

# Factors Influencing Initiation and Continued Sexual Activity among Adolescents in Odukpani Local Government Area of Cross River State: A Qualitative Case Study

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** One-third (31.6%) of Nigerian total population of 197 million people are adolescents and young adults aged 10 to 24 years; positioning Nigeria with the highest population of adolescents globally. A high prevalence of sexual activity among adolescents in Cross River State has contributed to the highest birth rate (35%) in the South-South of Nigeria.

**Purpose:** This study explored factors influencing initiation and continued sexual activity among adolescents in Odukpani, Cross River State.

**Methods:** Using a qualitative case study design, purposive sampling technique was used in recruiting participants for Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Each FGD had 6-10 participants in attendance giving a total of 48 participants. The FGD audio tapes were transcribed verbatim into a word document. These and the field notes were scrutinized and compared for consistency. The document was coded, manually sorted and grouped to form code families and themes. Multiple cross-checking helped retain participants' discussion content and context.

**Results:** Access to pornography through mobile phones and satellite television as well as early involvement in romantic relationships in secondary schools were identified as factors leading to early sexual debut. Poverty, the love for fine clothes, shoes and big phones, were identified as factors leading to transactional sex by adolescents. Poverty and Living conditions exposed adolescents to their parents' sexual activity while need for attention/information put some adolescents at risk of falling victims to adult sexual predators.

**Conclusion:** Poverty alleviation programs could help reduce early sexual debut, sustained sexual activity and sex-related health risks amongst adolescents in Odukpani.

**Keywords:** Sexual behaviour, romantic relationships, pornography, poverty, risky sexual behaviour

## INTRODUCTION

One-third (31.6%) of Nigerian total population of 197 million people are adolescents and young adults aged 10 to 24

years[1], positioning Nigeria with the highest population of adolescents globally, with an estimated over 35 million adolescents[2]. Percentage estimate of

sexual debut for adolescents in Nigeria ages 15-19 years is 15.6% females and 2.9% for males[3]. Sixteen million young people, aged 15-19 years who gives birth each year, contributes 40% to maternal mortality rate in Nigeria[3]. A high prevalence of sexual activity among adolescents in Cross River State has contributed to the highest birth rate (35%) in the South-South[1, 4]. A review of records at the University of Calabar Teaching Hospital revealed highest rate of induced abortion among single girls who were less than 20 years of age[5]. At the end of 2017, HIV prevalence in Cross River State rose to 6.6%, a higher figure than the national (3.4%) and majority of those infected and affected by HIV new infections were adolescents[6]. Although, there is no concrete data on sexual activities in Odukpani LGA, the Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC) project in Odukpani had reported a high prevalence street hawking by adolescents and young adults in the area. Exposure to street hawking is known to predispose teenagers to early sexual debut and increased sexual activities leading to high rate of teenage pregnancy in the area[7]. This study explored adolescents' perspectives on factors influencing early sexual debut and sustained sexual activity among them in Odukpani Local Government Area of Cross River State.

## **METHODS**

The study was conducted in Odukpani Local Government Area (LGA) of Cross River State. Situated in the Southern Senatorial District of the state, Odukpani has an estimated population of 192,884, with 100,697 males and 92,187 females[3, 8]. The males account for 52% of the total population (192,884) while the females account for 48%[3]. Odukpani LGA with 2,624.6 square kilometers land mass has 13 political wards. The indigenous ethnic group known as the Efik, speak both Efik and English languages. Odukpani LGA is bounded in the north by Abia State and Biase Local Government Area of Cross

River, in the south by part of Calabar Municipality, Calabar South and Atlantic Ocean, in the east by Akamkpa Local Government Area and in the West by Itu and Oron Local Government Areas of Akwa Ibom State[8]. All these surrounding LGAs and States are reported by the 2018 National Demographic and Health Survey[9] to be flash points for high sexual activities due to high commercial activities and markets[3].

Inhabitants of Odukpani are small scale traders, subsistence farmers and fishermen, while the adolescents are typically involved in road side hawking at different locations. Due to close proximity to Calabar, Odukpani serves as lodging area to influx of visitors during the Calabar carnival, an annual festival adjudged the biggest street party in Africa. The carnival provides avenue for high prevalence of sexual activities and multiple partners with high probability of unprotected sexual intercourse and increased patronage of commercial sex workers, who are mostly adolescents of ages 10-19 years[3]. Adolescents within this age range (10-19 years) in Odukpani LGA are estimated at 23.22% (44, 788) of the total population; male (23,290) and female (21,498)[10]. many adolescents aged 12-13 years have had their first child, 15-17 years have had their second and few young women between 20-24years have an average of 6 children each[7]. A qualitative case study design was used to explore adolescents' self-reported factors that may contribute to their early sexual debut and maintained sexual activity in their adolescent years. The study population comprised of a proportion of adolescent males (52%) and females (48%) within the age bracket of 10-19 years (44,788), according to the proportion of the population by gender of Odukpani (192,884)[10]. Simple random sampling method was used to select six communities out of 24 communities in Odukpani Local Government Area, earmarked for the study. Purposive sampling technique was used in recruiting 60 information-rich participants (adolescents who have had babies [males

and females], are pregnant [females], and sexually active [males and females]) for the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Each FDG had 6-10 participants in attendance making a total number of 48 adolescents in the FDG. Of the six FDG sessions, three were all males and three were all females. A FDG guide comprising four sections was the instrument for data collection; Section A involved the introduction of the research team and the participants. The goal and objectives of the research and the participants' role. All ethical principles involving research with human subjects including consent to audiotape the session were in this section of the guide. Section B had the group rules which were collectively generated, such as "all phones should be turned off or be silenced; everyone's opinion matters even if others disagree with such opinion". Section C had seven open-ended questions related to the topic, leaving enough room for follow-up questions based on responses from the participants while section D had closing remarks and appreciation of the participants. Six FDGs comprising of a minimum of six and maximum of eight participants were conducted in six different communities in Odukpani Local Government area. Each FDG was conducted in a serene environment void of distraction, at a convenient time chosen by the participants of each group. After each group discussion, time was given to allow for summaries, clarifications of any ambiguities, change of opinion, appreciation of participants and conclusions. The sessions were audiotaped while the Notetaker took detailed notes as backup for the tapes. The Observer focused on the non-verbal communication by and between participants. The audio tapes were transcribed verbatim using the Express Scribe software into a word document. These in addition to the field notes and observations taken during the focus group discussion were then scrutinized and compared for consistency, often referring back to the audiotapes. The 'cleaned' document was then coded using the 'track

changes' function of Microsoft Word. Axial and in-vitro coding methods were used. The codes were subsequently manually sorted and grouped to form code families from which the themes were derived. The research protocol was approved by the Cross River State Ethical Review Committee with approval number CRSMOH/RP/REC/2018/112.

## RESULTS

Poverty was one of the main themes associated with adolescents' early sexual debut and continuity of sexual activity thereafter. This study revealed that adolescents, especially early adolescents (10-14 years) get involved in sexual activities because of their living conditions; most parents and caregivers in the community live in single room apartments, where children sleep on mats or mattresses on the floor and the parents use the only available bed. There is no privacy. These children are at liberty to discretely observe their parents during sexual activity.

*"In some families, you know they live in one room and have all their children in that one room... when their papa and mama dey have sex, they will be hearing and watching, [while] pretending they are sleeping"* (16years old male).

Poverty again is implicated in some families where adolescents engaged in transactional sex. There are two types of transactional sex and adolescents can engage in one type or both. The first type of transactional sex is in exchange for foodstuff such as crayfish and fish to be able to feed and sometimes support their families.

*"Most times they [fishermen] give our parents fish and crayfish they catch in the river... even you what will you do when a young man is nice to you?"* (16years old female).

The second type of transactional sex is in exchange of non-food items; often items that the adolescents want but their parents could not afford to get for them. Some of these items may be considered as

necessities, such as soap, body lotion, school fees, clothes, shoes and phones, others may be wants such as android ‘big’ phones, human hair (wigs) etc. therefore, they engage in sex in exchange for these gift items. The phrase; *“The love for fine clothes, shoes and big phones”* was mentioned several times during the discussions as the reason for young people engaging in sexual activity.

*“Let me add, a times when dem ask money from their parent and their parent no fit give them, dem go go sleep with man to get the money”* (15year-old male).

Access to pornography on the ‘big’ phones was discussed as a major influence on adolescents’ engagement in sexual activities. While not all the participants admit having ‘big’ phones however, they could still watch on their friends’ phones.

*“You see, many young people their eye don tear go far. Some of them watch it in films now and will like to practice what they are watching”* (14year-old female).

The phrase; *‘their eye don tear go far’* refers to young people who may be very experienced as far as sexual activity is concerned despite their young age and seemingly innocent looks. Meaning they may not be as innocent as they look or as their age may imply. Having romantic

relationships at junior and senior secondary school levels was also cited by participants as a gateway into practicing sexual activities by the younger adolescents aged 8-13 years old.

*“Another thing is this boyfriend and girlfriend relationship among students in schools from very young age like from 8 to 11, 12 and 13 years. They will become closer to each other before you know, it will lead them to start having sex”* (16-year- old female).

Other adolescents, especially girls get engaged in sexual activities because they need attention and information about changes in their bodies, which most often are not provided by their parents. Hence, they get such information from their friends and teachers.

*“They have never been taught about sex or sexual behaviour and how to avoid pregnancy”* (15-year-old male).

*“They [the girls] lack knowledge of sex education and what behaviour can lead to sex”* (18-year-old female).

*“Most of these problems are caused by teachers and Corpers because they that are supposed to be advising the adolescents to stay away from sexual activities are the ones befriending and sleeping with them”* (19-year-old male).

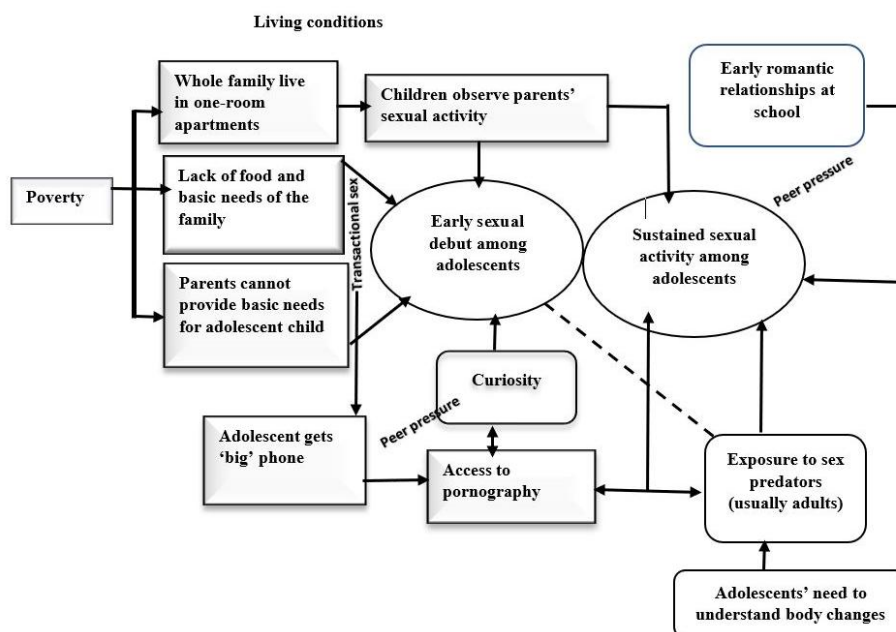


Figure 1: Conceptual Model showing linkages between factors influencing early sexual debut and continued sexual activity among adolescents in Odukpani Local Government Area.



Figure 1 shows the conceptual linkages between the themes on factors influencing early sexual debut and continued sexual activity by adolescents in this study.

## **DISCUSSION**

In this study, sexual debut for both boys and girls in their communities was from 8 to 14 years old. This is in contrast with a World Bank (2016) report, which reported early sexual debut in Nigeria at 15 years for girls and 16 years for boys[11]. It is however, in corroboration with a study conducted in Cross River and Kogi States in 2011 that revealed sexual debut age for girls at eight years and boys at 10 years[12]. Poverty was one of the main themes associated with adolescents early sexual debut and continuity of sexual activity thereafter. Parents' inability to provide basic needs (school fees, clothes, shoes etc) for their adolescent children (especially the girls) puts them at greater risk of engaging in sexual activity, usually with older men. This is similar to a WHO report on adolescent risky health behaviours[13]. The love for fine clothes, shoes and big phones was also mentioned several times by respondents as the reason for young people engaging in sexual activity. Lack of contentment or acceptance of one's current situation has been linked with risky behaviours and mental illness both in adults and young people[14]. Some adolescents were engaged in transactional sex in exchange for gift items and foodstuff such as crayfish and fish to be able to feed and sometimes support their families. The burden of poverty on children and adolescents have resulted in risky behaviours including but not limited to drug use and multiple sexual partners[15, 16].

Having romantic relationships at junior and senior secondary school levels was also implicated by participants as a gateway into practicing sexual activities by the younger adolescents aged 8-13 years old.

Access to pornography was discussed as a major influence on adolescents' engagement in sexual activities. The proliferation of mobile phones and satellite television programming in more homes since the early 2000s in Nigeria has increased access to internet connectivity for individuals and families. More young people own or have access to android telephones which are used to watch sexual content that may not have been available to them without these devices. The adolescents who are usually aroused by pornographic images they watched through the internet or television would often want to put these activities into practice. This is in line with a study in England where 4% (106/241) of males, compared with 29% (56/195) of females often tried out the sexual acts they had watched online[16]. One study explained adolescents' access to and subsequent use of media as a factor influencing their sexual behaviours using the General cohort theory[18]. Similarly a study in Taiwan showed that exposure to sexually explicit content led to risky sexual behavior that could continue into adulthood[19]. Another study in Ethiopia linked peer pressure, exposure to pornography and smoking with early sexual debut among adolescents[20].

Further findings from the current study revealed that adolescents, especially early adolescents (10-14 years) get involved in sexual activities because of their living condition; most parents and caregivers in the community live in single room apartments, where children are at liberty to see and be aware of when they have sex. Although participants discussed the exposure to parents having sex as a determinant of their early sexual debut and continued sexual activity, there is limited research on the subject matter in Odukpani. Other adolescents, especially girls get engaged in sexual activities because they need attention and information on changes in their bodies, which most often are not provided by their parents. Research has shown that poor parent-child

communication about sex and sexuality often placed the child at risk of getting wrong and/misleading information from peers[20]. In this study, adolescents confirmed that they do not use any form of protection during their sexual debut; these findings agree with those of Kassahun et al (2019), in their report which shows that adolescents engaged in risky sexual behaviours including multiple sex partners, sex without any form of protection as well as alcohol and substance use[20].

## **CONCLUSION**

Poverty, living conditions, early engagement in romantic relationships and exposure to online pornography were themes associated with early sexual debut while poverty, lack of contentment with their limited resources and need for attention and explanation of their body changes and desires seem to fuel the continued engagement in sexual activity. Majority of adolescent sexual activity occur without the use of protection therefore exposing them to increased risk of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections including HIV/AIDS.

## **Recommendation**

Since poverty seem to be the main domain associated with adolescent sexual debut and subsequent continued sexual activity, the researchers recommend the following;

1. Poverty alleviation programs at the local government levels: The poverty alleviation programs promoted by the sustainable development goals (SDGs) could serve the dual purpose of improving the lives of families and reducing high risk sexual activity among adolescents[21].
2. Entrepreneurship programs at the local government level: Entrepreneurship programs for adolescents and young adults have been shown to reduce poverty, improve lives and reduce dependency[22].

3. Every school and community should have a youth friendly center where adolescents could have access to comprehensive sexuality education (CSE). This CSE curriculum for both in-school and out-of-school adolescents should include abstinence as an option for prevention of teenage pregnancy as well as STIs. For it to be a true CSE, it should also include modern contraceptive methods with instructions on how to use condoms as a barrier method that provides dual protection (against pregnancy and STIs) if properly used by adolescents who are sexually active. Research has shown that abstinence-only sex education works better for those who have not initiated sexual activity than those who are already sexually active.

## **Author's Contribution**

AON conceptualized and planned the research, provided guidance on community entry and qualitative data collection; conducted the analysis and wrote the results and discussion parts of the manuscript. Also conducted overall review of the manuscript and is the correspondence author.

SOS worked with AON to develop the instrument for data collection, participated in community entry and recruitment of participants; was the facilitator of the Focus Group Discussions and also took part in the data analysis.

MIA was part of community entry, recruitment of participants and data collection. She also wrote the introduction of the paper and parts of the methodology and recommendations.

FTO was part of data collection and analysis. He co-wrote the methodology, discussion and recommendation sections.

JJE was part of community entry, recruitment and organization of the focus group discussions. He also was responsible for the literature review and wrote part of the recommendations.

All authors participated in the data analysis, comparing and referring back to the original tapes to ensure that the codes and themes capture the participants' opinions both in content and context. In addition, the authors reviewed the overall manuscript and provided input and corrections in the different sections.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors are eternally grateful to the youth who participated in this research. Special thanks to our student researchers-in-training and graduate assistants for the numerous road trips and assistance in data collection and transcription.

**Conflict of Interest:** None

**Source of Funding:** None

**Ethical Approval:** Approved

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How to cite this article: Ndep A, Simpa S, Akpan M et.al. Factors influencing initiation and continued sexual activity among adolescents in Odukpani local government area of cross river state: a qualitative case study. *Int J Health Sci Res*. 2021; 11(10): 303-310. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52403/ijhsr.20211040>

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