagement of adolescents in sexual activity (Djamba, 2008; Markham, Lormand, Gloppen, Peskin, Flores, Low & House, 2010).

Although quite dated, various studies have alluded to aspects of the social disorganization theory in explaining adolescent and premarital sexual behaviour in sub-Saharan Africa (Ankomah, 1999; Djamba, 1997; Le Blanc, Meintel & Piché, 1991; Meekers, 1994). They show how adherence to traditional authority is eroding; thus, parents' opinions relating to topical issues concerning adolescents' lives, including sexual behaviour, are no longer revered. This present study explores the role of 'social disorganization' on adolescent sexual behaviour in an urban low-resource indigenous community in Accra through adults' accounts. It sets out to: (i) identify adults' accounts of the differences in the past and present 'models of sexuality'¹ among adolescents (Le Blanc et al., 1991) in an indigenous Ga community; as well as (ii) unearth factors accounting for the changes in adolescent sexual behaviour over time.

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¹ Loosely based on terms used in Le Blanc et al.'s (1991) paper, the phrase 'models of sexuality' connotes any distinct patterns in the sexual behaviour of adolescents, including their sources of sexual education, forms of sexual expression and sexually permissive attitudes, as well as risk-taking behaviours such as early sexual activity and multiple partnerships.

Social Disorganization and Adolescent Sexual Activity

Social disorganization connotes a 'breakdown in a neighbourhood's organization and culture' (Bowen, Bowen & Ware, 2002, p. 470). Shaw and McKay (1942) propounded the theory and suggested three structural factors that influence social disorganization – 'low socio-economic status', 'ethnic heterogeneity', and 'residential mobility'. Based on this understanding, high rates of poverty, mobility/migration and diversity in ethnic group compositions may impinge on social cohesion and networks, directly or indirectly, and lead to youth delinquent behaviours (Shaw & McKay, 1942; Wikström & Loeber, 2000). Studies have identified pathways through which various factors accounting for disorganization, reduce 'opportunities for prosocial activities' and increase 'opportunities for delinquent activity' (Bowen et al., 2002, p. 470). For example, Bowen et al. (2002) discuss the factors that break down cohesion in a community as leading to a loss of the cultural/traditional influence, norms, and control, ultimately translating to weakening that which supports an 'effective family and parenting process'.

A few studies (Djamba, 1997; Meekers, 1994) conducted in sub-Saharan Africa have tried to explain premarital sexual activity through this lens. They loosely adopt the three structural factors (low socio-economic status, ethnic heterogeneity, and residential mobility) and focus on the erosion of traditional values that promote positive sexual behaviour which has been replaced with contemporary ideals on the subject (Djamba, 2008). The theory also characterizes adolescent sex as 'spontaneous' and without being "directed towards any special goal" (Meekers, 1994, p. 54). Preliminary evidence from research conducted in Ghana has identified some factors associated with risky sexual activity (Oppong Asante, Nketiah-Amponsah, Andoh-Arthur, Boafo & Ampaw, 2018), but few interrogate this at the community level (Gyan & Marhefka-Day, 2021). Studies have scarcely explored community settings that are not entirely informal settlements but rather indigenous urban poor settings due to available amenities and other contextual factors that do not connote the entirely deplorable conditions of the informal settlement. In addition, these indigenous urban poor settings have larger social networks and access to social support despite the urban poor conditions. This study explores accounts of adolescent sexual activity at different periods and the role of social disorganization – through changes in community-level factors – increased poverty, ethnic heterogeneity, urbanization, and modernization. We seek to point out the changes that have taken place, and the contextual factors accounting for these changes and their implications on adolescent sexual activity.

Most studies on social disorganization are quantitative, suggesting a lack of subjective, and to some extent, nuanced accounts on the pathways through which delinquent behaviours occur using this theory (Opoku-Ware, Akuoko, Ofori-Dua & Dapaah, 2022). In addition, while qualitative studies may identify the mechanisms through which adolescent risk-taking behaviours occur, adults' accounts are also important in understanding some of these behaviours. Parents and elders can offer personal insights on the reasons for specific deviant behaviours over time due to community-level characteristics and changes they may have observed.

Patterns of Sexual Activity Across Rural and Urban Contexts

Social disorganization provides a lens for understanding the role of community on various forms of deviant behaviour, including early adolescent sexual activity, with it concomitant risky and negative reproductive health outcomes. In the literature, different patterns of sexual activity emerging in urban and rural contexts (Joshi, 2010; Ngoc Do et al., 2020; Smith, 1997; Tadesse & Yakob, 2015; Wiafe, Mihan & Davison, 2021). For example, sexual activity over time in rural settings is characterised by earlier ages at first marriage/cohabitation (Phiri, Musonda, Shasha, Kanyamuna, Lemba, 2023) and childbearing (Kassa, Arowojolu, Odukogbe & Yalew, 2018; Melesse et al., 2021; Mpilambo, Abduraghiem & Susuman, 2023; Shasha, Phiri, Namayawa, Sikaluzwe, Nakazwe, Lemba, Muhanga, 2023) as well as traditional rites and societal control over adolescent sex (Moshi & Tilisho, 2023; Sarfo, Yendork & Naidoo, 2021). The lack of access to key sexual and reproductive health information continues to put adolescents in rural areas at risk of making poor sexual health decisions (Nabugoomu, Seruwagi & Hanning, 2020; Sousa, Santos, Santana, Souza, Leite & Medeiros, 2018). Also, poor access to formal education and employment may predispose them to risky sexual encounters (Abdurahman, Assefa & Berhane, 2023). On the other hand, changes in sexual behaviour among adolescents in urban areas indicate more risk-taking, less condom use, sexual activity under the influence of alcohol or other drugs (Millanzi, Osaki & Kibusi, 2023), multiple partnership (Ngoc Do et al., 2020) and watching pornography (Tadesse & Yakob, 2015). The lack of cohesion in urban areas, weakening parental control/support and increasing independence due to "disorganization" contribute to the uptake of such risky behaviours (Tadesse & Yakob, 2015; Wiafe et al., 2021).

Study Setting: The Ga Community

The setting for the study is an indigenous Ga community located in Accra, the capital city of Ghana. The Ga people are part of the Ga-Adangme ethnic group and are related to the Dangme ethno-linguistically. There are six main Ga clans located in Accra with the majority residing along the coast – the Gulf of Guinea. This study was carried out in Ga-Mashie, one of the indigenous Ga coastal communities in Accra. Most of these localities are low resource or urban poor settings (Henry, Agula, Agyei-Asabere, Asuming, Bawah, Canning & Shah, 2021; Quarcoopome, 1998). One study carried out in Ga Mashie (but this includes data from a neighbouring slum Agboghloshie), describes the setting as one with high individual and community cohesion scoring 8.2 and 7.5 points out of 12, respectively (Kushitor et al., 2018).

The Ga people are known for their adherence to their local customs and traditions despite residing in the most urbanized and developed region in the country (Quarcoopome, 1998). For example, the Ga people continue to celebrate the popular Homowo festival and still maintain traditional shrines in their communities. Their socio-economic activities include trading, fishing and manual labour (Kushitor et al., 2018; Wrigley-Asante & Mensah, 2017). Urbanization has been central to changing practices of the people with the elite migrating out and in-migration producing heterogeneity in perpetuating the poverty cycle (Quarcoopome, 1998). The community under study is situated in the heart of the Central Business District, thus encouraging internal migration, with migrants looking for economic opportunities, especially in the informal trading sector (Quarcoopome, 1998; Wrigley-Asante & Mensah, 2017). The coastal nature of the community and the historic landmarks left by the British, Dutch and Portuguese promote tourism with annual festivals such as *Chale Wote* promoting street art in Ga-Mashie and Ghana (Sitas, 2020; Wrigley-Asante & Mensah, 2017). The proliferation of different cultures through migration, street festivals, traditional festivals, a vibrant trading centre and coastal dwelling all present opportunities for the mixing of values and beliefs; and expose the people to different social influences such as adolescent sexual behaviours.

A number of studies (Alhassan & Dodoo, 2020; Atobrah & Awedoba, 2017; Biney & Dodoo, 2016; Fayorsey, 1993; R. Henry & Fayorsey, 2002) have been conducted on indigenous Ga communities on adolescent sexual activity. These studies suggest diverse ways through which youth sexual activities are framed within this space. For example, Atobrah and Awedoba (2017) found that youth in a typical Ga setting had 'casual and unrestrained sexual and reproductive behaviour' (Atobrah & Awedoba, 2017). Fayorsey (1993) also alludes to commoditization of childbearing in the Ga community which could fuel the desire to form relationships and engage in early sex. Biney and Dodoo (2016) assessed sexual readiness in the same context and observed the majority of adolescents reporting not being sexually ready despite engaging in sexual activity. What is not clearly stated in the literature, however, is adults' reflections on the past and present contributors to adolescent sexual activity. More particularly, how elders and parents assess the situation regarding adolescent sexual activity in an indigenous Ga community, and their suggestions on contributors to the patterns of sexual and reproductive behaviour among youth.

Materials and Methods

Study Design and Data Collection

This research uses qualitative methods to explore the phenomenon of interest – adolescent sexual behaviour – over time. The data were collected in August 2016 over a period of four days in an indigenous Ga community in Accra, the capital city of Ghana. The entire study was part of a project that sought to explore circumstances surrounding adolescent sexual activity in Accra. Eight trained interviewers, fluent in the indigenous Ga language, conducted a series of focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs) with boys and girls aged 12 to 19² years, mothers, fathers³ and elders in the community. There were six FGDs and 18 IDIs with adolescents, two FGDs with parents and six IDIs with elders. The parents and elders were not required to be parents and grandparents of the adolescents interviewed. The mix of methods and study participants provided a means of triangulating the information obtained about adolescents in the community to enhance credibility of the data.

Participants were selected by community mobilizers residing in the neighbourhood. The mobilizers recruited participants based on the study's inclusion criteria. Participants eligible for the study were adolescent girls and boys between ages 12 and 19 years, residing in the community under study,

² We acknowledge that the World Health Organization defines adolescents as 10 to 19, however, we excluded 10- and 11-year-olds from the study due to our preference not to discuss sexual behaviour with these early adolescents.

³ The fathers' FGD included two men who were caregivers to adolescents and not their biological fathers. Despite this, the terms 'parents' and 'fathers' are used to describe all of these participants.

had parental approval and were willing to participate in the study. Male and female parents had no age restrictions but were required to be biological parents of adolescents or caregivers currently responsible for an adolescent, should be residing in the study community and be willing to participate in the study. The elders were men and women over age 50 and of Ga descent, they were also expected to be residing in the study community and be willing to participate in the study. All other categories were excluded from the study. The community mobilizers informed community members about the study through face-to-face meetings and phone calls. Eligible residents who agreed to participate were given the dates and venues for their interviews. Once set numbers were reached, no further participants were recruited.

Data collection tools consisted of semi-structured interview guides developed by the first author and reviewed by experts working on adolescent sexual health studies. The adolescents' FGD guides included general questions on circumstances leading to early sex, sexual readiness and coercion in their community. Similar questions were asked in the parents' FGDs and elders' IDI interview guides but were worded differently to facilitate conversations for the different approaches. However, for the IDIs with adolescents, more in-depth questions on their romantic and sexual experiences related to sexual readiness and coercion were captured.

For this specific paper, data from two same sex focus group discussions with parents and five individual interviews with elders, respectively, were analysed. A sixth individual interview transcript with an elder was excluded from the set because although being born in the community, he did not fully grow up in the community but left and migrated back over two decades ago. The two parents' FGDs consisted of nine men and nine women while the elders were two men and three women. The fathers' FGD lasted for about two hours and the mothers' FGD took just over an hour to complete, while the elders' interviews ranged between 40 and 80 minutes. In addition to discussing recent happenings, the interviews required that the study participants recall their personal experiences and the experiences of colleague adolescents as far back as the 1960s and 1970s for the elders, and the 1980s and 90s for parents.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee for Humanities (ECH), at the University of Ghana, Legon, Accra with protocol number ECH 086/15-16. All participants were informed about the study and signed informed consent forms to indicate voluntary participation in the study. We attained written assent from adolescents while parents of those below 18 years orally consented for their wards to participate in the study. Upon completion of the focus group discussion or individual interviews, participants were provided with tokens comprising toiletries worth about \$3 as compensation for their time.

Data Analysis

All in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were audio recorded, and the data were later translated and transcribed verbatim. The qualitative analysis software, Atlas.ti version 7 was used to analyse the transcripts which was initially conducted by the first author using the thematic network analysis approach (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Upon receiving the transcripts, the first author read through the transcripts and assigned both deductive and inductive codes to portions of text. The deductive codes were primarily generated from the literature that had been reviewed as the study was being developed. The codes were grouped into their respective basic and organizing themes under the broader global themes of: (i) differences in past and present 'models of sexuality' and (ii) factors accounting for the changes in adolescent sexual behaviour. To establish intra-coder reliability and further enhance trustworthiness in the analysis, the first author reviewed the codes and themes at another instance – over six months later and not too many codes and themes were revised. The second author subsequently reviewed the transcripts and verified and renamed a few themes under the study's broader global themes. The results presented in this paper are from analysis carried out with portions of the parents' FGD and elders' IDI transcripts that discussed adolescents' past and present sources of sexual information and sexual behaviour, and factors that have triggered changes in adolescent sexual activity in the community under study.

Results

Findings were classified under the two global themes corresponding to the research questions: (i) past and present 'models of sexuality' and (ii) factors accounting for changes in adolescent sexual behaviour. As mentioned earlier, the phrase 'models of sexuality' is loosely used based on terms used in Le Blanc et al. (1991), which connotes any distinct patterns in the sexual behaviour of adolescents, including their forms of sexual expression and sexually permissive attitudes, as well as risk-taking behaviours such as early sexual activity and multiple partnerships. As indicated in Table 1, the main

sub-theme under the first global theme includes past and present models of sexual behaviour. Sub-themes under the second global theme include reasons for adolescents' changes in sexual behaviour at the individual, familial and community/structural levels. Prior to the reporting of results, background characteristics of the study participants are described.

Participants' Characteristics

Twenty-three participants were enrolled in this study. The ages of the nine fathers ranged between 32 and 50 and averaged 38 years, while the nine mothers were between 30 and 51 years and averaged 39 years. Mothers had on average 3.4 children while the fathers had an average of two children. Fourteen FGD participants were Christian and four were Muslim. Their educational attainment levels ranged from three with no education (two female, one male), two with primary education (one female, one male), and the remaining 13 had some form of secondary education, with none stating indicating that they had attained post-secondary education. They were all of Ga origin except for one female who was Akan. Two male and three female elders were also interviewed. They were all above 50 years, affiliated with the Christian religion, had some primary and middle school education and had been raised in the community under study. Three were fully Ga while two women were half Ga. They all had biological children, although the number was not specified.

Past and present 'models of sexuality'

According to the adults' accounts, past and current adolescent sexual behaviour and its ensuing reproductive health outcomes differ. First, adolescents have become more public with their sexual activity. Some respondents cited instances where they are unable to sleep because young people disturb them with unabashed public sexual acts. Adolescent sexual activity that was previously discreet has increased in visibility and magnitude. In their opinion, this public display of sexual activity is not something that existed in the past.

Some of the problems are sleeplessness. We are not able to sleep; they [adolescents] disturb us. The boys and girls stand at places like this very corner, having sex, and even when someone is passing by, they don't bother. This is the problem we are facing. (Elder 3 - Female)

When you see a car parked but shaking, then it [sex] is being done in it.... It is serious in this community...they come and park their cars here and kiss. (Mothers FGD)

Second, participants stated that although certain sexual practices and negative reproductive health outcomes occurring among adolescents such as teenage pregnancy, induced abortion, homosexual and heterosexual intergenerational relationships, multiple partnerships, prostitution, and transactional relationships all occurred in the past, it is currently at a higher magnitude.

In our time abortion existed, prostitution was also in existence. You see they were all happening; there is nothing which has never happened before. But it wasn't like today; in this twentieth [twenty-first] century it is scary (Elder2 - Male)

Third, while one participant mentioned that HIV/AIDS has never been a problem in the community, some mothers in the FGD disagreed. Adolescents' risk associated with HIV/AIDS was seen as an issue to some but not to others.

Okay...for this community I have not heard that anyone has contracted HIV/AIDS; I haven't heard of such a thing. (Elder3 - Female)

AIDS is very common along this lane going.....from this place [points to a street outside] through to that side, AIDS is common. (Mothers FGD)

Adolescents in the current generation were reported as exhibiting heightened sexual activity, deviant sexual behaviour, and a greater degree of negative reproductive outcomes in comparison to adolescents in the respondents' generation. Although concerns did exist during their dispensation, they believed conditions were currently worse.

Table 1: Coding frame displaying themes, codes and sample quotes

Global Themes	Organizing Themes	Basic Themes	Codes	Sample Quote*
Past and present 'Models of sexuality'	Sexual behaviour and reproductive health outcomes	More sexualized	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Noisy sex in public - Early ages at first sex - Transactional sex (intergenerational, heterosexual and homosexual)* - Don't sleep at home 	<i>"It is practiced by the young children at the ages of 16 and adults in their 20's and 30's. When the adult homosexuals sleep with the children and give them money for it, they tend to enjoy the reward therefore they offer themselves for sex at other times." (Elder 4 – Female)</i>
		More negative reproductive health outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Abortions* - Unintended pregnancy - HIV/AIDS 	<i>"They do the abortions secretly without the knowledge of their mothers. Some mothers also hold their children's hand to a facility to cause the abortion for the children. The moment they get to know that abortion is an option, they continue to get pregnant and abort." (Mothers FGD)</i>
Factors accounting for changes in sexual activity	Individual level	Child indiscipline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Disregard parents - Disrespect elders* - Aware of human rights 	<i>"...Nowadays adults can no longer discipline [other people's] children because if you dare, they would ask you if you are their caretaker." (Mothers FGD)</i>
	Family level	Lack of parental care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Stop providing* - Stop monitoring 	<i>"When she [the mother] gets up in the morning she gets to the market and when she returns, she doesn't ask the girl-child whether she has eaten or not eaten. Because of this the children also do things that they like." (Elder 2 – Male)</i>
	Community/ Structural level	The media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sexual content on television - Sexual content on internet - Sexualized lyrics* - Pornographic music videos 	<i>"Those songs should not be played in the schools as it spoils the children. I attended the graduation ceremony of my little boy and all the school children were gathered and a song was played for them to dance chorography. The song was very provocative...I called one of the teachers and queried her on the kinds of music they are playing for the kids." (Mothers FGD)</i>
		Poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Transactional sex - Seek 'worldly pleasures' 	<i>"When they are schooling, their parents are unable to provide their needs. When they request for things such as money, they are unable to provide because their businesses are not doing well. When this happens, the children stop schooling and when this happens, they usually depend on boys or their boyfriends and they begin to engage in certain bad plays [sex]." (Elder 2 – Male)</i>
		Population growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Population increased - Community more populous* 	<i>"As we speak now, even if you go to the community centre to educate them [adolescents] on these issues they would question your integrity; they would ask if you are the one to tell them what to do. They would cast insinuations on you and tell you to go and advise your own children at home. I blame everything on over population; we are too many." (Elder 4 – Female)</i>
Community features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No boundaries so sex is more evident* - No boundaries so adolescents go out - Night clubs and drinking bars prevalent 	<i>"Many of them do not have rooms; they sleep [have sex] on the pavements. Money is also hard to find, so they feel when they sleep with the boys, they must be paid for it. So, they fight over money. The least thing results in fights." (Elder 3 – Female)</i>		

Source: Fieldwork, 2016

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Contextual factors accounting for the changes in adolescent sexual activity

Factors accounting for the changes leading to the more sexualized nature of adolescents were stated. These reasons could be placed under individual, family and community/structural-level factors. Respondents touched on **child indiscipline** as an individual-level factor, **lack of parental care** or parents' inability to discipline children as a family-level factor. The **media** with concomitant increased access to varied sources of sexualized information, **poverty** along with the desire for money, **population growth** and **community features** were all community/structural-level factors mentioned by participants.

Individual-level Factor

Child Indiscipline. Participants cited child-discipline as the only individual-level factor. While in the past adolescents were afraid to openly display their sexual escapades, adults seemed to suggest that this was not the case in recent times. In the past, adolescents were better behaved in public, more respectful towards adults and would not consider outward shows of sexual engagement as opposed to the current generation.

I: Was this [current sexual behaviour] the case in the past when you were an adolescent?

E1: No! No!....there was discipline, there was total discipline in the area because even when you are standing behind somebody's window, the moment you see that an elderly person is coming, you will run. (Elder 1 - Male)

Now there is no respect anymore. Children of today, especially in this area are disrespectful. When they set out and their mothers ask them where they are going...they don't regard their mothers. (Elder 2 - Male)

The inability of community members to discipline other people's children and children's understanding of their human rights played a role in forming this indiscipline. Participants relayed how the ties in the extended family system had deteriorated and thus, community members were no longer able to discipline their friends and relatives' children.

In the past during our time, there was nothing like human rights. Today, because of that "human right" there is nothing we could do. In our time, anybody can discipline everybody's child but now how dare you? Human rights will come in...the human rights have changed things. (Fathers FGD)

In the past, everyone could discipline anyone's child; but this cannot be said of today's generation. How dare you cane a friend's child? Discipline has broken down because the right to discipline is for the father of that particular child. The extended system of family ties is no more so you cannot discipline another man's children. (Fathers FGD)

Family-level Factor

Lack of Parental Care. Lack of parental care was an outcome and the cause of child indiscipline as explained by a few participants. The lack of care also connotes a lack of parental monitoring, control, and support and this poses a key family-level factor impacting recent patterns in adolescent sexual behaviour. Sometimes the lack of monitoring was due to parents being busy with work and other obligations to the detriment of their child's needs.

Secondly, you can see that the parents, when the young girls... reach a certain age, the parents stop caring for them because they are disrespectful. When they notice disobedience in their daughters, they conclude that the girls have boyfriends, so they cease providing them money for upkeep. Now parents are not taking good care of the children...so the children are let loose. They claim the children are disrespectful, so they do not even think about their schooling, they don't think about anything concerning the children. When she [the mother] gets up in the morning she gets to the market and when she returns, she doesn't ask the girl-child whether she has eaten or not eaten. Because of this the children also do the things that they like. (Elder 2 - Male - underlined for emphasis)

So, what causes those things [early sexual activity among adolescents] is lack of parental care. Parents expose their children to danger. I have warned my wife to keep her eyes on the children, especially the small girl. (Fathers FGD)

Another participant also discussed how the broken family system minimizes parental monitoring leading to adolescents engaging in behaviours without their parents' knowledge.

What I would like to say is that the blame should be put at the doorsteps of the mothers and fathers.... In cases where both parents are together, the children are somewhat disciplined; but where there is separation, the children play tricks on the parents and do what they like. When they tell the father they are going to their mother, they rather go and sleep with friends. So, I think divorce or separation are worsening our problems. (Fathers FGD)

Community/Structural-level Factors

Some community/structural-level factors were mentioned as reasons for changes in adolescent sexual behaviour. These include the media, poverty, population growth and community features.

The Media. Adults discussed the media as a source of sex education that ultimately influences sexual behaviour. Parents' accounts also seemed to connote a sense of helplessness in preventing their children's access to sexual content through the media, since they would be accessing it using various mediums and at different times, without their knowledge. Mediums such as the television and the internet - through phones and computers at internet cafes were mentioned.

From 12 years going they get the feelings, so the moment they see those things [sex] on the television they would practice them. So, they begin [having sex] gradually and master [it] finally. When you advise them, they tell you that, you don't know what the future has for them. (Mothers FGD)

*They copy what they see at the [internet] café. (Mothers FGD)
Some TV scenes also portray aspects of sex which children feel they have to practice. Because they see kissing and other sexual acts in the movies, they see no wrong in doing it. (Fathers FGD)*

The TV...at times it spoils the children...sometimes as you are asleep your children are watching something. Now we are in a computer world and even phones have certain things loaded on them ...it is not good. He/she is seeing pictures and other bad stuff. (Elder 2 - Male)

Parents also spoke about music children are being exposed to that has sexual connotations. Shatta Wale, a Ghanaian dancehall-reggae musician who composes music in Ga, was singled out as producing music with 'provocative' and 'pornographic' lyrics and music videos for youth in the community.

The songs from Shatta Wale are also provocative; they are not appropriate for children.... those songs should be banned. In Rawlings' [former President] era such songs could not be composed, they would be banned. The video clips of the songs are provocative and show pornographic scenes. (Mothers FGD)

Poverty. The community under study is considered a resource-constrained or urban poor indigenous community and thus, poverty is a key factor influencing young people's initiation into sex. Girls seemed to be the main recipients of goods and money as they engage in these relationships to get their needs met.

Money is also hard to find, so they [girls] feel when they sleep with the boys, they must be paid for it. (Elder 3 - Female)

It was also mentioned that parents' inability to provide some of the basic needs of their children propelled them into transactional relationships, sometimes with the parents' approval.

More often than not, poverty is the main reason [for young people's early sexual activity]. Poverty is number one. When I say poverty, it stands for everything. Parents can't afford to pay fees... A colleague of ours whose girl child was entering the university was asked to pay 70 million Ghana Cedis [GHS 7000⁴]. Where is that parent going to get this money from? So poverty... poverty is very common in this community. (Elder 2 - Male)

Like one of my colleagues said, sometimes the parents are aware the children are flirting [in relationships] but because the children bring home some of the money, the parents rather encourage them to do more. This is because most of these parents are themselves struggling to make ends meet. (Fathers FGD)

One elder spoke about young people's desire for more than basic needs being the reason for their sexual activity. He described it as the 'insatiable quest for money' and 'worldly pleasures' that lead young people into sex.

That is what I am saying that it is due to worldly pleasures and the insatiable quest for money that all these [adolescent sexual activity] are happening. (Elder 3 - Female)

Another aspect of this is the cramped living conditions in this urban poor setting where adolescents are exposed to sex early when they see their parents engaging in intercourse.

In the past, I lived with my parents in the same room; we were many in the same room but I never knew how they had sex. By the time I realized she was pregnant and had given birth. But these days, little children who are still breastfeeding, those who are even 3 or 4 years old know about sex.... those who see their parents doing it record it into their memories and when they meet their peers, they mimic what they saw. So, when you ask them 'Where did you learn that from?' they reply, 'from my mother and father'. You may not understand but maybe they are many in a single room, so they see what goes on. (Elder 4 - Female - underlined for emphasis)

The subject of poverty plays out in different ways to influence adolescent sexual activity - whether through parents neglecting their basic needs, transactional sex norms being perpetuated in the urban poor space, the desire to have certain material goods, or living conditions enforcing exposure to sexual activity.

Population Growth. According to the adults interviewed, population growth culminated in a series of outcomes including children's knowledge of their rights, the lack of respect for adults in the community, and not heeding to adults' advice. These residuals of changing population dynamics highlight disorganization within societies that have resulted in changes in adolescent sexual behaviour, including what has been observed in this urban poor setting.

Our population has increased sharply and our laws on human rights have caused lots of damage. This is because when you try to advise a child, he will tell you it is his right to do what he is doing, and you have nothing to say or do. (Fathers FGD)

The things we are seeing [adolescent deviant behaviour] in this community now never existed. Things have changed now; [in] those days, things were cool, and the human population was lower than today. (Mothers FGD)

Today, we are populous, there is envy and selfishness; everyone wants to progress...People work for money; others use their bodies for it [money] (Elder 4 - Female)

Population growth could result in a lack of control over people's behaviour and seems to be an underlying factor linked through other individual, family, and structural-level factors to influence adolescents' sexual activity.

Community Features. A few participants complained that although adolescents across the country behave similarly, due to the designated boundaries and curfews occurring in wealthier urban communities, deviant adolescent sexual practices were not more evident. Therefore, sexual activity among adolescents in low-resourced communities without boundaries is more public and easier to notice. These adolescents also have more opportunities to loiter, making them prone to sexual activity.

I think we are witnessing these things [adolescent sexual activity] because we are not 'enclosed'; our area is not enclosed so everyone sees it [adolescents having sex]. It is everywhere, but in areas where there are gates, or their homes are fenced and gated you won't see it. But here because there are no gates people see it more than areas with gates, so it happens everywhere. (Elder 2 - Male)

If you are at Ridge or East Legon [wealthy parts of Accra], the residential areas, by this time they've closed your gate. Who are you to come out from those houses? But here, look at where we are. Some of the houses do not have gates so you can just loiter about any time and go out at any time. (Elder 1 - Male)

Other community features such as the recent establishment of drinking spots and night clubs in the community had also negatively influenced adolescent sexual behaviour. One mother noted the influence on how their daughters dress and behave.

⁴ This is equivalent to USD1,750 in 2016 when data collection was carried out. The exchange rate was about 1 US Dollar to 4 Ghana Cedis.

There are night clubs here, so it makes it difficult to control our children. They make friends with bad gangs who do not sleep early. Due to the clubs, they dress shabbily and go to town with revealing dresses.... The problems in this community are uncountable; the night clubs in particular have 'spoiled' our youth. The youth no longer respect their parents; they do not pay attention to good counsel. (Mothers FGD)

Thus, the urban poor space with its lack of boundaries does not only expose young people's sexual escapades, but also enable them to engage in sex. The night clubs also influence their indecent dressing and disrespectful behaviour toward parents. This finding brings to light the fact that the community space/environment may have more influence over some adolescents' behaviours than even the adults in their lives.

Discussion

Using qualitative interviews with parents and elders, this study sought to identify differences in the past and present-day sexual behaviour patterns among adolescents in an urban poor setting in Accra. The study also explored individual-level, family-level and community/structural-level factors accounting for the changes in adolescents' behaviour over the past few decades, as perceived by parents and elders. We find that adults in this community are a rich source of information to glean experiences and perceptions about adolescent sex over a 50-year period. Participants emphasize how conditions with adolescent sexual behaviour are worse in the community because of the changes arising from urbanization and modernization.

The findings infer that the changes taking place in the community may be accounted for using the social disorganization theory in several ways, while also contradicting the theory in other ways. Adolescents' change in behaviour – from a fear of adults formerly to their current disrespect towards adults – connotes a loss of social control, related to the social disorganization theory. As highlighted by Bowen et al. (2002), a break down in cohesion in a community results in a loss of parental influence and control. In relation to adolescent sexual activity, the theory suggests that adolescent sex is 'spontaneous and is not directed toward any special goal' (Meekers, 1994, p. 54). In this context, we find evidence that both refutes and supports the social disorganization theory since adolescent sex can be both spontaneous and planned in this setting. Indications of population growth, the proliferation of sexual media to influence adolescents and the modernization taking place in this urban poor setting further affirm these spontaneous "opportunities for delinquent activity" as highlighted by the social disorganization theory (Bowen et al., 2002). However, adolescent sexual activity in the community under study is also regarded as planned behaviour, especially when young people have sex to meet their basic needs. From adults' accounts, we find that sexual activity is also very much attributed to poverty, hardship and a lack of jobs resulting in a quest for money to survive and purchase other material goods. Consequently, adolescents in this community are willing to engage in intergenerational or homosexual transactional relationships as well as prostitution. It all suggests that they engage in sex for a purpose, and this can be best explained by the rational adaptation theory (Djamba, 2008). The social disorganization theory is silent on adolescent's planned sexual activities and the reasoned actions for engaging in sex despite the lack of control in their settings.

Furthermore, the community features such as poor housing systems, and the increase in the number of drinking bars within the community expose adolescents to alcohol with its concomitant link with risky sexual behaviour. While street and art festivals are powerful tools for showcasing art and developing young talents (Sitas, 2020), these festivals also expose the young people to other cultures through the mixing of cultures and may leave adolescent vulnerable to experimenting with sex.

We find that the media are significant contributors to adolescents' sexual activity in the present day as there are several mediums used to access age-inappropriate information about sex. Parents recounted television stations showing inappropriate material, children have accessing to phones with pornographic material on the internet, as well as children's access to explicit music lyrics and music videos. Young people's access to such information has been shown to shape their perceptions and result in sexual behaviours similar to what they see (Day, 2014; Flood, 2009; Wright, 2014). Restrictions on access to inappropriate information as well as parental monitoring may reduce the influence of the media on the behaviour of adolescents. Unfortunately, parents in such communities tend to require knowledge in order to provide age-appropriate information to their children (Esantsi et al., 2015; Usonwu, Ahmad & Curtis-Tyler, 2021). However, in the literature, it is indicated that there are some useful information and learning moments from television shows and movies that parents use to educate their wards about sexual and reproductive health issues (Muhwezi et al., 2015).

The respondents acknowledge that adolescent sexual activity occurred in the past since early childbearing is the norm in this setting (Fayorsey, 1993). However, they state that this is currently occurring more frequently and at a greater intensity than in the past, with adolescents being less ashamed to have initiated sex. Ready access to sexual media content, undisciplined youth, the lack of parental care/support and lack of monitoring, as well as poverty have rendered children more vocal about their sexuality. Unfortunately, the consequences for engaging in early sexual activity on adolescents' future prospects may be more damaging to this current generation as well as impede low- and middle-income countries' harnessing of their economic potential (Mumah, Brinton, Mukiira, Kabiru & Izugbara, 2015; Patton et al., 2016).

We acknowledge the following limitations in this study: first, participants were conveniently selected and thus, their views do not represent all perceptions and experiences of adult community residents. However, we do not seek to generalize the information, and only intend to highlight our participants' subjective accounts of past and present views about adolescent sex and reasons for the changes. Second, it is to be recalled that bias may also be an issue since we requested respondents to recount their period of adolescence and circumstances at this time. This can go as far back as the 1960s and 70s for the elders, and the 1980s and 90s for parents. Social desirability as well as older people's framing of issues where they consider all things modern as wrong could also play a role in how they perceive and report information about current adolescent sexual behaviour. To navigate this, to the extent possible, we probed for specific accounts to gain a comprehensive understanding of their thoughts on an issue. Finally, due to limited funding, we arranged in advance for a set number of interviews to be conducted; hence, the process of 'meaning saturation' was not used as the stopping criterion in obtaining data.

Despite these limitations, the study has succeeded in highlighting parents' and adults' views on adolescent sexual activity between the 1960s and the 2010s. Future studies can carry out longitudinal research in such communities to explore changes in this phenomenon going forward. Both survey and qualitative data will enable an assessment of the exact mechanisms through which specific individual, family and community/structural factors influence adolescent sexual activity in the community.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Adults in an urban poor community in Accra provided their perceptions about adolescent sexual behaviour in their community. Parents and elders recounted instances of sexual behaviour in the past as being better than present times. They also indicated that child indiscipline, lack of parental care, poverty, the media, population growth and community features as the main factors leading to the changes in adolescent sexual behaviour in the community. Therefore, solutions to improve their sexual and reproductive health behaviour and outcomes require individual, family and community/structural-level programs and interventions.

The findings highlight the importance of parental monitoring and care (a family-level intervention) on adolescents' wellbeing. Parents themselves can be resourceful tools for sex education for adolescents if given the right education. Because parents in such communities tend to require knowledge to provide age-appropriate information; they must be given opportunities to receive sex education for the different adolescent age groups to resume this role of being the primary source of information for their children. In addition, parents should commit to providing their wards' basic needs as well as ensuring safe housing for their adolescent boys and girls to reduce the risk of young people seeking accommodation in other unsafe spaces.

In addition, since adults in the community acknowledge that the rise in drinking spots potentially exposes adolescents to sexual activity; it is important that they regulate these bar activities to prevent adolescent from having access to these spaces. Again, community leaders, parents and relevant stakeholders should take advantage of the space art festivals provided in this indigenous community to educate adolescents on safe sexual practices such as abstinence and condom use with the aim of preserving the accounts of the 'good old days' while reducing the incidence of risky sexual behaviour.

Abbreviations

ECH - Ethics Committee for Humanities
FGD - Focus Group Discussion
IDI - In-depth Interview
SSA - Sub-Saharan Africa
STI - Sexually Transmitted Infection

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