

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Socio-cultural factors influencing teenage pregnancy in the East Mamprusi Municipality, Ghana

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Abstract

Teenage pregnancy puts a heavy cost on the mother and newborn child, family and the wider society. Despite measures taken by the Ghana Health Service to tackle the issue of teenage pregnancy, the phenomenon remains a public health concern that is widespread throughout the country. The study investigated the socio-cultural factors influencing teenage pregnancy in the East Mamprusi Municipality using an exploratory descriptive design. The study was conducted in rural communities in the East Mamprusi Municipality, in the North East Region of Ghana. Eighteen (18) participants were purposively sampled. Data collection was done by face to face interviews using an interview guide. The study found that polygamous families, parents' desire for grandchildren, multiple sexual partners and poverty were reportedly influencing teenage pregnancy in the rural community. The bid to establish close family ties also accounted for early marriages. There is a culture of silence on matters of sexuality in the community. Teenage pregnancy is an observed phenomenon admitted by the participants and teenage girls are at risk of serious health complications. This phenomenon paints a gloomy picture of the girl child education in the municipality. (*Afr J Reprod Health 2022; 26[5]: 120-130*).

Keywords: Socio-cultural, teenage pregnancy, community, teenager

Résumé

La grossesse chez les adolescentes représente un lourd tribut pour la mère et le nouveau-né, la famille et la société en général. Malgré les mesures prises par le Service de santé du Ghana pour s'attaquer au problème de la grossesse chez les adolescentes, le phénomène reste un problème de santé publique répandu dans tout le pays. L'étude a examiné les facteurs socioculturels influençant la grossesse chez les adolescentes dans la municipalité d'East Mamprusi en utilisant une conception descriptive exploratoire. L'étude a été menée dans des communautés rurales de la municipalité d'East Mamprusi, dans la région du nord-est du Ghana. Dix-huit (18) participants ont été sélectionnés à dessein. La collecte des données s'est faite par entretiens en face à face à l'aide d'un guide d'entretien. L'étude a révélé que les familles polygames, le désir des parents d'avoir des petits-enfants, les partenaires sexuels multiples et la pauvreté auraient influencé la grossesse chez les adolescentes dans la communauté rurale. La volonté d'établir des liens familiaux étroits explique également les mariages précoces. Il existe une culture du silence sur les questions de sexualité dans la communauté. La grossesse chez les adolescentes est un phénomène observé admis par les participantes et les adolescentes sont à risque de graves complications de santé. Ce phénomène brosse un sombre tableau de la scolarisation des filles dans la commune. (*Afr J Reprod Health 2022; 26[5]: 120-130*).

Mots-clés: Socioculturel, grossesse chez les adolescentes, communauté, adolescent

Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) defined a teenager as an individual who is between the ages of 13 to 19 years and an adolescent as an individual between the ages of 10 to 19 years¹. Adolescent health and development are of global concern. The need to prevent early pregnancy among teenage

girls in Sub-Saharan Africa has been recognized increasingly over recent years².

Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy³. Approximately 12 million girls aged 15–19 years and at least 777,000 girls under 15 years give birth each year in developing regions^{4,5}. At least 10 million unintended pregnancies occur each year among teenage girls

aged 15–19 years in the developing world⁴. Complications during pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death for 15–19-year-old girls globally. Teenage mothers face higher risks of eclampsia, puerperal endometritis, unsafe abortion school dropout, poverty and systemic infections, and babies of teenage mothers face higher risks of low birth weight, preterm delivery, neonatal infections⁶⁻⁸. Countries in Africa have the highest teen pregnancy rates in the world. Niger tops with teenage pregnancy following Niger are Mali, Angola Mozambique, Guinea, Chad, Malawi and Cote d'Ivoire respectively. In these countries, early marriages are the major cause of teenage pregnancies^{9,10}. These high rates have been ascribed to Africa as the poorest continent in the world with most countries categorized as low and middle-income countries (LMIC)¹¹. Factors contributing to high teenage pregnancies in LMIC include socioeconomic conditions, poor access to sexual health, low educational attainment; as well as cultural and family structure¹².

The problem of teenage pregnancy is not dissimilar in Ghana. Between 2016 and 2020, about 555,575 teenagers aged 10 to 19 years, are said to have gotten pregnant⁷. On average, a little over 112,800 teenagers get pregnant annually¹³. The North East region of Ghana recorded about 16,695 pregnancy cases over the last five years. In 2018, the number of teenage pregnancy cases was 3,331. Even though the region recorded a decline in 2019, it increased rapidly to 3,780 in 2020¹³. This was the year the country was strongly hit by the COVID-19 pandemic where most business activities were put on hold and people, including teenagers, were required to stay home.

Every society is characterized by customs, norms, beliefs, and values that influence the behavior of people in society. Cultural and political attitudes toward sexual matters may impede the formulation of a resolute effort toward addressing the problem of teen pregnancy. Researchers, policymakers, educators, and parents mostly focus on preventing teenage pregnancy itself rather than addressing the societal influences that may encourage teen pregnancy¹⁴. The confluence of cultural, religious, and geographical factors provides a sensitive environment where issues of sexual and reproductive health have persistently

remained a taboo in most communities for years in Ghana¹⁵. A study in Chokor, a fishing community in the Greater Accra region of Ghana revealed that poor parenting, poverty, school dropout, peer pressure, and watching pornographic films and materials are the major determinants of teenage pregnancy¹⁶. A similar finding is expressed in systematic review in sub-Saharan Africa¹⁷.

Teenage pregnancy poses a threat to adolescent health with the gravest repercussions on teenagers who are the least educated, poor, and living in rural and isolated areas¹⁸. Even though the Ghana Education Service has a policy that allows pregnant students to continue their education, this may not be possible for the girl child, truncating their education and leading to bleak prospects. The study sought to unravel the entrenched socio-cultural factors that influence teenage pregnancy in the East Mamprusi Municipality of Ghana.

Method

Study design

The approach of this research was an exploratory descriptive qualitative study. A descriptive exploratory qualitative approach is useful in summarizing and understanding an area of interest allowing participants to contribute to the development of new knowledge in the area¹⁹. The design was appropriately selected for this study to describe and explore participants' experiences and thoughts on socio-cultural and economic factors influencing teenage pregnancy in the East Mamprusi municipality.

Research setting

The study was conducted in the East Mamprusi Municipality of Ghana. The municipality is located in the North-East Region of Ghana. The municipality is a multi-religious one; the dominant religions are Islam, Christianity, and Traditional religion. The major ethnic group in the municipality is Mamprusis. Of the population 11 years and above, 33.0 percent are literate and 67.0 percent are non-literate. The Municipality is richly endowed with some natural resources, particularly tourist attraction sites such as the Naa Djerenga Wall (which was built without water but only milk and

honey in Nalerigu) the Gambaga Witches Camp, the Moshe chiefs' ancestry grave sites in Gambaga. The Municipality has three functional markets. The main means of transportation for the people are motorbikes, bicycles as well as commercial vehicles²⁰.

Study population

The target population for the study was opinion leaders in East Mamprusi Municipality. Opinion leaders are highly respected in Ghanaian communities; community members listen to and pay attention to their directives. Since they are gatekeepers, knowledgeable, and influential in the community, their perspectives on teenage pregnancy are most likely to be reflections of those of community members. Their views would most likely give more insight regarding the strategies to adopt for preventing teenage pregnancy.

Sampling technique

Purposive sampling technique was used to select the participants. Study participants (opinion leaders) were selected based on personal judgment, and they are important stakeholders in the community. The sample size was 18 opinion leaders from the selected municipality. This sample size was reached based on data saturation. Saturation is the point at which the information collected begins to repeat itself²¹.

Procedure for data collection

Permission was obtained from relevant opinion leaders, chiefs, and the Municipal director of health services in the research setting. The rationale for conducting the study was explained to the participants who met the criteria for inclusion. Participants who were within the inclusion criteria and agreed to take part in the study signed or thump printed on the consent form before the interview. Participants' right to withdraw in the course of the study was explained to them so that no participant would feel coerced to be part of the study. The interviews were conducted at participants' convenience and in places of their choice, for example, school offices, mosques, churches and homes as desired by the participants. All interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants. Probing questions were used to elicit

information on the socio-cultural factors that influence teenage pregnancy in the area. Each interview lasted between 45 to 75 minutes.

Data processing and analysis

Data collection and analysis were done concurrently. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Field notes provided more clarity on the data. The data was analyzed using thematic content analysis. After the transcription of the data, the entire transcripts were read severally to make meaning out of the data and to identify codes, categories and the primary patterns in the data. During the analysis, coding was done with repetitive words, phrases, or sentences that were of interest to the researchers, being highlighted, and assigned label code. The coded passages were compared and codes that had common elements were grouped to form main themes and subthemes¹⁶.

Methodological rigor

Rigor was ensured by asking good questions, iterative questioning, and frequent debriefing sessions. Participants' validation was also done where some of the transcripts were given to the participants to confirm whether transcription reflected the exact information they gave. There was a clear description of the research setting, and the background of the participants. A detailed account of the processes involved; the research design, data gathering, and analysis also gives credence to the study. In custody with the researchers is an audit trail.

Results

A total of eighteen (18) opinion leaders (assemblymen, chiefs, head teachers/mistresses, and religious leaders (Pastors and Imams) participated in the study.

Causes of teenage pregnancy

Family structure

Polygamous families

Participants observed that in polygamous families, immoral behaviors of teenagers are shielded by

their mothers because they do not want their rivals and other family members with whom they share the same compound to know the immoral behaviors of their teenagers. A participant expressed how mothers in polygamous families in the community shield the bad behavior of their teenagers:

"...This community is an Islamic community and Islam does not measure the number of wives a Muslim man should marry, so if a Muslim marries up to four (4) wives and all his wives are having children, none of his wives will like to openly scold her child for her rivals to know that her teenage girl is chasing after boys or is a bad girl. So the teenagers go out and come back late at night but their mothers will not tell their husbands about the behavior of the children. So children continue to misbehave with impunity. These are some of the things. (OL8).

As a result of polygamous marriage parents sometimes share rooms with children. This lack of privacy for couples comes with negative consequences resulting from the sexual life of parents.

"Some of these things, you know, our parents practice this polygamous marriage... At times parents will be having sexual intercourse while their children are in the room. Some parents will put video cassette and instead of asking their children to go out, they will allow them to watch whatever is going on. These children will come out and you will hear them say last night we watched some film and it was like this like that so let us practice and see" (OL16).

Family pressure

Family pressure was identified by participants as a cause of teenage pregnancy. Parents put pressure on their teenagers to marry or get pregnant by insulting and comparing them to their colleagues who got pregnant and delivered or are married.

"Parents also influence their teenagers into teen pregnancy and early marriage. Look! ...a parent can insult his/her daughter, stupid girl, look at the face like that, your colleagues have given birth and you are still there; what is your contribution? Your junior sisters have given birth and their parents have grandchildren. So

the teenage girl who was not ready for premarital sex will be forced to engage in early sex or marry just to satisfy her parents or be like her peers" (OL15).

Other parents also put pressure on their teen girls to get pregnant or marry early if they believe that the man she is courting is responsible.

"Sometimes too, when a girl is still courting a man and her parents realize that the guy is capable of taking care of her, they will put pressure on her to marry him or get pregnant for the man. You see, all these things? It does not help us"! (OL12).

Poverty

The majority of the participants also revealed that the economic hardships of some parents are the cause of teenage pregnancy, explaining that some teenage girls provide money for their families gotten from their 'boyfriends'. It was also found that some parents find it difficult to meet the basic needs of their teenagers, so the girls exchange sex for money because their parents are unable to meet their basic needs. As one participant explained it the quotes below aptly portray the situation:

"A child will be asked to go to school without breakfast or lunch to eat on her return around 2pm. These teenagers beg from their peers. Some children walk bare footed to school, and the moment they attain puberty, men convince them with a token and they yield to it and when they start having sexual intercourse the end result is pregnancy" (OL15)

Another participant a female teacher shared her experience with an adolescent mother who was providing finances for the family upkeep:

"There was a girl in primary four (4) in my former school who gave birth. When we traced her house, her parents were poor, very needy. It was the girl who was taking care of the family. This one, we can't do anything about it. We monitored her until she gave birth and went back to school. We supported her up to SHS and when she completed SHS, she got pregnant again. Can you imagine?" (OL11).

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of participants

| Participant | Gender | Age | Ethnicity | Marital status | No. of wives | Religion | Educational level |
|-------------|--------|-----|-----------|----------------|--------------|-------------|---------------------|
| OL6 | Male | 71 | Bimoba | Married | 3 | Traditional | No formal education |
| OL2 | Male | 54 | Mamprusi | Married | 1 | Muslim | Tertiary |
| OL16 | Male | 58 | Kusasi | Married | 1 | Christian | Tertiary |
| OL9 | Female | 51 | Bimoba | Married | | Christian | Tertiary |
| OL8 | Male | 39 | Mamprusi | Married | 1 | Muslim | Tertiary |
| OL4 | Male | 57 | Mamprusi | Married | 2 | Muslim | Middle school |
| OL1 | Male | 44 | konkonba | Married | 1 | Muslim | No formal Education |
| OL5 | Male | 76 | Mamprusi | Married | 3 | Traditional | No formal education |
| OL15 | Male | 55 | Bimoba | Married | 1 | Christian | Tertiary |
| OL18 | Male | 46 | Konkonba | Married | 2 | Muslim | Middle school |
| OL11 | Female | 58 | Mamprusi | Married | | Christian | Tertiary |
| OL3 | Male | 51 | Mamprusi | Married | 2 | Muslim | Tertiary |
| OL17 | Male | 60 | Mamprusi | Married | 1 | Christian | Middle school |
| OL12 | Male | 56 | Mamprusi | Married | 2 | Muslim | No formal education |
| OL7 | Male | 62 | Bimoba | Married | 3 | Traditional | No formal education |
| OL13 | Male | 53 | Mamprusi | Married | 2 | Muslim | No formal education |
| OL10 | Female | 36 | Mamprusi | Married | | Muslim | Tertiary |
| OL14 | Male | 49 | Kusasi | Married | 1 | Christian | Tertiary |

Table 2: Main themes and sub-themes

| Main Themes | Sub-themes |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Causes of teenage pregnancy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family structure • family pressure • Poverty • Influence of social and mass media |
| Sociocultural factors | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural beliefs, taboos and norms • Early marriages • Moral decadence |

One of the participants cited the case of a student who had successfully passed her Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) but could not continue her Senior Higher School education because her parents could not get money to pay her school fees.. This was captured in the conversation with the participant as follows:

“I know of a man whose daughter completed Junior High School, she had a placement in Senior High School but her parents were not having money to pay her school fees so before we could realize she had married. If her parents had managed to send her to Senior High School, it might have been difficult for her to marry early like that” (OL1).

Social and mass media

The study findings showed that Social and Mass Media were good for teaching, learning and

entertainment for children. They also served as a conduit that promoted sexual relationships in the community. One study participant shared his view on Social and Mass Media as follows:

“...These teenagers have mobile phones and with the possession of the mobile phones, they watch love and pornographic materials on the internet and as they watch these things on the internet, they end up indulging in sexual relationships with the opposite sex. That is what is happening now!” (OL8)

Socio-cultural factors

Cultural beliefs, and taboos

Every society has its beliefs and taboos and the community studied was no exemption. Participants of the study highlighted the culture of silence on matters related to sex. They believed that discussing issues of sex with teenagers will lead them into sexual relationships and eventually teenage pregnancy. A participant shared:

*“...if teenagers sit and discuss sex or vagina and penis matters and an adult hears, he will use a handle of a hoe and chase them away. It is believed that as they talk about it, they will develop some desire which will lead to; let me try and see. He will try and before you realise, he has ‘killed an elephant’ (that is impregnates a girl). **Opinion leader (OL) (OL7)***

Another participant expressed how difficult it is to discuss issues on sex at home.

"...No, no no, some parents do not even want to talk about sex because they believe that telling your daughter that she is getting matured or matured and should not engage in early sex will allow her to indulge in it. So they normally say that the child will 'spoil' if such information is given to her." (OL1)

One of the participants who heads a traditional area indicated that back in the olden days, they dared not talk about sex as teenagers:

".... other elderly men will insult them as "spoiled" children and he will chase them away from where ever they are sitting. Look, in our days you feared to let vagina or penis slip out of your mouth. Should that happen, you will receive the wrath of your father"! (OL4)

Norms

Norm are accepted standard or way of behaving or doing things that the community agree with. However, Participants observed that the community's cultural/social norms that were long cherished by community members are being infiltrated by westernisation leading decline in pristine cultural heritage. Participants bemoaned the emergence of record dances (discos) which have now become an integral part of funeral performances, naming ceremonies, festivals, and Muslim weddings in the community serving as a conduit for risky sexual behaviours. The following are typical quotes from three selected participants:

"Now, there is almost no funeral, wedding or naming ceremony in this community that they will not play jams, it is almost played every day and extend into late hours of the night and that is where the children get the opportunity to indulge in sexual relationships...we see what they do." (OL1)

To demonstrate how the new practice of jamming (music and dance) leads to risky sexual behaviours, a teacher (participant) in one of the communities had this to say:

"... jams are played from morning to about 6 pm and they continue again from 8 pm to somewhere midnight. Children and adolescents

are found in such gatherings at night... Some of these children sleep a lot in class because they do not have enough rest at night. This contributes to their failure in basic education certificate examination" (OL8).

Early marriages

Findings from the study revealed that early marriages are a common phenomenon in various communities. The majority of the participants stated that poverty and parents' desire to keep close family ties with other families were contributing to the problem of early marriages in the municipality. Extreme poverty in the area reportedly compels parents to give their girls out for marriage; another reason is to reduce the large family size to be able to feed the remaining children. Two participants narrated:

"Early marriage is also common in this community; I will say the primary cause of it is poverty because we give out our girls for marriage for economic benefits. A child may be in JHS School and for one reason or the other parents give her out to a man to get cows from that man. (OL3)

Establish family ties

Participants also revealed that some parents, in an attempt to establish a close family relationship with a particular family, will give a teenage daughter to an adult or teenage boy in that family to marry. This serves as a bond of friendship between the two families. Once the teenage girl gets married, the next thing is to start giving birth at that tender age. Three participants expressed it as follows:

"... a head of a family will give a teenage girl out to the elderly person/teenage boy in a different family to marry in a bid to establish good relationship with the other family. Sometimes these teenage girls are forced into marriage and they have no option" (OL16).

Another participant shared his experience on a marriage ceremony that was done in a bid to establish close family ties in the municipality.

"...I know certain tribes here exchange teenage girls for marriage and the girls are not always

up to the age of 18 years. I have seen that several times.. I witnessed a marriage ceremony with certain parents in the neighbourhood; a girl less than 15 years of age was given out for marriage to a boy under 18 years that was in 2016. You can imagine”! (OL8).

Moral decadence

Morality is collectively upholding certain beliefs, ideas, values and behaviours that are considered good or right and acceptable in the community. Moral Decadence is the failure to uphold sound morality in the community. The majority of the participants observed a decline in morality among adults and teenagers in the community. A myriad of issues on morality was reported by participants including teenagers having multiple sexual partners, teenagers being sexually active, and watching pornographic films.

Multiple sexual partners

Participants indicated that some of the teenage girls have multiple sexual partners. The following excerpts from a participant (local chief) illustrate the situation:

"Some of the girls will not chase after only one man at a time; today it is Mr A tomorrow is Mr D and tomorrow next is Mr E, so when she finally gets pregnant, she will say Mr A is responsible for the pregnancy and Mr A will say, no I am not responsible you were also going out with Mr D! I have had cases of that sort in my reign as a chief. They all denied taking responsibility for the pregnancy" (OL5).

An assemblyman recalled a case of teenage pregnancy where two boys were purported to have been chasing after the girl and both boys deny the responsibility for the pregnancy. He also shared his experience as follows:

"I have two cases of teenage pregnancy, they are supposed to report here by 10:00am for us to preside over the issue to see how best we can solve it. One of the girls is attending Kongo senior high school in the upper east region...the boy who impregnated the girl is not ready to take responsibility for the pregnancy

citing another guy who was purported to have been dating her too" (OL3).

Wayward teenagers

Wayward behaviour is doing only what you want and often changing your behaviour in a way that is difficult to control. Wayward behaviours were exemplified by teenagers who take alcohol and teen girls who do not sleep at home. The following were examples from interviews:

"...One girl like that refused to go back to school and was hiding in a man's house and before we realised she was pregnant for that man and that was all for her education! You see all these things?" (OL12).

Sexually active teenagers

"...A boy from primary 6 went home with his girlfriend from the same class; the boy's father was not around and the boy took the girl to his father's bedroom and locked it. The father came back and realised that his room was locked, the boy's father asked his wife and his wife said she does not know who locked the room. So he collected the spare key from his wife and when he opened the door, he saw his son and the girl lying on the bed. Can you imagine this?" (OL9).

Discussion

The present study indicated that teenage pregnancy is a real and common phenomenon in the communities studied in the North East Region. Polygamous families, were observed by participants as one of the causes of teenage pregnancy. Rivals in polygamous families cover up the behaviours of their sexually active children. Their motivation is to cover up their children from being seen as bad boys or girls in the eyes of their rivals. This finding appears to be consistent with the two study findings which posited that children in polygamous families have high attrition rates in school, are sexually active and use drugs and alcohol partly due to family structure and poor parenting^{17,22}.

Studies in South Africa showed that of the several factors causing teenage pregnancy, one of the causes is parents' desire to have grandchildren,

so they support teenage pregnancy even though it is culturally unacceptable, again the majority of girls are under pressure from men they are courting and family members to give birth or prove that they are fertile^{23,24}. These findings agree with the finding of the present study which reported that parents in their quest to have grandchildren, put pressure on their teenage girls or boys to marry. Some parents also put pressure on their teenage girls to marry if they realise that the men they are courting are responsible men. Participants reported that this behaviour of some parents increases teenage pregnancies in the area. This finding could be because parents in Northern Ghana pride themselves on the number of children and grandchildren one has of which the study area, East Mamprusi Municipality is no exception. It could also be due to cultural and religious (Islam) statutes that do not restrict the number of wives a man can marry^{25,26}.

The current study also revealed that close family ties contribute to teenage pregnancy. Teenage boys, adults, and teachers who impregnate teenage girls do so with impunity because the offenders (males responsible for the pregnancy) are either related to the girls' families or because they are in the same community, they will not want to disgrace them and their families, so disputes arising from teenage pregnancies are settled at home quietly and that is not deterring the male partner. As a result, they continue to impregnate teen girls in the community. Relatedly, a study in Mtwara District in Tanzania, found that community members team up with the male partners responsible for causing teenage pregnancy and resolve the disputes privately; usually by promising to take responsibility for the pregnancy and to support the teen girls and their children after delivery or marry the girls. The authors stated that this contributes to high illiteracy and early marriages among teenagers in Tanzania²⁷.

The study also revealed that parents, in an attempt to establish a close family relationship with another family, will give a teenage girl to an adult or teenage boy in that family to marry. This, according to the participants serve as a bond of friendship between the two families. The Konkomba tribe was noted for establishing these close family ties. This finding agrees with other studies which stated that there are three (3) main forces that drive

child marriages namely: The desire to strengthen social ties, the belief that it offers protection and poverty^{12,22}. It is possible that apart from poverty, the persistence of early marriages in East Mamprusi municipality might be due to their way of life which is inherent in their culture and traditions. It could also be that people value and respect culture and traditions more than the laws of the Republic of Ghana which is strongly against child marriage (The Children's Act 1998, Act 560). A recent report by the Ghana News Agency indicated that many girls from 10 to 15 years are in polygamous marriages in Banda, Jaman North and Asutifi South Districts of the Brong-Ahafo Region of Ghana²⁸. These marriages according to the report were orchestrated by parents of the teenage girls and close relatives, apparently to preserve traditional values and heritage. Unless there is a paradigm shift where there is a total renewal of the mind-set of traditional rulers and members of the society, the practice of teen marriages might persist. In all of these issues, the education of the girl child is ruined. Stiffer punishment such as jails, and huge fines among others ought to be meted out to families that encourage early marriage to serve as a deterrent to other families.

The findings of the present study showed that one contributory factor to pregnancy among teenagers is poverty. This finding corroborates the findings from a systematic review and a cross-sectional survey in Nigeria which showed that poverty is a major cause of pregnancy among teenagers^{12,29}. Other studies established that teenagers from socially deprived backgrounds, characterised by poverty are at high risk of teenage pregnancy^{6, 30}. Some participants (assemblymen and teachers) in the present study recounted how parents of some of the teenagers live in complete destitution; one of the participants observed that a teenage girl who had passed the Basic Certificate Examination could not afford to pay her school fees and before they realise, she was pregnant. Poverty has a huge impact on health; it is directly related to poor health outcomes and a prominent feature of the WHO's social determinants of health, hence the United Nations' efforts to mitigate its effects through the sustainable development goals 1 and 2 which seek to eradicate poverty and zero hunger respectively. Studies have shown ample evidence that women between the ages of 15-24 years were

at increased risk of unwanted pregnancies and STIs and HIV/AIDS in part because they had exchanged sex for money, school fees, necessities and other things such as mobile phones³¹⁻³³. This finding is congruent with the current study's finding which revealed that some adolescents reportedly go to school without breakfast and lunch and so are forced to beg for food from their peers; other school children walk barefoot to school hence they are easily convinced by men when they give them a token for sex. It was noted that the North East Region, where East Mamprusi municipality (study area) is located is one of the worst poverty-stricken regions of Ghana. Poverty is reportedly endemic in the three (3) regions of Ghana namely: Upper West, Upper East, and Northern Region³⁴. Poverty, according to the findings of the study could also be the reason why most teenage girls from the current study setting migrate to the southern part of Ghana (mostly to the cities) to become "Kayaye" (head porter) to earn a living. In the clinical area, one of the researchers had nursed children with malnutrition brought to the hospital by 60+ old women. These children were mostly children of young girls who had left the north to go to the south to work as "Kayayee" in the cities where they are homeless and fall prey to men contributing to pregnancy and reproductive health problems³⁵.

The present study found that the culture of the people forbids parents to talk about sex or sex education to their children/adolescents. It is believed that talking about sexuality to teenagers will let them develop the desire to indulge in sexual relationships. It was also found that talking about sexuality will 'spoil' the children. These findings are congruent with several studies that showed that culture and taboos influence discussion on matters of sexuality. There is a stigma attached to talking about issues of sexuality in communities, which is directly attributed to their culture. This prevented community members from having a safe forum to discuss or ask questions on sexuality³⁶⁻³⁸. The current study further revealed that teenagers are chased away sometimes with dangerous weapons (a handle of a hoe) if they are found discussing sex in a typical traditional setting. Teenagers dared not let words such as "vagina" and "penis" slip out of their mouths in the presence of an adult. This finding concurs with a study's findings that; young people in Nigeria do not openly talk about sex matters and

desires. Words that are used to represent sexual parts of the body, activities, and desires among young people are usually ambiguous and indirect, reflecting the cultural silence expected of them in matters concerning sexuality¹⁷. Similarly, in Thailand conversation about sexual issues was intolerable, particularly among females, because the values, culture, and norms of the Thai society considered sexual issues as a private matter which should not be discussed in public³⁹. Since issues of sexuality are shrouded in secrecy⁴⁰, teenagers are likely to be influenced by peers about sexual issues. The silence on sexual matters at home and in different geographical areas might be due to insufficient public and community sensitisation on the benefits of comprehensive sex education for teenagers.

The participants observed that the long cherished community cultural/social norms are being infiltrated by westernisation leading to a decline in societal norms and values. The majority of the study participants bemoaned the emergence of local disco dance popularly called 'jams' which has become an integral part of funerals, naming ceremonies, festivals, and Muslim weddings in the community and serves as a fertile ground for risky sexual behaviors among teenagers. Similarly, some studies established that the celebration of festivals and religious gatherings at night attracts teenagers who sometimes end up having sexual intercourse debut at the grounds^{17,41}. The traditional African culture that promoted cultural values such as virginity has been eroded with time. The African culture had well-organized structures that not only enhanced morality but also educated teen girls to uphold their virginity until marriage. The breakdown of culture and moral structures result in teenagers indulging in pre-marital sex leading to teenage pregnancy, abortions, STIs among others.

Ethical consideration

The Institutional Review Board of the Noguchi Memorial Institute for Medical Research of the University of Ghana-Legon gave ethical clearance for the study (NMIMR-IRB CPN 046/16-17). Individual informed consent was obtained from each participant before the interview. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Participants were informed they can withdraw from

the study if they could no longer continue without any penalty. All the participants were treated with dignity and respect.

Conclusion

A myriad of socio-cultural factors contributes significantly to teenage pregnancy in the study setting including: poverty, early marriages family pressure and a bid to establish family ties. Moral decay among teenagers was also highlighted in the study and there is a culture of silence on sexual matters by community members. There is a need for periodic sensitization workshops for traditional rulers on the harmful cultural beliefs, taboos, and practices especially the culture of silence on sexuality. Measures should be put in place by the government that inhibits traditional rulers and community members from the practice of early marriages in their communities. Policymakers should engage opinion leaders for community sensitization on the importance of comprehensive sexuality education and ensure teenage girls enrol and stay in schools. Policy makers and community stakeholders should be involved in designing interventional programmes for teenage pregnancy prevention in the municipality. Awareness creation on adolescent-friendly health services at schools and healthcare centers is vital to enable teenagers have access to some of the services it provides.

Authors' contributions

JDD: Study design and data collection, data analysis, manuscript preparation, PA: Data analysis, revising manuscript critically, SR: Reviewed the manuscript and proofreading and final approval of the version to be submitted.

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Competing interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest in this study

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