

# Poverty and crime: Uncovering the hidden face of sexual crimes in urban low-income communities in Ghana

Charlotte Wrigley-Asante<sup>1</sup>

George Owusu<sup>2</sup>

Martin Oteng-Ababio<sup>3</sup>

Adobea Y. Owusu<sup>4</sup>

## Abstract

*Although the debate about the link between poverty and the incidence of urban crime in developing countries is complex, nowhere is the link more persuasive than in the urban low-income communities of these countries. Based on official police data, key informant interviews (KIIs), and focus group discussions (FGDs) from five low-income urban neighbourhoods in Ghana, we analyse the incidence and drivers of sexual crimes in urban low-income communities. The analysis revealed that sexual offences are one of the major crimes in Ghana, in spite of the legal and institutional frameworks to curb these acts. We argue that in urban low-income communities, poor housing (reflected in high room occupancy rates, overcrowding, and congestion) and poverty in general promote sexual crimes in such communities. Moreover, patriarchal attitudes serve to exacerbate particularly females' exposure and vulnerability to sexual crimes. We recommend that policy measures to reduce sexual crimes should not focus exclusively on education and institutionalization of legal frameworks but also extend to poverty reduction programmes that include urban planning and slum housing upgrading.*

**Key words:** gender; poverty; sexual crimes; urban low-income communities; Ghana

<sup>1</sup>Charlotte Wrigley-Asante, Department of Geography & Resource Development, University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana. Email: [cwrigley-asante@ug.edu.gh](mailto:cwrigley-asante@ug.edu.gh) <sup>2</sup>George Owusu, Institute of Statistical, Social & Economic Research (ISSER)/Department of Geography & Resource Development, University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana. Email: [GOwusu@ug.edu.gh](mailto:GOwusu@ug.edu.gh) [geowusu@yahoo.com](mailto:geowusu@yahoo.com) <sup>3</sup>Martin Oteng-Ababio, Department of Geography & Resource Development, University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana. Email: [moteng-ababio@ug.edu.gh](mailto:moteng-ababio@ug.edu.gh) , [moababio@yahoo.com](mailto:moababio@yahoo.com) <sup>4</sup>Adobea Yaa Owusu, Institute of Statistical, Social & Economic Research (ISSER), University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana. Email: [gaowusu@ug.edu.gh](mailto:gaowusu@ug.edu.gh)

## **Introduction**

The debate linking poverty and the incidence of crime, particularly sexual crime, in developing countries is complex. However, studies have shown that poverty can predispose some people to sexual abuses and expose the more vulnerable to abuses of their sexual rights (Everett, 1997; Jolly & Hawkins, 2010). For example, in Lesotho, daughters placed in households of wealthier extended families as domestic helps go through several forms of abuse, including rape (Everett, 1997). Similar studies in Zimbabwe and Cote D'Ivoire also show that where family members have non-conforming sexual relationships, their families are more likely to reject them if they are not bringing in an income (Jolly & Hawkins, 2010).

Similar practices have been noted in other African countries, including Ghana, with domestic crime data consistently showing that females are more likely to be abused or raped, with the underlying predisposing factor being associated with gender-related roles of males and females (Cusack, 1999; Britwum & Cusack, 2009). It has therefore been noted that women and girls are the major victims of sexual violence in particular and domestic violence in general. In Ghana, however, attempts to address domestic violence have focused mainly on providing requisite legal frameworks and strengthening institutional arrangements. Principally, attention has been on how well these institutions and legal frameworks have performed, with a limited focus on the relationship between gender, poverty, and sexual crimes. Thus, although sexual crime remains a major gendered offence in Ghana, its relationship with poverty has received very limited scholarly attention. Our paper highlights these linkages, using both national-level quantitative data and qualitative information from five low-income urban neighbourhoods in Ghana. We argue that the poor (and, particularly, poor females) are generally more exposed to sexual crimes than other income groups, and this is partly due to their geographical location, housing conditions, poor socio-economic status, limited access to police, and general powerlessness.

The paper is divided into five sections. The next section provides the institutional and legal frameworks for dealing with sexual crimes in Ghana, and this is followed by presentation of a conceptual framework for understanding sexual crimes and poverty. Subsequently, the study methodology and data analysis are presented. Finally, the paper provides conclusions and policy implications.

## **Institutional and legal frameworks for dealing with sexual crimes in Ghana**

Ghana's overall legal and institutional frameworks make provision for addressing sexual crimes and protecting individual rights. Legally, the country's 1992 Constitution guarantees equal rights to men, women, and children, including also the vulnerable and other disadvantaged groups. In addition, Chapter 6 of Ghana's Criminal Offences Act (Act 29) deals with sexual offences. The first provision of the chapter, Section 97, provides that rape is a 'first-degree felony and an accused

person is liable on conviction to a term of imprisonment of not less than five years and not more than twenty-five years'. Section 98 defines rape as 'the carnal knowledge of a female of not less than sixteen years without her consent'. Section 101 of Act 29 also provides for defilement of a child under 16 years of age, whether with or without the child's consent. Any individual who commits this criminal offence is liable on summary conviction to a term of imprisonment of not less than seven years and not more than 25 years of imprisonment. Thus the consent of the victim is irrelevant (Archampong, 2010).

Ghana has also ratified major international conventions, treaties, and protocols in relation to sexual crimes, such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which was signed in 1980, and the Beijing Platform of Action (BfA). Subsequently, several laws related to sexual offences have been passed. Notable among them are the Domestic Violence Act, 2007 (Act 732); Juvenile Justice Act, 2003; and Human Trafficking Act, 2005 (Archampong, 2010; Ghana CEDAW Report, 2012).

The institutional mechanisms for addressing sexual offences in Ghana comprise several governmental and non-governmental institutions at the national, regional, district, and local levels. At the national level, the Ministry of Gender and Social Protection (formerly the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs) was established in 2001 and headed by a cabinet-level minister with the mandate of ensuring the overall welfare of people, particularly women, children, and other vulnerable groups. With respect to sexual crimes, the Ministry has, since the enactment of the Domestic Violence Act, 2007 (Act 732), organized a series of public sensitization and awareness creation programs on the Act and has established a secretariat to supervise the operations of the Act. Also, a National Policy and Plan of Action has been developed to cover a 10-year period from 2009 to 2019, to facilitate the implementation of the Act. Other institutional mechanisms for addressing sexual offences at the national level include the Domestic Violence Victim Support Unit (DOVVSU). Established in 1998, this is a specialized unit within the Ghana Police Service, with the key mandate of investigating and handling cases involving domestic violence, child abuse, juvenile offences, and child delinquency cases. It also has the mandate to prosecute all such cases and to perform any other functions as directed by the Inspector General of Police (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2006). The unit is saddled, however, with challenges such as limited resources to conduct forensic work or psychosocial analysis, limited victim support services, and increasing case-load. Thus, it works in collaboration with some women's rights organizations to address some of its challenges (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2006; Ghana CEDAW Report, 2012).

A Domestic Violence Support Fund has also been established under Act 732, to be used to provide for basic material support of victims of domestic violence, tracing the families of victims of domestic violence, and any other matter connected with the rescue, rehabilitation, and reintegration of victims of domestic violence. The fund is expected to receive voluntary contributions from individuals, organizations, and the private sector. Parliament and the Finance Ministry are mandated to approve an amount of money from government for the fund (Archampong, 2010).

The Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ) is one of the judicial and administrative authorities with competences in effecting human rights issues, including issues related to sexual offences. Its mandate is to protect and promote universal rights and freedoms especially recognized by the 1992 Constitution and international human rights instruments ratified by Ghana (Ghana CEDAW Report, 2012). The State Legal Aid also exists to provide legal aid services to individuals, but it is almost non-operational due to financial constraints (MOWAC, 2009). There are, however, private legal aid schemes such as the Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA), Legal Resources Centre, Ark Foundation, and Women's Initiative for Self Empowerment (WISE) that provide some services to women (ibid.).

In spite of these legal and institutional frameworks, sexual crimes continue to be among the major crimes in Ghana, but not much is known about the extent to which poverty plays a role in this phenomenon. The next section thus discusses the linkages among poverty, gender, and sexual crimes, and this provides the framework for understanding poverty and sexual crimes in Ghana.

## **Poverty, gender and sexual crimes**

Poverty has been traditionally understood to mean the lack of access to resources, productive assets, and income, resulting in a state of material deprivation. But poverty is now also recognized as more than shortage of income, as its causal explanations have been broadened to include issues of dignity and autonomy. It is therefore a multi-dimensional concept that includes not only economic deprivation but also various forms of vulnerability (see for instance Sen, 1990; Kabeer, 2003). In effect, vulnerability has now become an integral aspect of poverty analysis and is looked at from two perspectives: an objective perspective, such as the exposure to risks, shocks, and stress, and the inability to deal with them; and a subjective perspective, such as the sense of powerlessness in the face of threats (see Kabeer, 2003). In Ghana, poverty is also considered a multi-dimensional concept with complex interactive and causal relationships between the dimensions. Although it implies low income, it also means malnutrition, persistent ill health, lack of education, poor housing, chronic unemployment, lack of access to basic social services, and inability to assert legal or political rights (Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy, 2003).

The literature highlights the fact that poverty occurs at different levels—individual, family, and societal levels—and there are several debilitating effects of poverty, with crime as one of these effects (Shaw & McKay, 1972; Taylor, 1995). Research shows that people living in poverty and people who lack economic power are vulnerable to sexual violence (see for instance Greco & Dawgert, 2007). Therefore, even though people are at risk of sexual violence regardless of age, income level, ethnicity, religion, and educational level, it has been noted that there is a linkage between poverty and sexual violence—albeit the linkage is complex. Indeed, certain vulnerabilities contribute to sexual violence victimization. Poverty has been identified as one of the key vulnerabilities that is likely to lead to crime victimization. Often, individuals who lack power in society, such as women, children, people living in poverty, and individuals who are less likely to report, are the targets of perpetrators of sexual violence (WHO, 2002; Greco & Dawgert, 2007)

At the individual level, poverty may increase one's vulnerability to sexual crime, and, most importantly, people with the lowest socio-economic status are at the greatest risk (Greco & Dawgert, 2007). This is because such people experience daily stressors in meeting their basic needs such as food, shelter, clothing, and transportation. Such individuals lack sufficient economic resources to meet their basic needs, and they may have to resort to exchanging sex for essential goods (WHO, 2002). Poverty therefore makes the daily lives of such people dependent on others for survival, and this is particularly so for women and children. It can necessitate high-risk survival activities, and these can include less ability to control their own sexuality or to consent to sex (WHO, 2002; Greco & Dawgert, 2007). Poor women and girls are also more likely to be at risk of sexual assault in the course of their daily tasks than the better-offs, as they may have to walk home from work or from collecting firewood alone (WHO, 2002). Poorer children may also be at risk since they may have less parental supervision (mothers may be unable to afford childcare) or they may work as child labourers. Such children may be vulnerable to sexual exploitation (ibid.).

While poverty may make people more vulnerable to sexual crimes, gender-based perspectives on crime also suggest that factors that contribute to sexual offences include power asymmetries, gender roles, norms, and societal representation of females (Everett, 1997; Pappoe & Ardayfio-Schandorf, 1998; Jolly & Hawkins, 2010). In effect, violence becomes a mechanism for the social control of the less powerful and serves to maintain male dominance and female subordination. Men attempt to maintain their advantageous position by coercing females. Furthermore, social attitudes and values perceive men as naturally superior to women and make it a man's right to have power over and control a woman's behaviour (Gros, 1990; Pappoe & Ardayfio-Schandorf, 1998). In most African societies in particular, girls and boys are socialized to accept male dominance and to acquiesce throughout life to male demands, including sexual demands. There is therefore an imbalance of power between males and females, and this is a fundamental cause of violence against women (Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Catalupo et al., 2006). Males are expected to want and need sex regularly, while females have been subjugated by the greater patriarchal society, which limits their opportunities and makes them vulnerable to sexual abuses (Cusack, 1999; Cusack & Manuh, 2009). Social institutions such as the family, community, educational systems, religious institutions, and the media further reinforce the power imbalance, perpetuate stereotypes, and contribute to the violent attitude of males against females (Pappoe & Ardayfio-Schandorf, 1998; Coker-Appiah, 2004). Therefore, at the community and societal levels the risk factors for the perpetration of sexual violence have been identified to include poverty, tolerance of sexual assault in the community, and weak community sanctions against perpetrators. Moreover, lack of employment opportunities and lack of institutional support from the police and the judicial system are other contributory factors (WHO, 2002; Greco & Dawgert, 2007). While all these factors may exist at all levels of communities, they are more prevalent in economically impoverished communities, and these factors increase the risks of men committing such crimes (WHO, 2002: 159). Moreover, poverty reduces the resources that are needed for the sustenance of basic institutions such as the family (Yahaya et al., 2013). It has therefore been argued that neighbourhood poverty and related factors such as family disruption, residential instability, and population density could contribute to sexual crimes (Terry & Tallon, n.d.; Yahaya et al., 2013).

It is assumed in this paper that poverty makes people more vulnerable to sexual crimes. Indeed, in urban low-income communities in Ghana, there are high levels of poverty, including unemployment, poor housing conditions, and generally low socio-economic status. It is also assumed that women are more likely to be victims than perpetrators of sexual crime due to their vulnerable position as well as society's perception of such crimes. The experiences in the sampled communities will be the focus of discussion in the subsequent sections.

## **Study sites and research methodology**

This paper is part of a broader study exploring the nexus between urban crime and poverty in four major cities in Ghana: Accra, Takoradi, Kumasi, and Tamale. These cities reflect the different ecological zones (coastal, forest, and savannah) in the country. Both secondary and primary data sources were used in the analysis. Secondary sources were mainly national-level data from the Ghana Police Crime Statistical Bureau and from civil society organizations (these sources were relied on as proxy data to explain the gender dynamics of sexual crimes), since the police data were not disaggregated by sex to show clearly perpetrators and victims. In this paper, the official data sources are supported by qualitative data from five low-income communities (Nima, Glefe, New Takoradi, Aboabo-Kumasi, and Aboabo-Tamale) in the research locations (Table 1).

Nima lies approximately 5 km from the Central Business District of Accra. It has a total population of 80,843 (comprising 41.7% males and 52% females). In this community, 45.0% of persons 15 years and older have attained junior high school or middle school certificates, while 25.7% have completed secondary or senior high school. About 63.6% of people in the community are employed, primarily in the informal sector as traders and artisans. The majority of the dwellers in this community (90%) live in rented compound houses, with the main source of drinking water being pipe-borne and located outside dwellings. Almost 61.2% of the households use public toilets as their main toilet facilities (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012). The community is typically characterized by congested buildings made with rusted corrugated iron sheets, usually built without authorization and considered as a typical slum in West Africa (Owusu et al., 2008).

Glefe has a total population of 8,738 (comprising 49.5% males and 50.5% females). With respect to the level of education, the majority of the people (58.4%) are middle school or junior high school leavers. The majority of the inhabitants (80.7%) live in rented compound houses. The main source of fuel for cooking and the source of lighting are charcoal and electricity, respectively. Also, the main source of drinking water is pipe-borne and situated outside dwellings, and almost 86.7% of the households use public toilets as their main toilet type. In addition, 40.6% of household's liquid waste is thrown unto the compound. Most of the employed people in the community (85%) are in the private informal sector (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012).

**Table 1: Selected communities: Survey sample allocation and number of KIIs & FGDs**

City	Community	Community socio-economic status	Households sampled	No. of KIIs	No. of FGDs
Accra	Airport West	High-class	30	13	4
	Dansoman	Middle-class	300		
	Glefe	Low-class	60		
	Nima	Low-class	510		
Kumasi	Ahodwo	High-class	60	14	3
	Oforikrom	Middle-class	465		
	Aboabo-Kumasi	Low-class	360		
Sekondi	Chapel Hill	High-class	165	11	4
	Anaji Estate	Middle-class	135		
	New Takoradi	Low-class	210		
Tamale	Russian Bungalow	High-class	45	13	4
	Zogbeli	Middle-class	225		
	Aboabo-Tamale	Low-class	180		
Total			2,745	50	15

New Takoradi has a total population of 20,687 (comprising 46.9% males and 53.1% females). As a typical coastal fishing community, educational levels are low, with the majority of the population (73.5%) aged 15 and above with primary, junior high school, or middle school level certificates. Less than 1% have tertiary degrees. About 84.0% of the population live in compound houses. Others live in improvised homes such as kiosks, containers, or uncompleted buildings. Pipe-borne water outside dwellings and public standpipes are the main sources of drinking water for the community, and the majority (72.3%) depend on public toilet facilities (ibid.).

Aboabo-Kumasi has a total population of 60,136 (47.4% males and 52.6% females). It is a congested community with 1,777 houses and residents living mostly in compound houses (62.1%), with the majority renting their residential premises. The level of education is low, with 68.9% of the residents aged 15 and older having basic education (primary, junior secondary, and middle school) as their highest, with only 0.1% having post-graduate education. About 61.0% of the residents who are 15 years and older are engaged in some economic activity, mostly in informal private employment. Pipe-borne water is their main source of drinking water, and it is sourced mostly outside the dwellings of the residents. The majority use public toilets (ibid.).

Aboabo-Tamale has a total population of 10,485 (47.3% males and 52.7% females). Some 52.7% of the residents have completed only basic-level education. Only 57.8% of the residents are economically active, with the rest being either unemployed or inactive. Those who are employed are mostly self-employed, often without employees (52.4%). Pipe-borne water is the main source for drinking (97.5%), with about 51.0% of these sources located in homes. Toilet facilities used by the residents are mostly public ones (54.2%). About 75.7% live in compound houses in a very congested community of 1,972 houses (ibid.). Thus, access to most homes by vehicle is almost

impossible, as there are very few streets. Free-range grazing of animals is also a common sight in the outskirts of the community, as well as rubbish in some places and uncleared weeds.

These five selected low-income communities have similar socio-economic characteristics, including high population densities, poor community infrastructure, and the predominance of poorly maintained public facilities such as stand pipes, bathrooms, and toilets. The majority of the populace live in multi-habitation houses and structures with facilities such as kitchens being shared. Many residents also tend to have low educational and income levels and work informally (Benneh et al., 1993). The selection of the communities was based on initial discussions with officials of the regional police unit, who provided guidance on the communities with a high prevalence of crime, including sexual crime. Ethical clearance was received from the University of Ghana's Ethics Committee. As a result of reconnaissance visits and in consultation with key stakeholders (community leaders, the police, and community-based organizations), qualitative fieldwork was carried out from late February to early March 2014. This was done to get more insight and understanding of crime and specifically domestic and sexual crimes. The initial consultation with key stakeholders facilitated easy access to community members and was guided by the project's security and ethical protocols, which contain details regarding the procedures for making contact with, meeting with, and interviewing respondents, among others. Focus group discussions (FDGs) were carried out in all five low-income communities and were held with male only, female only, and male and females mixed groups. Key informant interviews (KIIs) were also held with the police, officials from the Domestic Violence and Victims Support Unit (DOVSSU), local government representatives (assemblymen and -women), city planning officers, leaders of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that focus on crime and security-related issues, youth leaders, and traditional and religious leaders.

The fieldwork solicited information on a broad range of crime issues, but for this paper it specifically used questions on the types of sexual crimes, the victims and perpetrators, and the factors that contribute to such acts, including housing conditions and socio-economic status. These major themes guided the analysis of the data. Most of the in-depth interviews were conducted in English except in a few instances regarding community traditional and religious leaders, which were conducted in the local languages and later transcribed. All the FDGs, however, were conducted in the local languages and transcribed.

## **Analysis of sexual crime trends and gender in Ghana**

As noted earlier, sexual crimes continue to be recorded as some of the major offences in the country, in spite of the many laws and institutions to address human rights and domestic violence issues in particular. Table 2 shows aggregated data from the Ghana Police Service, and this reveals that rape and defilement cases are two of the five crimes considered as major offences committed in the country, with defilement cases recording the highest in all the years under consideration.



**Table 2: Major offences committed in Ghana (2007–2013)**

<b>Crime type</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>
Murder	391	430	427	422	423	560	551
Rape (sexual abuse of persons above 16 years)	631	485	447	447	514	533	484
Defilement (sexual abuse cases of children 16 years and below)	2,942	1,675	1,604	1,729	1,805	2,028	1,917
Robbery	1,413	1,449	1,373	1,260	1,235	1,126	1,235
Possession, use, and distribution of drugs	650	714	678	473	525	491	658

Source: Ghana Police Service

This shows that the sexual abuse of children 16 years and below (i.e. defilement) is a major sexual crime committed in the country. Rape was the fourth-most frequent crime in the country in 2007–2011 but became the third-highest in 2012. It was recorded, however, as the least of the major offences in 2013. This decreasing trend in rape cases may give an indication that the situation is being controlled. But, as noted, rape cases are extremely complicated phenomena, and many raped women feel bad and ashamed and prefer to stay quiet over the matter rather than discussing ‘private sexual matters’ (Pappoe & Ardayfio-Schandorf, 1998). Victims most often suspect that they will be treated with doubt and suspicion. Moreover, family and friends may also tend to make it difficult for victims to confide in the police about rape issues and will try to settle the matter out of court (as explained later in the analysis). As noted earlier, the police data on major offences and particularly on rape and defilement cases are not disaggregated by sex to show clearly perpetrators and victims. We therefore relied on secondary data from Ark Foundation, a major civil society and women’s rights organization in Ghana, as proxy data to explain the gender dynamics of sexual crimes, and this was supported by qualitative data from the field. The data shown in Table 3 thus provide a gender analysis of reported cases of victims of sexual abuse.

**Table 3: Victims of sexual abuse cases by sex (2002–2011)**

<b>Sex</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Male</b>	13	23	29	40	74	98	59	60	82	86	564
<b>Female</b>	107	244	259	365	382	485	389	311	506	534	3582
<b>Total</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>267</b>	<b>288</b>	<b>405</b>	<b>256</b>	<b>583</b>	<b>448</b>	<b>371</b>	<b>588</b>	<b>620</b>	<b>4146</b>

Source: Ark Foundation, Ghana

In all the years under consideration, more girls than boys have fallen victims of abuse and these are usually girls of ages 2–13 years, with the perpetrators often adult men, sometimes as old as 70 years, as reported by an official of the organization. This is in line with the view that over 80% of all defilement cases are perpetrated by men, who may be a father, brother, uncle, cousin, nephew,

or a person in authority such as a teacher (Pappoe & Ardayfio-Schandorf, 1998). Thus, a trusted family member or person in authority uses his power as well as the child's love and dependence to initiate sexual contact and to ensure that the relationship continues and remains secret (Coker-Appiah, 2004; Cantalupo et al., 2006). Officials explained that even though cases of sexual abuse included boys, the majority of victims were girls, and in most cases these abuses may have gone on for years with perpetrators often threatening the girls not to reveal the relationship. This subjects the victim to serious health challenges, particularly psychological ones. The fact that men as old as 70 years are found abusing young girls and use threats to conceal the act suggests that there is a power imbalance between males and females. It also suggests that such men attempt to maintain their advantageous position by coercing females and maintaining control over the less powerful (Gros, 1990; Pappoe & Ardayfio-Schandorf, 1998). It further suggests that perpetrators often target vulnerable persons who lack power in society and are less likely to report the crimes (WHO 2002; Greco & Dawgert, 2007). As noted by Cusack (1999) and Cusack and Manuh (2009), men are expected to want and need sex regularly, while females have been subjugated by the greater patriarchal society, which limits their opportunities and make them vulnerable to sexual abuses. The qualitative interviews confirmed the fact that older men often abused younger children and, in most cases, men used a variety of techniques, including luring them with money and sometimes using force. Indeed, our findings revealed that a female could be a victim of sexual abuse in spite of her age, status, or physical appearance. The perpetrators of such crimes were mostly trusted family members such as uncles, male cousins, co-tenants, or neighbours—and sometimes even fathers. Families would therefore not like to expose such people and often concealed and resolved the issue as a private matter, owing to the shame and stigmatization, as echoed by one of our respondents:

*Yes, rape happens in this community, but families feel shy to report. Also, others are afraid of the consequences. At one time a landlord's 13-year-old girl was raped. He asked all of us to be quiet about the matter. We were therefore afraid to report—because if we do, this landlord will eject us. The family ended up collecting money from the man's family and that was it. (FGD, woman in Nima community)*

The non-reporting of such crimes conforms with studies elsewhere that show victims often will not disclose the abuse if the perpetrator is an acquaintance or related to the victim, or the crime occurs within a family setting (Terry & Tallon, n.d.). This therefore results in low community sanctions against the perpetrators. Indeed, it came up repeatedly in FGDs that most families would prefer some form of compensation, often in monetary terms, from perpetrators rather than reporting the crime to the police and pursuing such cases in court. Both officials and community members themselves thus had a strong conviction that poverty is a major contributory factor to the prevalence of sexual crimes in these low-income communities. These poverty-related factors included high unemployment, limited education, poor infrastructure (including housing), lack of toilet facilities, poor lighting, and inadequate security services. Therefore, a multiplicity of factors, spanning economic, social, governmental, and physical or built environment factors, all work together to facilitate crime—and, particularly in such communities, sexual crimes (Newman 1972; Steffensmeier & Haynie, 2000; Hipp & Yates, 2011). This is in line with the general argument that

extremely disadvantaged neighbourhoods with concentrated poverty are vulnerable to crime (Geason & Wilson, 1989; Hipp & Yates, 2011). These factors are the focus of discussion in the next section.

## **Factors contributing to sexual crimes in low-income communities**

In-depth interviews with officials revealed that even though sexual abuse cuts across all segments of society, most rape and defilement cases recorded occurred in low-income communities. It was reported that some middle- and high-class children also become victims, even though in few instances. Yet parents of such children reported these cases and they pursued them to their logical conclusion in order to ensure that justice was achieved. But this is not so with people from low-income communities, where there is a recurrence of such sexual crimes due to several factors, with poverty being the underlying factor. As noted earlier, low-income families would prefer some form of monetary compensation from perpetrators rather than reporting to the police and pursuing such cases in court, which is often considered ‘a waste of time’. Frequently, it is only when one party (the perpetrator) fails to fulfil its obligation that the aggrieved party takes the matter up with the police, as explained by one of our respondents:

*In many instances, rape and defilement cases from such poor communities are not reported. Even when the police get information about the case through a tip-off and follow-up on such cases, the families refuse to cooperate with the police—and this is all because of poverty. Most cases are often settled informally at home, where parents agree to take money from the offender(s). To them, receiving money is more substantial than cooperating with the police. Parents would only cooperate when the offender fails to pay the agreed amount, but even then once some form of money is paid along the line, the families try to withdraw the case. All that the family wants is financial compensation rather than wasting time at the police station. (Police officer, Accra)*

Thus, even though sensitization and education goes on in such communities, informal arbitration and monetary compensation most often take precedence over formal ways of addressing the issue. This appears to explain the recurrence of sexual offences, particularly defilement cases, in such communities, as explained by another official:

*In most cases, parents of abused children from these poor communities would not report because of the disgrace and stigma associated. And, most importantly, some do not even have the means of transport to the police station and to move to and from home. In the event that the case is sent to court, it can drag on for about three to four years. Such people do menial jobs to survive and do not have the time to waste on police and court matters, so they give up along the line. Paying of hospital fees for evidence is also a challenge for most of them, as they do not have the means or consider it as a waste of money. Thus, most often, they try to settle issues out of court, especially if the perpetrator proposes to compensate them financially. It is only when the perpetrator fails to pay the agreed sum of money that they report the matter to the police. Even then, some give up along the line and refuse to cooperate. (NGO official)*

This implies that such poor people lack the financial resources to pursue matters of this nature. Moreover, the long procedural ways of addressing these cases are also a deterrent for the poor to pursue such cases. The interviews revealed that there were instances where police officials and NGOs personally supported victims by paying for the medical bills and providing transport fees so that a particular case could be prosecuted. Indeed, the police and NGOs confessed to having limited resources to address these cases, a situation which sometimes caused frustration for these officials. Opinion leaders as well as FGDs with community members also reiterated these factors to explain the recurrence of such acts in their communities. There were reports of 20-, 30- and 40-year-old men befriending 13-, 14-, 15-, and 16-year-old girls, with both parties, including parents, accepting the relationship as normal 'girlfriend-boyfriend' relationships. This provides an indication that, in certain instances, social institutions such as the family and community support power imbalances and stereotypes that contribute to the tolerance of sexual assault against females as well as promoting weak community sanctions against perpetrators (WHO, 2002; Greco & Dawgert, 2007). In most instances, because these older men provided the financial needs of these girls, parents often felt reluctant to report such cases because of the financial gains derived. This strongly suggests that such individuals lack sufficient economic resources to meet their basic needs, and so they may have to resort to exchanging sex for essential goods (WHO, 2002). Thus, most young females are lured with money by neighbours and friends, as highlighted by an NGO official:

*If one has many children and one's income is very low, the needs of children are often not met, and so most of these children have to rely on neighbours, friends, and sometimes teachers to satisfy their basic needs. Some parents cannot provide the school needs of children, sometimes not even food for their children. These perpetrators often take advantage of such situations and provide for such needs. They therefore lure the children with money; and with time, they defile these children.* (NGO official)

This implies that low-income communities are often dominated by poor people who have large family sizes and in many instances are incapable of taking care of their children and providing them with such basic needs as food and shelter. Poverty therefore becomes one the key vulnerabilities that is likely to lead to crime victimization (WHO, 2002). Such poor people often become dependent on others for survival when they go through difficulties in meeting their daily basic needs. This necessitates high-risk survival activities, which include less ability to control their own sexuality and their consent to sex (WHO 2002; Greco & Dawgert, 2007). Similar concerns were raised by the community members themselves, pointing to the fact that poverty is a major contributory factor to sexual crimes in urban low-income communities:

*Sleeping with children is very common here and it's all because parents do not care about the welfare of their children. No matter how the child dresses or looks, the parents do not care; so that is why many children are deceived by men with money.* (FGD, woman in Glefe community)

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*Some parents don't even care if their children stay outside at night and don't come home to sleep, because they can't even provide food for them. So when a man is ready to assist in such a situation, the girl also gives in .... Sometimes the money given to the children is not enough, and some men pretend to be assisting the mother by adding some to it. With time, he rapes the child. (FGD, man in Glefe community)*

This reiterates the fact that people who live in poverty experience daily stressors in addressing their basic needs and that most often they tend to lack sufficient economic resources to meet their needs, thereby becoming vulnerable to sexual encounters (WHO, 2002; Greco & Dawgert, 2007). But the fact that men provide for the needs of these girls and take advantage of them also exhibits a form of power imbalance between males and females (Pappoe & Ardayfio-Schandorf, 1998; Catalupo et al., 2006). Interestingly, the official definition of such acts (defined as crimes) is often at variance with community members' definition, who often consider them as a mere relationship where one party (the male) is financially supporting the other (the female).

Apart from the economic challenges that contribute to sexual crimes, social factors such as limited education also contribute to the perpetration of sexual crimes in low-income communities (Newman, 1972; Steffensmeier & Haynie, 2000). Education is important for employment, career opportunities and development, knowledge building and transfer, and empowerment and general personal development (Roudi-Fahimi & Moghadam, 2003). In effect, having limited education may have consequences for an individual's well-being and overall social development. In all five communities, low levels of education came up as a significant feature which had consequent impact on the socio-economic lives of inhabitants. This resonates with the view that lack of employment opportunities and related factors increase the risks of men committing such crimes (Terry & Tallon, n.d.; Yahaya et al., 2013). Indeed, a high rate of school dropouts was reported in all five communities, and this subsequently impacted on crime levels, including sexual crimes, as explained by an opinion leader:

*In this community, many children do not attend school regularly because parents themselves did not attend school and do not understand education. Moreover, most parents cannot afford their children's education. So, if you have a community where both children and parents are not enlightened, you should know the outcome. (Male opinion leader, New Takoradi community)*

Such outcomes included many young men engaging in all manner of social vices, including smoking Indian hemp and other materials, owing to the absence of jobs. Indeed, in all five communities sampled, there was no police post in the community to deter these social vices. The breakdown in social norms and values often leads to negative outcomes for the youth, including dropping out of school. This, coupled with the lack of middle-class role models, affects the norms of residents and brings about a cycle of disadvantage, and this facilitates sexual offences in such communities (Hipp & Yates, 2011). For instance, it was reported that some females requested money from men for their material sustenance in exchange for sex, which they sometimes denied the men. Such habits coupled with the unruly behaviour of men often triggered rape and defilement cases, as men often used force to have sex with such females at the least opportunity.

Housing conditions also contributed to the prevalence of sexual crimes in these communities. As noted earlier, many residents lived in multi-habitation units and also tended to have large family sizes. An official of an NGO revealed that large family sizes and the limited number of sleeping rooms were often triggers of sexual abuse, particularly of children. In certain instances, poorer families did not live in proper structures, which made children very vulnerable. Perpetrators, who are often close neighbours, often took advantage of such situations, as explained by a community member:

*People tend to have many children that they cannot cater for. So if one goes out and does not return home, the parents do not really care because there is only one room and parents want to do their private things. Some live in kiosks which are woefully inadequate for a family of four or five. Again, some children, even very young ones, go out to trade sometimes at night and bring home money to support their parents. Most often, it is such children, mostly girls, who are lured by neighbours, and particularly the gangsters around, and abused. (Female opinion leader, Nima community)*

This explanation indicates that poorer children are more vulnerable to sexual abuse and more likely to be at risk as they have less parental supervision and also work as child labourers (WHO, 2002). The housing conditions alone may not necessarily be a factor contributing to sexual crimes; other factors are the lack of proper planning of housing in these communities as well as the lack of community infrastructure such as road networks, lighting systems, and places of convenience. In all the low-income communities sampled, none had a police post or proper lighting system to address security issues at night. In a few instances, some public lighting systems had been provided but were not functional. This situation, coupled with the absence of proper toilet services, facilitates sexual harassment and rape, as explained in one FDG:

*In this community, the numbers of people outnumber the houses because there are many migrants here and they keep on moving in. As a result, people sleep anywhere: kiosks, shacks, open spaces, etc. There are hardly any toilets as the public ones are not even enough; some people go to the forest nearby to attend to nature's call, which is very bad because any bad thing can happen there. Some people, including children, use open and obscure sites as places of convenience, and these are very dangerous places, particularly for females. (FGD woman, Aboabo community in Tamale)*

Indeed, such obscure sites with no proper lighting systems thus become sites for crimes, including sexual ones, as 'girls are often raped, especially in the night', as explained by one respondent. The discussants also noted that the communities are inhabited by people of different ethnic backgrounds owing to increasing migration to the cities. This results in ethnic heterogeneity, which is a major characteristic of all the sampled communities. This promotes a breakdown of social structures and institutions and is likely to increase crime levels (Hipp, 2007). Religious and cultural factors also came up strongly as contributory factors to defilement cases in particular. While the act was blamed on the lustful behaviour of men, it was also meant for ritual purposes. In many of these instances, older men, who had very poor socio-economic status, sexually abused children

mainly for monetary and spiritual gains in order to improve their socio-economic status, as reported in an FGD:

*Some men rape little girls because of evil lust. They drug the children with sleeping tablets and do whatever they like to the children. Some men also do that sometimes for spiritual purposes, particularly the young churches which are springing up, either to get more money or to perform miracles for his church members. (FGD, woman in Glefe community)*

Another case was related of a father who abused all five children (ages 2–13 years), including two boys, because of his desire to ‘get rich quick’ due to his poverty level. Similarly, a male pastor was arrested for abusing a 9-year-girl mainly for ‘power’, as it was reported. Sexual abuse of minors for such purposes appears to be an emerging trend in the country, and more studies need to be conducted in this area to unravel the mysteries surrounding religious beliefs and sexual crimes. Nevertheless, such acts have strong links with poverty, as people sexually abused children not solely for spiritual purposes *per se* but mainly for financial gains.

## **Concluding remarks**

This paper has examined the relationship between poverty and sexual crimes in urban low-income communities in Ghana. The analysis shows that the country has instituted several legal and institutional frameworks for addressing sexual crimes and to protect the rights of individuals, yet sexual crimes are prevalent in urban low-income communities due to a multiplicity of poverty-related factors. Thus, in spite of many laws and institutions to address sexual crime issues in particular, the low socio-economic status of people in such communities, cultural and societal perceptions of women, and institutional procedural barriers make it difficult for the poor to seek redress when their rights are violated. The most worrying aspect is the fact that perpetrators are often trusted family members or acquaintances, whom families do not wish to expose—and hence the preference for monetary compensation. In effect, the attitudes of parents and their neglect of children, limited education, and high unemployment facilitate such acts. Moreover, people’s perception about rape, which is most often at variance with the official definition of such acts, as well as community’s weak sanctions against perpetrators, tends to promote sexual abuse, as some parents accept their daughter’s relationships with older men owing to the financial gains involved. The built environment, particularly housing structure and occupancy and poor infrastructural services such as the absence of proper toilet facilities, further contribute to the prevalence of sexual crimes in low-income communities.

These findings suggest that several economic, social, governmental, and physical factors contribute to the prevalence of sexual crimes in urban low-income communities. Yet most of these structural issues have escaped the attention of policy makers. As argued, it is important that governments, donors, and policy makers take into consideration issues of sexuality in their poverty reduction efforts in low-income communities so as to address sexual and economic justice issues more broadly (Jolly & Hawkins, 2010). More has to be done to address the complex economic,

social, and physical factors in these communities. The efforts being made in Ghana to address domestic violence issues in general, and sexual crimes in particular, and the focus on strengthening institutions and providing legal frameworks are positive initiatives. It is important, however, for all stakeholders to intensify educational and sensitization programmes on sexual crimes, and this must include issues of power imbalances and stereotypes in the social representation of females, as these contribute to violent attitudes against them. Secondly, officials and NGOs must work together with community leaders to institute stricter measures or sanctions against perpetrators of such crimes in the communities. Most importantly, government and all stakeholders must provide support to victims of sexual crimes, such as the provision of free medical care. The Domestic Violence Support Fund should be operationalized and decentralized, as it is often the poor who need most access to this facility. This would also motivate the police and other officials to pursue such cases efficiently. Finally, poor housing (reflected in high room occupancy rates and overcrowding), coupled with weak planning in general, heightens the vulnerability of girls and women to sexual crimes in these poor urban communities. Therefore, policy measures in the areas of education and legal and institutional frameworks need to be complemented with effective urban planning and slum housing upgrading schemes as critical initiatives to stem the incidence of sexual crimes in poor urban communities.

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