

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

What Is Talked About When Parents Discuss Sex with Children: Family Based Sex Education In Windhoek, Namibia

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Abstract

Among limits to school based sex education in Namibia are teachers that sexually harass children, unqualified Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) teachers and lack of teaching materials. Moreover out of school youths cannot access school based SRH education. Given these shortcomings, and in the context of HIV/AIDS, promoting parental-child communication about sex is an important measure to prevent HIV infections in Namibia. Parents are important because they support the emotional and physical development of children and greater parent-adolescent communication delays sexual initiation and reduces the number of sexual partners. The rationale for the paper is that there is need to know more about what parents and children discuss if the development of more effective communication about sexual issues between parents and their children as a tool for fighting HIV/AIDS is to be accomplished. Using qualitative data from Windhoek this study explored parents' communication with their children about sex. Findings indicate such discussions are traditionally seen as a taboo but nowadays they do take place (especially with mothers) around menstruation, pregnancy and HIV/AIDS. There is resistance to more specific discussions around sexual intercourse and relationships. We conclude that there is a need for parents to be taught how to educate their children on sex (*Afr J Reprod Health 2011; 15[4]:120-129*).

Résumé

Sujet de discussion quand les parents discutent le sexe avec les enfants: Education sexuelle au sein de la famille à Windhoek, Namibie. Parmi les limitations à l'éducation sexuelle au sein de l'école sont les enseignants qui harcèlent sexuellement les enfants, les enseignants de santé sexuelle et de la reproduction (SSR) non-qualifiés et le manque de matériels d'enseignement. Etant donné ces défauts et dans le contexte du VIH/SIDA, la promotion de la communication enfant-parent sur le sexe est une mesure importante pour prévenir les infections du VIH en Namibie. Les parents sont importants parce qu'ils soutiennent le développement émotionnel et physique des enfants et beaucoup de communication parent-enfant retarde l'initiation et réduit le nombre des partenaires sexuels. Le raisonnement est qu'il y a la nécessité de connaître davantage ce que les parents et leurs enfants discutent si l'on doit accomplir le développement d'une communication plus efficace concernant les problèmes entre les parents et leurs enfants comme outils pour lutter contre le VIH/SIDA. A l'aide des données qualitatives recueillies à Windhoek, cette étude a exploré la communication des parents avec leurs enfants sur le sexe. Les résultats de l'étude montrent que telles discussions sont considérées traditionnellement comme un tabou, mais de nos jours elles se déroulent (surtout avec les mères) autour de la menstruation, la grossesse, et le VIH/SIDA. Il y a une résistance aux discussions plus précises autour des rapports sexuels et d'autres relations. Comme conclusion, nous affirmons qu'il faut que les parents apprennent comment éduquer leurs enfants à propos du sexe (*Afr J Reprod Health 2011; 15[4]: 120-129*).

Keywords: Families, Sex education, Parental-child communication, Namibia, HIV/AIDS

Introduction

School based sex education is now widely recognized as a tool for fighting HIV/AIDS in countries that form the epidemiological centre of the disease. However in Africa in general and in Namibia in particular there are clear limits to school based sex education^{1,2,3}. They

include school systems that fail to prevent teachers from sexually harassing school children, unqualified Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) teachers and a lack of appropriate SRH teaching materials. In Namibia in particular even the government admits that there are shortcomings in school based SRH education. These include training and supporting school officials in the monitoring and evaluation of youth programmes and

investing financial and human resources at national and regional levels to enable better management and coordination of SRH education⁴. Moreover, Namibian students do not take examinations in SRH education, consequently few teachers and students take it very seriously. Some students find their teachers uninspiring when it comes to SRH education¹. A considerable number of young Namibians are out of school and therefore cannot access school based SRH education. Given these shortcomings, and in the context of finding solutions to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the role of parents in the sex education of their children has received reconsideration and renewed impetus. Put simply, promoting parental-child communication about sex in the domestic context has been identified as an important measure to prevent HIV among boys and girls in Namibia. There are many reasons why parents are considered key people in sex education. They include the fact that they are seen as individuals that “are able, not just to educate their children about sexual subjects, but to compliment and maintain the culture and ethos present within the family. They support the emotional and physical aspects of their children’s health and assist them in preparing for adult life”⁵. A second reason why parents are key to SRH education is that “studies that examined the association between communication and adolescents’ sexual behaviors have found that greater parent-adolescent communication delays sexual initiation, reduces the number of sexual partners and leads to more contraceptive use and fewer unwanted pregnancies”⁶.

Although there is some information on school based sexual education in Namibia, there is little information on family based sex education and there is a distinct lack of studies on what parents and their offspring say to each other on sexual issues. Using qualitative data from Windhoek this study’s general objective is to explore parents’ communication with their children about sex. More specifically, we explore the content of communication on sex and difficulties both parents and their children face in such communication. We are interested in finding out the advantages and disadvantages children see in discussing sexuality issues with parents, who discusses which sexuality issues with which parent, who initiates discussions on sexuality and what are the themes in parent – child sex discussions. The rationale for the paper is that there is need to know more about what parents and children discuss if the development of more effective communication about sexual issues between parents and their children as a tool for fighting HIV/AIDS is to be accomplished. Knowing the content of parent- child communication on sex and sexual

matters might help in designing policies and programmes that might tackle HIV/AIDS in Namibia.

Parents and sex education

The family in general and parents are recognized by many disciplines as most influential in affecting a given child’s behaviour including sexual identity⁷. To this end psychological theories (e.g. learning theory, social learning theory, psychoanalytic theory and cognitive development) as well as sociological approaches all emphasize family as the most important factor in sexual identity and behaviour⁷. Aggleton and Campbell⁸ in this context argued that one of the most important determinants of adolescent sexual health (particularly safe sex) is social support. The absence of the link between social support (especially family support) and safe sex largely explains why socially isolated young people have poor sexual health. Engaging parents in sex education matters therefore and has a definite impact of the sexual health of the young⁹. Parental avoidance of sex education with their children is related to such factors as embarrassment, lack of awareness of what to talk about, lack of confidence, poor communication skills and a lack of tradition whereby parents talk to children on such issues^{9,7}. This is largely because of the cultural construction of sexuality as an adult affair and as belonging to the realm of the private. In many parts of the world “sex” is also culturally framed as a taboo¹⁰. Many parents did not have sex education when they were young and this contributes to their lack of confidence on the subject. Thus parents in one Nigerian study feared that sex education would lead to experimentation and the corruption of their children¹¹. Some research⁹ indicates that starting sex education in the early years is beneficial because parents find it easier to talk to children about sex when they are younger. It may even lead to reduce teenage pregnancy. Aggleton and Campbell⁸ say that poor parental communication and lack of skills and confidence is linked to poor sexual health among teenagers. It seems the more educated the mother the easier she finds it to discuss sexual matters with her daughters and the less likely the daughter ends up experiencing teenage pregnancy⁸. Buston and Wight question the orthodoxy that sex education should be delivered at an early age. According to them pupils must be mature enough to take sex education seriously and to willingly engage with lessons¹². Another problem with this body of research is its treatment of parents as a homogenous group hardly able to talk to their children about sex¹³. Parents are diverse and some parents from managerial and professional backgrounds are quite adept at discussing the subject with their

children. Moreover social change in the form of HIV/AIDS and its effects has caused too much concern and grief for parents in heavily infected countries to continue using 'embarrassment' as a reason for not engaging in sex education. It is in this context that Mturi et al² found broad support in Lesotho for the sex education among young people, parents and teachers. The apparent concerns parents have over what children are taught in schools might reflect their mistrust of a school process that neglects to involve them. In this context it is important to explore what parents' discuss with children concerning sex.

Parent-child Sex communication

When parent-child communication about sexuality occurs, it can be positive or negative.^{14,15,13} According to Izugbara¹⁰ some sex education from parents may not be that useful in that it deliberately misinforms children by depicting sex as immoral and wayward. This leads to inadequate knowledge on sex including the knowledge to negotiate safe sex¹⁰. Conversely, good sex education has the capacity to increase contraceptive use, reduce sexual partners, and reduce sexually transmitted infections¹⁰. Trinh et al⁶ argue that this is possible only through a good parent-adolescent relationship. Such a relationship is associated with effective communication about sexual topics making parents effective teachers that encourage children to ask questions. It also makes parents friends that share life experiences with children. With trust established children can initiate talk about sexual issues with their parents.

Gender and parent-child sex communication

Trinh et al⁵ found that gender played an important role in the communication of sexual topics. Holland et al¹⁶ say that women especially mothers are crucial to sex education at home and this is in line with their role as the parents most involved in care giving. According to Turnbull et al⁵ a consistent finding in the literature is that children and adolescents talk more to their mothers than to their fathers about sexual issues. Mother's readiness to engage in sex education at home is propped by their expressive role as caregivers cum mentor¹³. However, mothers seem more comfortable talking to girls than to boys about sexual matters. Part of the reason for this is that the onset of a daughter's menstruation acts as a marker of the child's fertility and sexual development prompting parents to act. Boys have no obvious such biological marker⁹. "Conspicuous physical changes that daughters undergo during puberty, such as breast and hip development, were

common cues for mothers to discuss sexual matters with their daughters"¹⁷. It is also the case that many parents are more concerned about their daughters' sexual activity than their sons'¹⁸. This because they see girls' sexuality as dangerous and/or vulnerable while boys' sexuality is seen in terms of risk taking and adventure¹⁰. Such adventure includes experimenting with sex. Consequently boys are talked to less on sexual matters than girls. Not only do parents have difficulty discussing sexual issues with children of the opposite sex, but there are also double standards when it comes to the sex education of boys and girls at home⁶. According to Trinh et al⁶ parents tell different things to boys and girls. Parents warn girls about sex hoping to thwart premarital sexual intercourse while their concerns with boys are different (things like how premarital sex might affect their education). This is associated with the cultural construction whereby girls that have engaged in premarital sexual intercourse are despised while boys that have are adored. Turnbull et al⁵ literature review indicates that boys and girls get exposed to different types of information and receive different sexual messages from parents.

Methods

Qualitative research methods based on interviews with respondents were the core of the data collection techniques in this exploratory study. Qualitative interviews were conducted in face-to-face situations. We believe semi structured interviews enabled us to get at the life experiences and social behaviour of the respondents, and to understand the issues under investigation through their eyes. This was a purposive sample of consisting primarily of Oshiwambo, Nam-Damara, Kavango and Masubia speaking families who were recruited from Windhoek's suburb of Katutura. Respondents were recruited from the Katutura multi-purpose youth center with the assistance of presiding youth officers. The parents and/or guardians of these young people were then contacted to see if they would participate in the interviews. Table 1 presents descriptive data of the participants' characteristics.

Research measures

Semi structured interviews were conducted separately with daughters, sons, fathers and mothers. The interview schedule employed in their respective sessions was designed to correspond substantively so that they would yield data on each group's perspectives on the same issues. For all respondents the facilitator initiated discussions about (a) the advantages and disadvantages children see in discussing sexuality

issues with parents; (b) who discusses which sexuality issues with which parent, (c) who initiates discussions on sexuality i.e. the onset and timing of conversations and the factors prompting these conversations (d) what the themes in parent – child sex discussions are (e) whether mothers and fathers discuss when to start sex education to children and what they think is important to tell children and (f) how sex education is done within the family traditionally in their respective ethnic groups.

Table 1: Characteristics of participants

Variable	N (%)
Age (Children)	
14-19	9 (45)
20-25	11(55)
Age (Parents/guardians)	
40-45	5 (34)
46-50	7(44)
Over 50	4(25)
Sex	
Female	24(67)
Male	12(33)
Ethnic group	
Oshiwambo	21(58)
Kavango	3(8)
Oshiwambo/Kavango).	2(5)
Oshiwambo/Zambian	2(5)
Oshiwambo>Nama-Damara	1(3)
Nama-Damara.	1(3)
Masubiya	3(8)
Oshiwambo /Subiya	3(8)
Educational attainment	
No education	3 parents
Primary education	3 parents*
Secondary education	6 parents**
Post secondary education	1 parents***

*2 children; **18 children; ***3 children

Procedure

These were one on one interviews conducted in a room free of outside distractions with respondents and interviewers seated together around a table. Respondents were told that the interviews would be audio-taped for later transcription. Only the interviewer would listen to the tapes. After this they would be erased. The children were assured that parents would not have access to the tapes. The interviews were conducted in either Oshiwambo (the dominant language among respondents) or English.

Data analysis

Interviews were scanned for comments, themes were established and data were systematically examined to see ways in which these themes were portrayed. In the findings section, illustrative comments are presented in quotes for the various themes in order to gain a sense of what respondents actually did and believed.

Results

Traditional family based sex education

Both children and parents were asked the question how sex education within the family is traditionally done in their community. They indicated that parents are not normally expected to discuss sex with their biological children. *It is not really done openly, just with mother and daughters but most of the education is done by the grandparents and or aunts and uncles* (Female, 21, Oshiwambo>Nama-damara). *“Sex and sexual matters are only discussed when people are considering marriage”* (Female, 21 yrs, Oshiwambo). *“In the Oshiwambo culture, the grandmother is the one who may talk freely with the grandchildren and not the parent* (Female, 19, Oshiwambo). *“In both my ethnic groups, sex and sexual matters are not really discussed between parents and children unless it is time for a girl to get married. For boys they don’t really discuss anything”* (Female, 19, Oshiwambo/Zambian).

However many respondents recognized that times have changed due to HIV/AIDS, modernization and the influence of western culture and media:

- *Our parents were raised differently, nowadays we are exposed to media and newspapers thus leaving our parents no choice but to try and be open to discussing sexual matters* (Male, 23, Oshiwambo).
- *Normally, it is not allowed for our parents were not raised that way. Most of the new or educated parents know the media informs us. Nowadays sex is taught in schools, and there is HIV/AIDS. Some parents are discussing sex with their children* (Female, 19, Oshiwambo).

A majority of parents argue that it is untraditional for parents to discuss sex with children as it is the role of the grandparents, aunts and uncles, *“Our grandmother and grandfathers are given the task of discussing sexual matters with grand children because they have a different and open bond with them. In our culture parents do not talk to their children about sex - it is usually done by grandparents”* (Male parents, Oshiwambo/Kavango). *“Traditionally, it is done by the uncles and aunties who have a much more open*

relationship with their nieces and nephews (Female parent, Masubiya).

Parents also recognize that things have changed with the advent of HIV/AIDS. *Traditionally it was not done at all, but it is being done now due to the high HIV/AIDS and the high rates of teenage pregnancy* (Male parent, Oshiwambo). *“Nowadays sex and sexual matters are published, broadcasted and therefore the parent has to talk to the child/children”* (Female parent, Nama-Damara).

Parent-Child sex discussions

The overwhelming majority of child respondents indicated that they found great difficulties talking to parents about sex. A few said they did not talk to them about sex. Three reasons emerged for non-discussions with parents – it was a taboo subject, it was too embarrassing or uncomfortable a subject and it was against tradition. Those that indicated that it is a taboo said, *“No, I don’t speak to my parents about sex. It is a taboo in my family. We can talk about other issues but not sex and sexual matters - that is just the way it is, no one questions it or even cares”* (Female, 26 years, Oshiwambo). *“Never tried nor will I even try. In our household it is seen as a taboo to speak about sex and sexual matters. It is also seen as disrespectful to even bring up the word sex”* (Female, 21, Oshiwambo/Kavango).

The respondents indicating that they were embarrassment or uncomfortable to speak to parents about sex said:

- *No, it is embarrassing, sex is private* (Female, 22, Oshiwambo).
- *No. It does not sound right. It would be awkward. My parents and I discuss other things such as school, finances* (Male, 22 yrs, Oshiwambo).
- *Not really, discussing sex with my parents is uncomfortable; they will think that I am sexually active. They will think I am disrespecting them and out culture* (Female, 21, Oshiwambo/Namadamara).
- *“No, I do not because it is weird”* (Female, 19, Oshiwambo/Zambian)

Those that do not discuss sex with parents because of tradition and culture indicated:

- *No, I do not discuss sex and sexual matters with my parents. Sometimes my mother would ask about my HIV/AIDS status. This started when I turned eighteen years of age* (Male, 23, Oshiwambo).
- *No, my parents just never discuss anything relating to sexuality issues. I think that it is because of the culture* (Female, 26, Oshiwambo).

- *No, I do not, because it is tradition that children are not supposed to speak about sex to their parents. Yes you are allowed to ask questions and sometimes you talk about sex in general. You are always allowed to comment but to a certain extent. You are limited because you cannot really ask explicit questions* (Female, 21 yrs, Oshiwambo).
- *I don’t speak to my mother at all because she is not even approachable. She never discussed sexual matters with any of us, my brother or sisters. We speak about sexual matters to each other and not our mother* (Female, 26, Oshiwambo).

All the child respondents were asked whether other young people do discuss sex and sexual matters with their parents. A majority were emphatic that most young people do not discuss sexual matters with parents. Despite this some child respondents view parents with professional occupations as more likely to do so. Child respondents indicated though that they do discuss sex amongst themselves.

All the child respondents were asked to elaborate on their feeling about speaking to parents about sex. The majority are not too prepared for that: *“I am scared, as my parents never made it comfortable for us to speak to them about sexual matters”* (Female, 21, Oshiwambo/Kavango). *“I cannot really speak to my father about sex, to my mother sometimes about contraceptives and pregnancy but not really sexual intercourse. I will not feel comfortable discussing my private life with them”* (Female, 21, Oshiwambo/Namadamara). Even those that have spoken to parents about sex have reservations. *“It feels awkward and inappropriate. My mother and father both did not know how to approach the topic and they did not know how to make it sound relevant. As a result I never felt comfortable, even though they discussed sexual matters with us once in a while”* (Male, 22 yrs, Oshiwambo).

Despite these fears most said that it is a good thing to talk to parents about sex, *“I do not really make time to talk about sex with my parents, but I feel good when we do talk about sexual matters. In my tradition one cannot really just bring up sexual topics easily”* (Female, 19, Oshiwambo). Some child respondents stated that they would have liked to talk to parents about sexual matters as it makes them feel the parent cares. *“My parents don’t realize that talking about sex and sexual matters is education to us just like any other educations so that we are informed* (Female, 22, Oshiwambo). A minority of the respondents felt that it is not a good idea to discuss sex with parents, *It does not feel good because for as long as you talk about sex, your parents will make assumptions about you and will not trust you* (Female, 21 years, Oshiwambo).

How did the parents feel about discussing sex with children? One parent saw this discussion as a necessary evil, *"I would not say that I feel this way or that way. Having discussions with them is just like everything else in life that I talk to them about. It is my responsibility as their parent and care-giver"* (Female parent, Masubiya). Most of the parents confirmed the difficulties of discussing sex with children, *"For the first time I felt a bit uncomfortable, and the reason I spoke to her was because of the High rate of HIV/AIDS and teenage pregnancy that is mushrooming in Windhoek"* (Female parent, Nama – Damara). *"Discussing sex and sexual matters with my daughter makes me uncomfortable for the reason that she is my daughter and sex is a word one will not voice out in front of his daughter"* (Male parent, Oshiwambo – Subiya). *"It is always difficult; I guess it is partly because of the African culture where sex is regarded as a taboo issue not to be discussed between adults and children, especially girl children"* (Male parent, Oshiwambo). Others claimed to like it, *"It makes me feel wonderful, even though most of the children never feel free or interested when we the parents speak and try discussing that issue"* (Male parent, Oshiwambo/Kavango). He believed that children did not like it because they felt blamed and lectured to.

Onset and timing of discussions

The child respondents were also asked to identify the first time when their parent started speaking to them about sex. Most female respondents noted that it was when they got their menstruation, *"when I first got my menstrual cycle and told her about it, I was around the age of fourteen. Then later my mother came and discussed HIV/AIDS when I reached high school"* (Female, 26, Oshiwambo). *"I went to my mother first and I told her that I am menstruating, I was fourteen years old. That is when she started talking to me about the changes that a girl goes through. She also spoke about HIV/AIDS"* (Female, 19, Oshiwambo). Male respondents indicated that most of their mothers came to them at a later age than the female respondent. This was when they were in high school. *"When I turned eighteen years old - that is when she came to me and gave me condoms and told me how to use them. My mother also spoke about HIV/AIDS"* (Male, 23, Oshiwambo). *"When I was seventeen years old, in High school, it is when my mother spoke to me about sex and sexual matters"* (Male, 21 years, Oshiwambo).

It seems mothers and fathers discuss when to speak to children about sex and sexual matters, *"I think my parents discussed when it was the correct time to because they came to me like it was normal and ok and*

they tried to make it comfortable. They tried to be serious" (Male, 22 years, Oshiwambo). *"Yes, my guardians discussed when they thought I was old enough to understand the topic"* (Female, 26, Oshiwambo). An overwhelming majority of parents confirmed that they discuss with spouses as to when to start sex education at home, *"Yes we discussed it with my wife"* (Male parent, Oshiwambo). Parents confirmed that they talk to daughters about sex more, *"I discuss with my daughters aged eleven and thirteen most of the time as they are more vulnerable than the boys"* (Female, Oshiwambo/Nama). Parents also confirmed that events such as menses (for girls) and going to high school (for boys) prompts sex education to children, *"The elder ones from the ages of fifteen years and I feel are mature enough to understand what I am saying. Most of the time, I repeat myself over and over to the nineteen year old because he is vulnerable to the society"* (Female parent, Oshiwambo).

Advantages of parents-children sex discussions

The children agree that there are advantages in discussing sex with their parents; *"Parents discussing sex with their child promotes growth"* (Female, 18 yrs, Oshiwambo/Damara). *"I do not see any disadvantages in parents talking to their children because sexual matters are so much part of society and whether parents talk about it or not, children will eventually hear or learn from other sources"* (Female, 26, Oshiwambo). In the times of HIV/AIDS one child respondent was quite philosophical:

Sex is a natural and normal thing and should be treated that way. Discussing sex between parents and children is good because if children cannot discuss it with their parents then who else can or should they discuss it with. They need parental guidance and advice on it. Friends and others will not always give the best advice or caring advice from the heart" (Female, 26, Oshiwambo).

Some argued, children discussing sex with parents can have positive impacts on the relationship between parents and children. Among these they listed a good and stable relationship, informed children, greater awareness of the dangers associated with sex and more open mindedness:

- *"Children will know the consequences of sex and this will result in less teenage pregnancies"* (Female, 21 years, Oshiwambo).
- *"There will be trust and that will build a good, positive and open relationship to discuss life issues especially sexuality and sexual matters. Children learn better from parents and thus children will take care of themselves which in turn prevents*

HIV/AIDS and teenage pregnancy (Female, 21, Oshiwambo>Nama-damara).

- “When you hear important topics being discussed by people older than you it sort of sticks with you and you feel that what they are saying could be true and really informative” (Female, 19, Oshiwambo).

A minority of the child respondents see it as a disadvantage for parents and children to discuss sexual matters:

- *I don't see any advantages in parents discussing sex with children. It can get out of hand were parents might start not caring. Children end up feeling like they know what they are doing, when in fact they don't. Most children only have half-baked information and not all the facts. As a result they end up making poor choices* (Female, 22, Oshiwambo).
- *If children discuss with their parents they may think they are given the freedom to have sex and this may put them at risk* (Female, 21 years, Oshiwambo).

Parents were unequivocal about their role in home based sex education,

- “Yes, I am a better source of information than their peers, and media such as television, magazines and the internet” (Female parent, Masubiya).
- “Yes, because I want them to know the risks of having sex at an early age - risks of sexual transmitted disease such as HIV/AIDS” (Female parent, Oshiwambo).
- *Yes, because children need to be educated about sex, this enables them to make wise decisions about their sexual life and future. A well-educated child will not indulge in sex too soon and when it eventually happens they will know how to use the necessary precautions. Thus they will know the importance of condom usage and contraceptives. They will have a complete understanding of how their bodies work and can therefore prevent pregnancy, STD's and HIV/AIDS* (Female parent, Oshiwambo>Nama).

The overwhelming majority of parents say discussing sex with children has the advantage of constructing an open relationship between parent and children, “Children have a more open honest relationship with their parents. They will not easily succumb to peer pressure but will instead talk it over with their parents” (Female parent, Oshiwambo/nama). Many parents indicated that information from them is more helpful and concrete for their children than that acquired from media, “It is better to educate your own children on sex and spare them the ignorance because if one does not talk to them as a parent, the children

will seek information and advice elsewhere (Female, Nama-Damara). Another parent insisted that, “although it may be seen as an insult in many African cultures, it is the only way that one can help protect their children” (Male parent, Oshiwambo). One parent saw the disadvantage of sex education at home as “children will learn to protect themselves and as a result will practice more sex at an earlier age” (Male, Oshiwambo – Subiya). This view reflected the fact that many parents were apprehensive about sex education at home, “sometimes the more you talk to children about something like sex and sexual matters, the more they want to experiment (Female parent, Nama-Damara). I was raised in a cultural way; my culture cannot allow me to talk about sex with my daughters. Only my daughter's grandmother or aunt are supposed or allowed to do so (Male parent, Oshiwambo – Subiya).

Gender differences in Parent-Child sex discussions

As already indicated, although most child respondents said that they do not discuss sex with parents that was not exactly the case as most females (and some males) talk about menstruation, pregnancy and HIV/AIDS to parents:

- *My mother only discussed menstruation, because her mother also only discussed menstruation with her. I think the reason why our parents do not speak to us or discuss sex and sexual matters is because they were not taught in school how to discuss the subject of sex with their children. My tradition also prevents my parents to approach me and come discuss sex with me* (Female, 22, Oshiwambo).
- *The topic makes me uncomfortable. When she talked to me, she spoke about HIV/AIDS, contraceptives and she also told me that abstinence is always better. She spoke about condoms and why they should be used* (Female, 18 years, Oshiwambo/Damara).

There was also a tiny minority that openly discuss sex with parents, “I do but only when they ask me questions about my sexual life. Yes I am allowed to ask questions and comment freely. My parents and I are open with each other” (Female, 19, Oshiwambo)

All the Child respondents were asked with which parent (mother or father) they discuss sexual matters with. Most (regardless of sex) said mothers. For many girl respondents this is limited to menstruation, contraceptives and HIV/AIDS. *My mother did not discuss anything else apart from menstruation. At a later stage, she asked me which type of contraceptive I am using* (Female, 22, Oshiwambo). *My mother discussed HIV/AIDS, how it is contracted and how one*

can be protected against HIV/AIDS (Male, 23, Oshiwambo). My mother first spoke to me when I was 15 years (Male, 22 yrs, Oshiwambo). She spoke about not having boyfriends because we are too young and we are not yet ready (Female, 22, Oshiwambo).

A few child respondents indicated that they are uncomfortable and embarrassed and deliberately voided their mothers' attempts to discuss sexual matters with them, "My mother tried by all means to make the subject of sex comfortable, as well as interesting. She tried to make me understand (Male, 22 yrs, Oshiwambo). My mother used to threaten us that if we get pregnant, she will chase us out of her house (Female, 22, Oshiwambo).

A minority of the female respondents did point to the fact that they discuss general sexuality issues with fathers, "My dad would say, "Just wait until you get married for you to have sex. He also always used to make comments about the HIV/AIDS adverts. He used to tell us that most boys would any way lie to you, and you are not the only girlfriend. He said all those things to keep us away from the boys (Female, 18 yrs, Oshiwambo/ Damara).

Very few respondents indicate that their mother and father are open to discussing sex and sexual matters:

I speak about sexual matters with both my parents. They are both open to discussing anything regarding sex. We have discussed dating, pregnancy, HIV/AIDS. They come from a different background were parents are obligated to teach their children what they will have to encounter in society (Female, 26, Oshiwambo).

In detailing what is discussed with mothers many mentioned menstruation, HIV/AIDs and contraceptives. Some respondents indicated that during these sessions with mothers they never asked questions but just listened,

- "My mother discussed menstruation and HIV/AIDS. She basically only informed me what menstruation is and how to take care of it. As for HIV/AIDS, my mom used to warn me about how one can contract HIV/AIDS and the effects of the disease" (Female, 26, Oshiwambo).
- "My mother spoke about contraceptives. I did not ask questions because I chose not to. It was embarrassing to ask questions, so most of the time my mother did the talking, I just listened. It was a one way conversation" (Female, 22, Oshiwambo).
- "We discussed HIV/AIDS. She also spoke about the dangers of having girlfriends at a young age (Male, 23, Oshiwambo).

- Mother spoke a lot about HIV/AIDS. She told us to protect ourselves, she emphasized on condoms, contraceptives, and she always told us not to get pregnant (Female, 18 years, Oshiwambo/ Damara).
- My mother discussed girlfriends, she also spoke about not to have sexual intercourse with girls, and if I do decide to have sexual intercourse, then I should use a condom. She used to tell me not to get any one pregnant and I should always protect myself against HIV/AIDS, as you can never know who has it (Male, 22 years, Oshiwambo).
- My mother and I discussed menstruation, sexual intercourse, and boyfriends and girlfriends in general but we did not discuss my relationships because they might take it the wrong way. Yes you are allowed to ask questions and comment on what has been said but to a certain degree (Female, 21 years, Oshiwambo).
- When I turned eleven my mother briefly talked about menstruation. What menstruation is and how I should care for it. She never really discussed anything with us. The only times that she would mention sexual intercourse was when maybe one of my cousin or someone we know got pregnant then she would say that is why we tell you not to have boyfriends" (Female, 22, Oshiwambo).
- My mother discussed risks of having a boyfriend at a young age. She discussed HIV/AIDS, pregnancy and contraceptive. We never discussed sexual intercourse, and I do not think that we ever will. It is difficult to discuss the fact that I am sexually active (Female, 21, Oshiwambo/Nama-damara).

Although many respondents indicated they rarely discuss sex with their father. Those that do mostly talk about HIV/AIDS,

- "My father spoke about HIV/AIDs but he always emphasized on waiting until I get married. He always discouraged us from boyfriends" (Female, 18 years, Oshiwambo/Damara).
- "My father never discussed sex. When I turned 21 he joked about having a son in law. He really just used to say wait till you get married to have children" (Female, 22, Oshiwambo).
- "I do not discuss anything related to sex and sexual matters with my father. We only discuss school and money issues. If he mentions anything sex related he only speaks about not contracting HIV/AIDS and he tells us to protect ourselves" (Female, 19, Oshiwambo).
- "My father told me that if you want to do grown up things and behave like a grown then you should know that there are responsibilities that come with

it, so rather just wait till you get married” (Male, 22 yrs, Oshiwambo).

The majority of respondents said that they do not have an open relationship with their father as a result they do not discuss sex and sexual matters with them.

An overwhelming majority of male parents confirm that sex talk with their children is on HIV/AIDs, contraceptives and condoms. Males are quite limited in these discussions, *“With her, I emphasize on abstinence, that way it eliminates the ideas of contracting HIV/AIDs, teenage pregnancies and other sexual related issues - she is usually shy in these discussions” (Male parent, Oshiwambo/Kavango).* One father reflected on the mistrust and difficulties he faces talking to his daughter about sex:

I normally talk about sexual relations in regard to what influence boyfriends can have on them - sexual intercourse and HIV/AIDs as well as STDs. I don't find talking about pregnancy necessary because should they realize the dangers of HIV/AIDs and STDs they will not fall pregnant. What I find difficult is talking to my daughter directly about sexual intercourse. So I usually talk about girls in general or other people. Her attitude at the beginning was of distrust and anger. I think she was suspecting that I wanted to stop her from these activities. Now she is freer (Male parent, Oshiwambo).

All child respondents were also asked which parent (mother or father) they would rather discuss sex with and why they prefer that parent. Not surprisingly mothers emerged as the parent preferred for such discussions. Females overwhelmingly argued that mothers are more understanding and as women understood female sexuality better. *“I prefer my mother. She understands me better” (Female, 22, Oshiwambo).* *“I prefer my mother as she is more open and she would understand me better and it is not uncomfortable because she is also a woman” (Female, 21 years, Oshiwambo).* Even male children preferred mothers for their understanding,

I prefer to speak with my mother, she is more understanding and she listens when I ask her questions. She always gives me practical examples, she would refer to other people's situations and allow me to evaluate myself and see if I am happy with what I am doing. My father is just about giving advice. He does not really give me any chance to talk back. He just discussed what he thinks is relevant. He would tell me to leave other people's children” (Male, 22 years, Oshiwambo).

Discussion

Among the major aims of this study were to investigate (1) whether Namibian parents discuss sex and sexual matters with children in the Windhoek area (2) what exactly is discussed and (3) gender interaction in these discussions. We confirmed parent-children sex discussions are traditionally seen as a taboo. However, times have changed due to the high rates of HIV/AIDs in Namibia, media discussions of sex and sex education in schools. Consequently, we found that although difficult, an array of things related to sexual matters is discussed between parents and their children. They mostly pertain to menstruation, pregnancy and HIV/AIDs. The discussion takes the form of information giving (as in menstruation) or warnings as in pregnancy and HIV/AIDs from parents to children. Our study has established that both parents and children see advantages in parent-child sex discussions. The main advantage is, *“It is better to educate your own children on sex and spare them the ignorance because if one does not talk to them as a parent, the children will seek information and advice elsewhere”.* There is also a general belief that parents are a better source of information on sex, although it is embarrassing and uncomfortable to speak to parents. As a result very little intensive discussions (in the form of back and forth questions) are entertained in these sex talks. The resistance encountered on these discussions is both from parents and children who still believe, *“this is not right but we are being forced by the HIV/AIDs situation to do it”.*

For the most part, both male and female children prefer discussing sex with mothers because they are more caring and understanding. Females argued that as fellow females, mothers understood female sexuality better. Discussions with fathers take on a very general form (usually instructions on what to do or not to do or what is right or not right with sex). For the most part parents initiate these limited discussions on sexuality. In line with most of the literature¹⁰ mothers started discussing sexuality issues with female children at the age when they begin the menstruation cycle and male children received sex education at a later age than the female¹³. This tallies with the popular construction of adolescent girls' sexuality seen in terms of danger and boys sexuality in terms of risk taking and adventure⁹.

Conclusion

The findings of this study are based on a small sample and therefore may not be generalized. It is a study designed to produce personal subjective and localized knowledge. It is also important to note that participants

were asked questions on sex and children (a very difficult issue), and despite assurances of confidentiality, they may have felt some restrictions in how they responded to the questions. Nevertheless, within the context of qualitative studies the findings of the study largely support other studies^{10,6,13} about the dynamics of home based sex education in Africa. The study also points to the difficulties children and parents find with family based sex education. It largely confirms the literature about the factors that inhibit parent-child sex discussions (embarrassment, lack of awareness of what to talk about, lack of confidence, poor communication skills and a lack of tradition whereby parents talk to children on such issues). Too many people have seen children and young relatives succumb to HIV/AIDS (officially the Namibian infection rate stands at 19% of the population) not to support efforts aimed at combating it. Therefore Namibian parents potentially support family based sex education for fighting HIV but are reticent about personally getting involved in teaching their own children about sex. There is a need for parents to be taught how to educate their children on sex. Survey research would be needed to investigate the extent of support parents give to family based sex education and the factors inhibiting greater parental involvement. This is important in a cultural context where adults find it difficult to discuss sex issues with minors.

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