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Gender Differentials in Sexual Initiation among Adolescents in Zambia

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to assess gender differentials in factors influencing sexual initiation among adolescents in Zambia. Data employed in this study was derived from the 2013 Zambia Demographic Health Survey. Logistic regression analysis was used to identify gender differentials in sexual initiation by considering socio-economic variables. The data revealed that about 22 per cent of the female and 32.6 per cent of males reported having had sex by the age of 15 years old. About 49.5 per cent of the female and 54.9 per cent of the males reported having had sex by the age of 18 years old. Logistic regression analysis identified age, religion, residence, wealth status, working status, educational level, watching television and drinking alcohol as strong predictors of respondent's likelihood of sexual initiation by the age of 15 years old. The study found that male youths who drank alcohol were 1.4 times more likely to be sexually active by the age of 15 years old compared to those who did not drink alcohol. Female youths who were working were 1.4 times more likely to report having had sex by the age of 15 years old and those who drank alcohol were 1.3 times more likely to report been sexually active by the age of 15 years old. This study is in agreement with other African and western based studies which have shown that socioeconomic and demographic variables have a significant influence on early sexual initiation among adolescents in Zambia. Interventions that seek to prevent HIV and AIDS and unwanted pregnancies among adolescents through regulation of sexual behaviour would need to seriously account for socio-demographic and economic influences.

Key words: Gender differentials, sexual initiation, youth, Zambia

Introduction

Although Zambia continues to be among the world's most devastating Human Immuno Virus (HIV) epidemics, significant efforts have been made towards reducing HIV incidence over the last two decades. The adult prevalence rate of HIV has declined from 14.3 per cent in 2009 to 13 per cent (CSO, 2014). In spite of the declines, the HIV prevalence rate is the seventh highest rate globally (UNAIDS, 2016). Zambia, like many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, has a young population. Zambia currently has the largest population of young people in its history with persons below 15 and 18 years constituting 45.5 per cent and 52.5 per cent of the total population, respectively. The population is also characterised by continuing urban drift. Between 2000 and 2010, the percentage distribution of youths aged 15-35 years reduced from 34.5 per cent to 33.3 per cent in rural areas and increased from 41.4 per cent to 41.9 per cent in urban areas (GRZ; CSO, 2012). The 2014 Zambia Demographic Health Survey (ZDHS) showed that HIV prevalence among the young people aged between 15 and 24 years was 7 per cent (8% among young women and 5% among young men). The ZDHS also showed that HIV prevalence increased with age, from 4 per cent among young people aged between 15 and17 years to 12 per cent among young people aged between 23 and 24 years (CSO, 2014). Previous studies conducted in SSA on early sexual debut and high-risk sexual behaviours have identified a host of environmental, economic, gender inequalities and social norms that influence adolescent sexuality (UNAIDS, 2010).

The studies have shown that sexual debut exposes young people to a myriad of risky sexual behaviours and negative sexual and reproductive health outcomes. Unprotected sexual intercourse leads to unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) (Potard et al., 2008; Patton, 2009). Social scientists have long considered unwanted teenage pregnancy as a negative outcome given, for example, that in the short to mid-term of the pregnancy, there is a high increase in the likelihood of dropping out of school (Shuger, 2012; UNICEF, 2012; Conde et al., 2004; Gupta and Mahy, 2003).

The risk of unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV and AIDS may be affected by the age of sexual debut. An individual who initiates sexual activity at the age of 15 years, for example, will have more exposure to conception over the reproductive span than one who initiates sex at the age of 21 years.

Many analysts on the role of gender in early initiation of reproductive activities have commented on the differences in societal expectations and norms for females and males (Singh, Wulf, Samara & Cuca, 2000). According to Borges and Nakamura (2009), differences in men's and women's sexual initiation are well described in population studies that analyse data through the gender variable because, most of the times, men's sexual initiation occurs earlier than women's. However, studies that adopt gender relations as a category of analysis, picture the diversity and complexity of individuals' sexual trajectories in a better way (Muller and Frisco, 2006). The gender perspective recommends that differences between genders should not be naturalised, but considered as a consequence of a social and cultural construction of what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman as well as the hierarchies and relation of power in each time, space and social group (Ainsworth, 1994). Therefore, there is a need to better improve the understanding of the various social, psychosocial and behavioural factors associated with sexual activity among young adolescents in various settings in sub-Saharan Africa, to inform the design of appropriate sexual and reproductive health programmes and interventions (Marston et al., 2013).

According to Marston et al. (2013), although there is abundant data on the sexual and reproductive behaviours of older adolescents and young adults (aged 15–24 years old) in sub-Saharan Africa, little

is known about younger adolescents (12-16 years). Yet, it is now widely recognised that it is necessary to target adolescents before they engage in sexual activity, to understand and address their sexual and reproductive health needs (WHO, 2011). Recent evidence from four countries in sub-Saharan Africa suggested that a significant minority of young people aged between 12 and 14 years old were already sexually active (Bankole, 2003). In addition, a sizeable proportion of young people become sexually mature between the ages of 12 and 16 years, when females typically have their first menstruation and males experience pubertal physical changes (Gupta & Mahy, 2003). As many young adolescents are still in school, they should be able to be targeted through school-based sexual and reproductive health programmes and interventions.

Delay of sexual debut is an important strategy in reducing the risk of negative adolescent health outcomes. Earlier sexual debut has been associated with more sexual partners (Smith, 1997) and more unprotected intercourse (CDCP, 2002) which can have lifetime and life-threatening consequences for adolescents. Furthermore, traditional Confucian norms, which are embedded in the cultures of the East Asian societies of China, Vietnam and Korea, prohibit premarital sex, but young people's sexual attitudes and behaviours in these regions have been rapidly changing (Hullfors & Waller, 2007). Although biological (e.g. pubertal timing), social (e.g. peer norms or parental monitoring) and environmental (e.g. media) factors influence the transition to first sex (Miller et al., 1997), individual attitudes and beliefs are also important factors. Studies, including those assessing adolescent sexual attitudes and longitudinal associations with coital debut, have concluded that adolescents are more likely to initiate sex if they have permissive or positive attitudes towards sex (Whitbeck et al., 1999). Despite varying contextual circumstances, positive or negative perceptions of sexual intercourse appear to influence the onset or delay of sexual intercourse (Chiao, 2011).

As noted in the statistics brought out by various studies, gender differences among youths sexual initiation are eminent. Findings from a study conducted by Patricia et al. (2009) showed that there were considerable gender differences in sexual debut. Factors not well understood, but likely to be of importance in early sexual debut are the social expectations based on gender. Despite varying contextual circumstances, positive or negative perceptions of sexual intercourse appear to influence the onset or delay of sexual intercourse (Chiao, 2011). The aim of the present study was to assess gender differentials in factors influencing sexual initiation among adolescents in Zambia.

Methodology

The present study used data from the 2013 Zambia Demographic Health Survey (ZDHS). The sample for the survey was designed to provide the estimates of population and health indicators at national and provincial levels. The survey was based on nationally representative sample carried out by Central Statistical Office (CSO) with technical assistance from the Demographic Health Surveys Programme at ICF International which was funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The survey used a two-stage stratified cluster sampling design. At the first stage, 722 Enumeration Areas (EA) were selected using systematic random sampling with probability proportional to size. At the second stage, 25 households per EA were selected again using systematic random sampling. Methods and data collection procedures have been published elsewhere [CSO, 2014].

The ZDHS included a special module designed to collect information on various demographic and health indicators including individual characteristics, sexual activity, marriage, family planning knowledge and use, HIV and AIDS-related knowledge, attitudes and behaviour. The household questionnaires also collected information on the demographic and economic characteristics of all household members. In this study, the analysis was restricted to unmarried young people aged between 15 and 24 years old in order to specifically look at gender differentials in sexual initiation

among youths in Zambia. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences was used to analyse the association between the socio-economic and demographic factors and the sexual initiation.

Measurement of Variables

A. Dependent Variable

Sexual initiation is indicated if a male or female youth had sexual intercourse by age 15 or 18 before their marriage. The measurement and description of independent variables is shown in Table 1.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was restricted to never married youths and the analysis was carried out in two stages. Firstly, cross tabulations were used to examine the relationship between the independent (socio-economic and demographic) and dependent (condom use at first sex) variables. For statistical analysis, chi-square tests were conducted at the bivariate level for independent variables at $p < 0.01$ and $p < 0.05$ significant level. Secondly, linear logistic regression was used to identify factors influencing condom use by considering socio-economic and demographic variables separately for condom use at first sex. The results of the logistic regression models were converted into odds ratios, which represented the effect of a one-unit change in the explanatory variable on the indicator of using a condom. Odds ratios larger than one indicated a greater likelihood of using condom than for the reference category; odds ratios smaller than one indicated a smaller likelihood compared to the reference category.

Findings and Discussion

Sexual Initiation

The percentage of males and females who have had sex by the age of 15 years old is shown in Table 1. The data shows that about 22 per cent of the female and 32.6 per cent of male respondents reported having had sex by the age of 15 years old. About 49.5 per cent of the female and 54.9 per cent of the males reported having had sex by the age of 18 years old. Respondents aged between 15 and 19 years old (Females 24.1%; Males 33.8%) were more likely to report having had sex by the age of 15 years compared to respondents aged between 20 and 24 years old (Females 21.2%; Males 30.9%). Respondents from urban areas (Females 27%; Males 37.3%) were more likely to have been sexually active by the age of 15 years old compared to those from rural areas (Females 19.1%; Males 27.8%). The wealth index shows that respondents from poor backgrounds (Females 30.5%; Males; 38%) were more likely to report having sex by the age of 15 years old compared to those from rich backgrounds (Females 16%; Males 26%). Respondents who were working (Females 28.5%; Males 37.3%) were more likely to have had sex by the age of 15 years old compared to those who were not working (Females 20.4%; Males 28%). Furthermore, respondents with primary education (Females 29.1%; Males 38%) were more likely to report being sexually active by age 15 as compared to those with secondary education (Females 19%; Males 30%). Moreover, those who read newspapers less than once a week (Females 25.3%; Males 35%) were more likely to have been sexually active by age 15 compared to those who read newspapers at least once a week (Females 15.2%; Males 27.3%).

Table 1: Percentage of males and females who report having sexual intercourse by age 15

Characteristics	% of females who report having had sexual intercourse by age 15		% of males who report having had sexual intercourse by age 15	
	%	n	%	n
Age				
15-19	24.1**	3686	33.8**	3344
20-24	21.2	3040	30.9	2306
Religion				
Catholic	21.2	1248	32.2	1196
Protestant	23.2	5462	32.8	4428
Place of residence				
Rural	19.1**	3426	27.8**	2780
Urban	26.6	3300	37.3	2870
Wealth Index				
Poor	30.5**	2212	37.9**	1723
Middle	26.2	1370	40.0	1224
Rich	15.9	3144	26.0	2703
Work status				
Not-working	20.4**	4655	27.9**	2868
Working	28.5	2038	37.6	2782
Educational level				
Primary	29.1**	2681	38.0**	2075
Secondary or higher	18.7	4040	29.5	3575
Reading newspaper at least once a week				
Less than once a week	25.3**	5039	35.0**	3892
At least once a week	15.2	1687	27.3	1758
Listening to radio at least once a week				
Less than once a week	25.7**	3289	35.1**	2123
At least once a week	20.1	3434	31.2	3527
Watching television at least once a week				
Less than once a week	27.4**	3989	37.7**	3089
At least once a week	16.2	2737	26.6	2561
Drinks alcohol				
No	22.7	6377	31.9**	4679
Yes	24.9	349	36.1	971
Total	22.8	6718	32.6	5650

*** Significant at P < 0.01; ** Significant at P < 0.05

Furthermore, those who listened to the radio less than once a week (Females 26%; Males 35%) were more likely to have been sexually active by the age of 15 years old compared to those who listened to the radio for at least once a week (Females 15.2%; Males 31%). With regard to watching television, those who watched television less than once a week (Females 27.4%; Males 37.7%) were more likely to have been sexually active by the age of 15 years old compared to those who watched television at least once a week (Females 16.2%; Males 26.6%). Male respondents who drank alcohol (36.1%) were more likely to be sexually active by the age of 15 years old compared to females who did not drink alcohol (31.9%). Alcohol intake was not significant among females.

Table 2: Percentage of females and males who report having had sex by age 18

Characteristics	% of females who report having had sexual intercourse by age 18		% of males who report having had sexual intercourse by age 18	
	%	N	%	N
Age				
15-19	44.8**	3686	49.2**	3344
20-24	55.2	3040	63.2	2306
Religion				
Catholic	46.4	1248	55.8	1196
Protestant	50.2	5462	54.7	4428
Place of residence				
Rural	47.3**	3426	50.8**	2780
Urban	51.7	3300	58.8	2870
Wealth Index				
Poor	52.8**	2212	59.9**	1723
Middle	56.0	1370	61.4	1224
Rich	44.3	3144	48.7	2703
Work status				
Not-working	45.8**	4655	46.1**	2868
Working	57.9	2038	64.0	2782
Educational level				
Primary	50.4**	2681	55.5	2075
Secondary or higher	48.9	4040	54.5	3575
Reading newspaper at least once a week				
Less than once a week	52.2**	5039	56.7**	3892
At least once a week	41.3	1687	50.9	1758
Listening to radio at least once a week				
Less than once a week	52.1**	3289	55.9	2123
At least once a week	47.0	3434	54.3	3527
Watching television at least once a week				
Less than once a week	53.7**	3989	59.5**	3089
At least once a week	43.4	2737	49.4	2561
Drinks alcohol				
No	48.5**	6377	51.5**	4679
Yes	67.5	349	71.3	971
	49.5	6718	54.9	5650

*** Significant at P < 0.01; ** Significant at P < 0.05

Moreover, about 49.5 per cent of the female and 54.9 per cent of the males reported having had sex by the age of 18 years old. Respondents aged between 20 and 24 years old (Females 55.2%; Males 63.2%) were more likely to report having sexual intercourse by the age of 18 as compared to respondents aged between 15 and 19 years old (Females 44.8%; Males 49.2%). Respondents from urban areas (Females 52%; Male 58.8%) were more likely to have been sexually active by the age of

18 years compared to respondents from rural areas (Females 47.3%; Males 58.8%). The wealth index also showed that respondents from middle class backgrounds (Females 56%; Males 61%) were more likely to report having sex by the age of 18 years old compared to their rich counterparts (Females 44.3%, male 48.7%). Respondents who were working (Females 58%; Males 48.7%) were more likely to have had sex by the age of 18 as compared to those who were not working (females 46%, males 64%).

Furthermore, respondents with primary education (Females 50.4%; Males 55.5%) were more likely to report being sexually active by the age of 18 years old compared to those with secondary education (Females 49%; Males 54.5%). Moreover, those who read newspapers less than once a week (Females 52.2%; Males 56.7%) were more likely to have been sexually active by the age of 18 years old compared to those who read newspapers at least once a week (Females 41.3%; Males 56%). Similarly, respondents who listened to the radio less than once a week (Females 52%; Males 55.9%) were more likely to have been sexually active by the age of 18 years old compared to those who listened to radio for at least once a week (Females 47%; Males 54%). With regard to watching television, those who watched television less than once a week (Females 54%; Males 60%) were more likely to have been sexually active by the age of 18 years old compared to those who watched television at least once a week (Females 43.4% and Males 49.4%). Respondents who drink alcohol (Female 68%; Male 71.3%) were more likely to be sexually active by age 18 as compared to females who did not drink alcohol (Females 49%; Males 51.5%).

Factors Affecting Sexual Initiation

In this study, in order to understand the factors influencing the early sexual initiation, Logistic Regression analysis was carried out by considering socio-economic and demographic variables. The results of the logistic regression analysis are presented in Table 3. The Logistic regression analysis data of social economic and demographic variables on male youths who reported having had sex is shown in Table 3. Logistic regression analysis identified age, religion, place of residence, wealth status, working status, educational level, reading newspapers, watching television and drinking alcohol as strong predictors of the likelihood of respondents to be sexually active by the age of 15 years. Females aged between 20 and 24 years were less likely to be sexually active by the age of 15 years compared to respondents aged between 15 and 19 years. Those from Protestant denomination were 1.2 times more likely to report being sexually active by the age of 15 years compared to those aged between 20 and 24 years old.

Table 3: Logistic Regression Analysis data of socio-economic and demographic variables on youth who reported having sexual intercourse by age 15

Background characteristics	Females who reported having had sexual intercourse by age 15		Males who reported having had sexual intercourse by age 15	
	Exp (β)	Significance level	Exp (β)	Significance level
Age				
15-19				
20-24	0.7481	0.0000	0.7735	0.0001
Religion				
Catholic				
Protestant	1.1655	0.0501	1.0168	0.8150
Place of residence				
Rural				

Urban	0.8185	0.0425	1.1083	0.1837
Wealth Index				
Poor				
Middle	0.8586	0.0758	1.1680	0.0565
Rich	0.5512	0.0000	0.7882	0.0146
Work status				
Not-working				
Working	1.3681	0.0000	1.4430	0.0000
Educational level				
Primary				
Secondary or higher	0.8275	0.0057	0.9304	0.2868
Reading newspaper at least once a week				
Less than once a week				
At least once a week	0.6812	0.0000	0.8857	0.0826
Listening to radio at least once a week				
Less than once a week				
At least once a week	0.9643	0.5688	1.0129	0.8408
Watching television at least once a week				
Less than once a week				
At least once a week	0.8161	0.0219	0.8292	0.0148
Drinks alcohol				
No				
Yes	1.4341	0.0069	1.3395	0.0003

However, respondents from urban residence were negatively associated with the likelihood of being sexually active by the age of 15 years old. Similarly, respondents from rich and middle class were negatively associated with the likelihood of having sex by the age of 15 years old. Moreover, working women were 1.3 times more likely to have had sex by the age of 15 years old compared to women who were not working. Those with secondary education were less likely to report having had sex by the age of 15 years old compared to those who only had primary education. Similarly, reading newspapers at least once a week was negatively associated with strong likelihood of respondents being sexually active by the age of 15 years old. Moreover, those watching television at least once a week was also negatively associated with likelihood of respondents being sexually active by the age of 15 years old. Those who drank alcohol were 1.4 times more likely to have been sexually active by the age of 15 of compared to those who did not drink alcohol.

On the contrary, for females, the logistic regression analysis identified age, religion, place of residence, wealth status, working status, educational level, reading newspapers, watching television and drinking alcohol as strong predictors of likelihood of respondents being sexually active by the age of 15 years old. Females aged between 20 and 24 years old were less likely to be sexually active by the age 15 as compared to respondents aged between 15 and 19 years old. Similarly rich and middle class respondents were negatively associated with the likelihood of having sex by the age of 15 years. Moreover, working men were 1.4 times more likely to have had sex by the age of 15 years compared to men who were not working. Similarly, reading newspapers at least once a week was negatively associated with strong likelihood of respondents being sexually active by the age of 15 years old. Moreover, watching television at least once a week was also negatively associated with likelihood of

respondents being sexually active by the age of 15 years. Those who drank alcohol were 1.3 times more likely to have been sexually active by the age of 15 years compared to those who did not drink alcohol.

Logistic regression analysis identified age, religion, and wealth status, working status, educational level, reading newspaper, watching television and drinking alcohol as strong predictors of likelihood of respondents being sexually active by the age of 18 years old. Females aged between 20 and 24 years were 1.4 times more likely to be sexually active by the age of 18 years compared to respondents aged between 15 and 19 years old. Those from Protestant denominations were 1.2 times more likely to report being sexually active by the age of 18 years old compared to those aged between 20 and 24 years old. Similarly, middle class respondents were positively associated with the likelihood of having sex by the age of 18 years old. Moreover, working women were 1.4 times more likely to have had sex by the age of 18 years old compared to women who were not working. Those with secondary education were 1.2 times more likely to report having had sex by the age of 18 years old compared to those who only had primary education. Moreover, reading newspapers at least once a week was negatively associated with strong likelihood of respondents being sexually active by age 18. Furthermore, watching television at least once a week was equally negatively associated with likelihood of respondents being sexually active by the age of 18 years old. Those who drank alcohol were 2.3 times more likely to have been sexually active by the age of 18 years old compared to those who did not drink alcohol.

Table 4: Logistic Regression Analysis data of socio-economic and demographic variables on youths who reported having sexual intercourse by age 18

Background characteristics	Females who reported having had sexual intercourse by age 18		Males who reported having had sexual intercourse by age 18	
	Exp (β)	Significance level	Exp (β)	Significance level
Age				
15-19				
20-24	1.3616	0.0000	1.3537	0.0000
Religion				
Catholic				
Protestant	1.1696	0.0206	0.9779	0.7443
Place of residence				
Rural				
Urban	0.9589	0.5362	1.1165	0.1407
Wealth Index				
Poor				
Middle	1.2100	0.0129	1.1298	0.1395
Rich	0.8747	0.1450	0.7308	0.0009
Work status				
Not-working				
Working	1.4000	0.0000	1.64912	0.0000
Educational level				
Primary				
Secondary or higher	1.2447	0.0002	1.2234	0.0026
Reading newspaper at least once a week				

Less than once a week				
At least once a week	0.6901	0.0000	0.8844	0.0603
Listening to radio at least once a week				
Less than once a week				
At least once a week	0.9255	0.1509	1.0547	0.3913
Watching television at least once a week				
Less than once a week				
At least once a week	0.7645	0.0001	0.8453	0.0224
Drinks alcohol				
No				
Yes	2.2666	0.0000	2.0665	0.0000

Logistic regression analysis identified age, religion, place of residence, wealth status, working status, educational level, reading newspaper, watching television and drinking alcohol as strong predictors of likelihood of respondents being sexually active by the age of 18 years old. Males aged between 20 and 24 years old were more likely to have been sexually active by the age of 18 years old compared to respondents aged between 15 and 19 years old. Similarly, respondents from rich background were positively associated with the strong likelihood of having sex by the age of 18years old. Moreover, working males were 1.6 times more likely to have had sex by the age of 18 years old compared to males who were not working. Aside from that, reading newspapers at least once a week was negatively associated with strong likelihood of respondents being sexually active by the age of 18 years old. The study also found that watching television at least once a week was also negatively associated with likelihood of respondents being sexually active by the age of 18 years old. Those who drank alcohol were 2 times more likely to have been sexually active by the age of 18 years old compared to those who did not drink alcohol.

Discussion

Studies have repeatedly shown that early sexual intercourse is associated with increased risk for acquiring sexually transmitted diseases and early pregnancies (Rosenthal et al., 2001; Madkour, 2010). In Zambia, STIs including HIV pose a huge public health and developmental challenge among adolescent and young people. Research has also shown that social economic and demographic factors have a huge influence on age related sexual initiation in Zambia (Goncalves, 2015). Farid et al. (2013) argued that an understanding of the factors influencing the initiation of intercourse may present opportunities to create new programmes designed to delay intercourse or discourage premarital sex in this group of adolescents and youths. Additionally, such an understanding may encourage new ways of conceptualising the management of adolescents who have already initiated sexual intercourse within families and formal institutions (Cong et al., 2009).

In most African societies, adolescents' contextual surroundings can profoundly affect their reproductive and sexual attitudes and practices. The phenomenon of "sugar daddies" (older men offering gifts of cash or kind to young unmarried women in exchange for sexual favours) has also been widely documented (Castle & Konate 1999; Djamba, 1997; Singhet al., 2000). Such practices are usually encouraged by poverty conditions. Reciprocity of the giving and receiving between girls and boys is common and characterise the majority of early sexual encounters in some areas. Teenagers whose sexual activities are often accompanied by financial rewards exhibit behaviours that put them at greater risk of contracting HIV and AIDS infection.

As in many other studies, data from this study has shown that on the overall, there were more males than females who had engaged in sexual intercourse by the age of 15 years old. These results are in agreement with findings of another study that indicate that males are more likely to initiate sexual intercourse and have more permissive perceptions about sex than females (Cong et al., 2008). In this study, the place of residence emerged as one significant factor that determined sexual initiation among youths. Living in a rural area increased the likelihood of initiating sex early compared to youths living in urban settings. This result may be as a result of the impact of cultural influences. Youths from rural areas are prone to conforming to traditional norms compared to those from urban areas. Research has shown that initiation ceremonies increase the likelihood of sexual experimentation among young people. Ekundayo et al. (2007) in a study on a rural sample in Nigeria found that family culture associated with rural areas in Africa were predictors of early sexual initiation among adolescents.

The results also revealed that wealth status had a role to play in early sexual initiation. Coming from rich and middle class backgrounds were associated with less likelihood of early sexual initiation among Zambian youths. Research has consistently shown that poverty contributed to early sexual initiation especially among females due to lack of money (Ikamari & Towett, 2007). Poor parents were found wanting when it came to marrying off their children at an early age compared to parents of middle and higher economic status. The need to empower youths with education, skills and jobs can help eliminate this factor as a significant contributor to early sexual initiation.

The current study has also revealed that education level is a predictor of early sexual initiation among Zambian youths. Those with primary level education were more likely to have initiated sex earlier compared to those with secondary education. These results are consistent with similar studies that have shown that early sexual initiation among adolescents is associated with low educational achievement. Due to early sexual engagement, educational achievement is compromised. Those who engaged in sex later than their counterparts had more time to spend in school compared to those that had early sexual encounters. Similarly, a study on a Kenyan sample found out that never having attended school and having little schooling was strongly associated with early sexual debut and engagement in risky behaviours (Marston et al., 2013).

Furthermore, lack of access to sexual and reproductive health information or awareness has been documented as one major cause of early sexual initiation (Ankomahet al., 2011). Zambia since 2012 has been integrating comprehensive sexuality education into the school curriculum to increase awareness on sexual and reproductive health among adolescents (MoE, 2012). This commitment is expected to result into lower rates of teen pregnancies and low rates of sexually transmitted infections. Consistent with the findings of other studies, this study revealed that reading newspapers and watching television on issues pertaining to sexual and reproductive sex and abstinence emerged as important predictors of early sexual initiation among the youths. The two factors are associated with exposure to media which to a larger extent increased the likelihood of exposure to information. However, these results suggest the need for more sensitisation on sexual and reproductive health in addition to existing measures.

Alcohol intake among adolescents was also found by research to have a relationship with early sexual initiation. This study found out consistent results by showing that alcohol intake by young adolescents increased the likelihood of early sexual initiation among youths in Zambia. However, results on alcohol intake were only significant for the males and not the females. These results were in line with the findings of US study which found out that substance use and alcohol increased the likelihood of young adolescents engaging in early sexual intercourse among other factors such as anxiety rates (Caminis et al., 2007).

Other than economic, social and cultural values and perceptions among adolescents, gender is an important factor in understanding their premarital sexual attitudes and behaviours (Hullfors & Waller, 2007). Many studies indicate that males are more likely to initiate sexual intercourse and have more permissive perceptions about sex than females (Cong et al., 2008). Gender differences in the influence of factors affecting early sexual initiation was among the important findings because some variables only affected one gender and not the other. This suggests that interventions aimed at delaying sexual initiation should take into account gender specific influences affecting sexual initiation among adolescents in Zambia.

Conclusion

In conclusion, social and demographic factors are indeed significant determinants of early sexual initiation in Zambia. Further studies may need to focus on specific influences between sexual initiation and each variable. A mixed method design which incorporates qualitative information could be of great help. Clearly, early age sexual debut is a complicated matter and though it is important to permit freedom of sexual expression to those adolescents who are mature, intelligent and reasonable enough to give consent for sexual activity, it is equally important to diligently prevent and protect young people from exploitation and abuse (Caver and Joyner, 2004). If behaviour is to be developed for those not yet sexually active and changed for those who are, adolescents and young adults must be a priority. Adolescents they need the relevant information, skills and services to enable them to put risk avoidance and risk reduction

Consent and Ethical Considerations

The survey procedure and instruments for the 2013 Zambia Demographic Health Survey was ethically approved by the Zambia Biomedical Research Ethics Committee. A written consent was taken from all of the respondents prior to starting the interview and all aspects of the ZDHS were strictly confidential. Since this study is based on analysis of secondary data, the ethical approval was not necessary; however, permission to use this data was sort and granted by Central Statistics Office and Macro Inc.

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