

“What is a Child like you doing with condoms”? Barriers to Condom Use among Adolescents in Two Rural Districts of Ghana

Background

A large number of young people in Ghana still engage in unprotected sex. Unfortunately, this is in the context of high unplanned pregnancy and STIs including HIV [2, 8,4,17].The general incidence of HIV/AIDS in Ghana has reduced significantly from over three percent in 2000 to 2.6% in 2006 to 1.5% in 2012, while this decline in the general population has been relatively consistent over the years, the same cannot be said for the prevalence in the 15 to 24 year group. For instance, the prevalence in the age group increased from 1.5 percent in 2011 to 1.7 in 2012 [10,11,13].This situation points to the need to galvanise more efforts to prevent infections in this age group which is normally used as the proxy for new infections. Research indicates that in settings such as the Ghanaian situation, in order to sustain a decline and to avoid resurgence of HIV/ AIDS cases, the best strategy is to concentrate on “at risk groups” [13]. Targeting adolescents is essential in this regard, because infected persons in this group normally serve as “harbingers” for the future spread of the disease. The prevalence among adolescents is normally the “starting point for new infections and the driving force behind the epidemic” and many infected persons might have contracted the disease during their adolescent ages [12]. Adolescents moreover, are still at their formative years and therefore still malleable to interventions aimed at changing their behaviours.

Studies in Ghana indicate a high level of unplanned pregnancies among young females resulting in high maternal mortality, high female school dropout rates and a consequent truncated future development [1,5,18] . All these have serious ramifications for the socio-economic development of the country as a whole. The state of young people in rural areas is even gloomier, as young people in rural areas generally lack access to education, information on preventive health care, and have diminished opportunities for income generating activities, factors which make adolescents vulnerable to the “twin challenges” of unwanted pregnancy and STIs [22].

In the face of inevitable risky sexual behaviour among young people, condom use promotion may be a more plausible solution. Given its dual protection role, condom use among adolescents has gained prominence as a key strategy for combating reproductive health challenges of the youth. The World Health Organization, Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS and United Nations Population Fund, issued a joint policy statement emphasizing the role of the condom in preventing pregnancy and STIs (UNAIDS and World Health Organisation[23,16]. Similarly, given its dual protective benefits and convenience, condoms have been acknowledged as an important strategy for combating HIV infection among adolescents in Ghana and are a favoured contraceptive method of young people [15]. However, Condom promotion among the youth is one of the most controversial strategies for the control of STIs and HIV, and pregnancy among young people [20]. Although contextual issues may play a very important role in condom use among adolescents, most efforts in Ghana have focused more on individual level factors to the neglect of contextual issues.

Objectives of study

Using qualitative methods, this study explores the complex set of factors that serve as barriers to condom use among adolescents in two rural districts of Ghana, the Kintampo North Municipality and the Kintampo South Districts and to make recommendations to policy and programmatic purposes.

Methods:

Data for this manuscript is drawn from the Kintampo Health Research Centre's (KHRC) Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) study conducted in 2011. KHRC is one of three research centres setup in the major ecological zones of Ghana (coastal, forest, savannah sahelian) by the Ghana Health Service Research and Development division in the Ministry of Health. The KHRC maintains unique identifiers of every individual in its catchment area and provides core updates on pregnancies, births, deaths and migrations every three months through its Health and Demographic Surveillance System (HDSS). In addition, the Kintampo HDSS routinely conducts research on various health outcomes of National and international interests. This includes research on sexual reproductive health of the population. Although the SRH study was a mixed methods study the focus of this particular study was to gain a deeper insight into societal, cultural and policy factors that influenced condom use by adolescents in the study community. The qualitative methodology was more suited for navigating the complexities involved in exploring societal cultural and policy issue. The aim was to provide the optimal direction for addressing the family planning needs of adolescents based on the experiences and perspectives of the study participants in the context of their societal norms and practices. The methods of data collection were focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs) using interview guides. Five (5) FGDs and 11 IDIs were conducted over the study period. The FGDs and IDIs were recorded on an electronic audio device together with hand-written notes. Qualitative data was collected from adolescents, societal representatives and family planning and care providers working in health facilities. Two (2) FGDs were conducted for community opinion leaders and 3 for adolescents with each group having between 8 and 12 participants. IDIs were done among health workers and community representatives till a level of saturation of information was attained.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed manually. Audio recordings of FGDs and IDIs were transcribed and translated verbatim into English and manual coding into the various themes influencing FP service delivery to adolescents was done by two researchers. The outcome of the qualitative analysis was to identify barriers to condom use and contraceptive needs of adolescents from the perspectives of adolescents, community representatives and family planning care providers. Themes that were specifically explored on condom use touched on the legal, policy and cultural milieu of adolescent sexuality and how these mediate condom promotion and use.

RESULTS

Preliminary results from the study revealed that apart from some married female adolescents who thought the suggestion that they should use condoms with their partners was outrageous; adolescents in general were in favour of condom use. However, the real causes of low use of condoms in the study area are rooted deeply in the socio- cultural, economic and

policy milieu. Unsupportive cultural norms, and negative attitudes and perceptions towards adolescent's use of condoms were themes that cut across all groups of respondents. These were exemplified in most gatekeepers such as parents, service providers and general community members being vehemently opposed to the idea of unmarried adolescents using condoms. This represented a significant barrier to condom use by adolescents. While parents of adolescents expressed fears that condom promotion would increase sexual activity if young people choose condom over abstinence and other prevention strategies, Adolescents were more particular about unfriendly health personnel (both formal and informal). These comments from a drug store seller- one of the main sources of condoms for adolescents- and an adolescent client perhaps gives a succinct representation of the situation.

“What I mean is that when I first started, I was selling it to them, but whenever there was a funeral in the town and it is being celebrated and if God does not intervene, only one night the whole packet will finish. So I saw that it won't help....since then I said I won't sell again.... so I don't sell again.... it is more than about four years now.... I don't sell to young people again” (IDI, drug store dealer)

“If you go, the drug- store operator will normally ask you, “What is a child like you going to do with condoms””? (FGD, Adolescent boy)

In the focus group discussions some female adolescents admitted that they lacked the courage to demand for condom use from their male partners because they risk losing them and losing their source of income.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Contrary to the often held notion that, adolescents do not like using condoms for protection, the results of the study highlight the fact that although adolescents in general are willing to use condoms; their efforts are hampered by context specific challenges. This is perhaps a reflection of the policy dilemmas and cultural contradictions that characterise adolescent sexuality and condom use in Ghana. In an effort to address low condom use among adolescents there is the need for program managers to shift emphasis from solely trying to change individual behaviour to efforts aimed at modifying these contextual factors and bottlenecks to adolescent's access to condoms?

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