

# **Money, Gifts and Sex: Parental and Peer Group Influence on Adolescent Transactional Sexual Relationships in Southeastern Ghana**

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## **Abstract**

This paper uses a mixed methods approach to explore how parents and peer groups influence adolescent transactional sexual relationships in Ghana. We use 12 focus group discussions with adolescent girls and boys and parents of adolescents in two peri-urban communities in southeastern Ghana to explore how peer groups influence male and female participation in transactional sex. We also identify a wide range of parental attitudes toward adolescent transactional sex and determine that while some parenting practices may discourage these relationships, other parenting approaches may intentionally or inadvertently encourage adolescents to engage in transactional sex. Additionally, using new survey data with girls and boys and their parents/caregivers in two neighboring communities, we examine the frequency of transactional sex practices among adolescents and describe the peer group and parental attitudes and social norms related to transactional sex among adolescents.

## **Background**

Transactional sexual relationships—where the exchange of money or gifts is central to the initiation and continuation of sexual relations—appear to be commonplace among adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa. These relationships are thought to contribute to the spread of HIV and other reproductive health problems among youth. Yet the nature and social contexts of these relationships remains poorly understood, particularly in West Africa. A recent study in Ghana that utilized a nationally-representative survey of adolescents between the ages of 12 and 19 found that nearly 75% of sexually active girls and 33% of sexually active boys reported receiving money or gifts in exchange for sex in the last 12 months (Moore et al., 2007).

Adolescent boys also report using money and gifts as a form of bribery or coercion to have sex with girls (Glover et al., 2003). While the absolute numbers of adolescents engaging in transactional sex remains somewhat modest in Ghana due to the number of youth who wait until older ages to have sex—just less than half of Ghanaian girls and 30% of Ghanaian boys become sexually active by the age of 18—it is evident that transactional sexual relationships are a commonplace experience among sexually active adolescents (GSS, 2009). Additionally, this phenomenon appears to be common among many demographics of sexually active adolescents; there is no significant difference in prevalence related to household economic status, educational attainment, or urban/rural residence (Moore et al., 2007).

Even though young people may see transactional sex as a normal component of dating in sub-Saharan Africa (Moore et al., 2007), these relationships bring additional risk to the health and wellbeing of sexually active adolescents, particularly girls. Because transactional sex impacts the nature of the relationships themselves and the power dynamics that emerge between adolescent boys and girls, transactional sex places adolescents at greater risk of contracting

HIV/AIDS and other STIs (Dunkle et al., 2004). With an HIV/AIDS prevalence of 1.9% in the general population (UNAIDS, 2008), and a 2.5% prevalence rate among adolescents between the ages of 15 and 24 (UNAIDS, 2009), young adults are particularly vulnerable to contracting HIV/AIDS in Ghana. Transactional sexual relationships are likely to be sporadic rather than steady and leading to marriage (Castle and Konaté, 1999), and thus these relationships are linked with more lifetime partners (Dunkle et al., 2007). Also, gender power differences are exacerbated; girls who may already find it difficult to negotiate condom use in their sexual relationships (Harrison et al., 2001) may be even less likely to advocate for condom use when there is transaction of money or gifts involved in the relationship (Chatterji et al., 2004; Luke, 2003). This compounds the risk of more lifetime partners. Girls who seek out transactional sex are also more likely to select older partners with financial means, who may be at greater risk for transmitting HIV/AIDS and STIs (Luke, 2003). And lastly, transactional sex is also connected to men's attitudes and behaviors in relationships; gender-based violence is related the giving and receiving material goods for sex (Dunkle et al., 2007).

Adolescents in Ghana may participate in transactional sex relationships for a number of reasons. Evidence from elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa suggests that while some adolescent girls enter into transactional relationships to escape poverty and meet immediate financial needs for food and other essentials, others exchange sex for luxury items such as beauty products and clothing (Wamoyi et al., 2010b; Leclerc-Madlala, 2003). While there is no available research that explores the motivations of Ghanaian boys who can also be recipients of money and gifts for sex—a phenomenon that is shown in these data but rarely explored elsewhere in the literature—there is some evidence that boys may also gain indirectly from transactional relationships by persuading their female partners to have sex with “sugar daddies” and sharing in the profits

garnered from these relationships (Afenyadu and Goparaju, 2003). However, understanding adolescent motivations to engage in transactional sex is likely not as simple as assessing the goods or necessities that adolescents acquire. Swidler and Watkins (2007) argue that transactional sex must be considered within a larger context of economic insecurity and that the practice is part of a larger system of social reciprocity that guards against numerous life uncertainties. Still, financial motivations for transactional sex are real; a recent World Bank report found that providing cash payments of about 10 dollars each month to adolescent girls and their parents in Malawi significantly altered girls' sexual behavior patterns; HIV/AIDS transmission rates were 60% lower and genital herpes infections were 75% lower than among a control group of adolescents who did not receive the payments (World Bank, 2010).

Given the relative frequency of transactional sexual relationships among adolescents and the additional sexual health risks that these relationships can bring, interventions are needed that either reduce the prevalence of transactional sexual relationships among adolescents or that reduce the risks that arise from them (e.g., by increasing condom use within those relationships). In order for such interventions to be maximally effective, however, their design should be informed by a thorough and realistic understanding of the nature of adolescents' transactional sexual relationships and the social contexts in which they occur. At present, little is known about the nature or larger social contexts of adolescents' transactional sex, particularly how parents and peer groups shape adolescent participation in transactional sexual relationships in Ghana.

In this paper, therefore, we examine the parental and peer group context of adolescent transactional sexual relationships in Ghana. We seek to answer a range of descriptive and explanatory questions on this topic, including: How do peer groups influence adolescent transactional sex, and how do these influences differ by gender? What attitudes do parents and

other adult caregivers hold toward adolescent sexual activity and transactional sex? To the extent that parents and other adult caregivers disapprove of these relationships, what strategies do they use to discourage them? And, do parents ever tacitly accept or actively promote transactional sexual relationships among their adolescent children? And of so, why and how do they do so?

An extensive body of literature on the family contexts of adolescent sexual behavior in the U.S. tends to assume that parents would generally prefer that their teenage children refrain from or delay sexual activity. This literature focuses on two sets of parenting practices—parental monitoring of the whereabouts and activities of their teenage children (e.g., Li, Stanton, and Feigelman, 2000), and parents’ communication about sex and sexuality with their teenage children (e.g., Henrich et al., 2006)—that are thought to delay intercourse and otherwise decrease sexual risk in American adolescents. Research on these factors is just beginning in sub-Saharan Africa. Traditional HIV/AIDS programs in sub-Saharan Africa have primarily focused on providing sex education in schools, in part because they assume that parents in sub-Saharan Africa do not talk to their children about sex. However, a recent study in Tanzania found that parent-child communication about sex does take place, particularly between mothers and daughters (Wamoy et al., 2010a). In Ghana, evidence suggests that parental monitoring of adolescent behavior does relate to sexual activity; a recent study found that adolescent girls who felt that their parents were not monitoring their behavior were more likely to be sexually active in the last year (Biddlecom et al., 2009). Additionally, parent-child communication in Ghana improved condom use among adolescent girls (Biddlecom et al., 2009). Because only a few studies explore the relationship between parental monitoring and communication and adolescent sexual behavior, this paper contributes to the field and shows that Ghanaian parents can and do influence transactional sex among adolescents.

As with parental influences, there is a large body of research on the influences of peers on adolescent sexual behaviors in the U.S. (Brown and Theobald, 1999), and very little research in the West African context. The mechanisms through which peer groups influence adolescent sexual behavior in the U.S. include peer pressure, where adolescents make direct efforts to influence the behaviors of others (De Gaston, Weed, and Jensen, 1996), modeling, where adolescent behavior is transmitted through a means of social learning (East, 1996), and enforcing group norms, where membership in peer groups may be contingent on participating in certain behaviors (Kinsman, 1998). Evidence from southern Africa suggests that girls and boys experience significant peer pressure to engage in sex from same-sex peer groups (Buga et al., 1996). This paper will explore the mechanisms by which adolescents in Ghana are influenced by peer groups to participate in transactional sex, and if and how this peer group influence is gendered.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The data for this paper are part of a five-year mixed methods study of adolescent sexual behavior in southeastern Ghana. The study is based in two areas, both located along a central road that runs from Ghana's capital Accra to the capital of the Volta region. The towns are of similar size (15,000 residents) and are both peri-urban in character. However, these communities differ significantly from each other with regard to HIV/AIDS prevalence. According to sentinel surveillance data, one of the towns has the highest HIV/AIDS prevalence in Ghana (8.4% in the 2006), while the other town remains largely untouched by the disease (National AIDS Control Programme [NCAP] and Ghana Health Service [GHS], 2007).

For this paper, we use data from 12 focus group discussions (FGDs) and a community-based survey of adolescents and their parents or caregivers conducted in these areas within the

past 9 months. In December 2009, a team of trained male and female fieldworkers from the Regional Institute for Population Studies at the University of Ghana conducted FGDs with adolescents aged 15 to 19 and the parents and caregivers of adolescents in two towns that neighbored the central research sites.<sup>1</sup> In each community, the fieldworkers conducted one FGD with each of the following groups: in-school boys, in-school girls, out-of-school boys, out-of-school girls, mothers or other female adult caregivers of adolescent children, and fathers or other male adult caregivers of adolescent children. Each focus group included between 6 and 8 participants.

The groups were designed to capture a wide range of adolescent and parental attitudes toward adolescent sexual behavior. While these data cannot be considered representative of adolescent and parental attitudes in these communities, by working with a community liaison to identify a diverse group of potential FGD participants, we increased the range of attitudes expressed by participants and thus the quality of these data. Facilitators used a focus group guide that included the following topics: adolescent sexual relationships, adolescent/parent relationships and communication, peer influence on relationships, and perceived risk of HIV/AIDS. During each group, the facilitators encouraged conversation among the participants to best access the social norms surrounding adolescent sexual behavior in these communities. We conducted the groups in a private location in the local languages that were predominant in the two communities (Ewe and Dangbe) and each lasted between one hour and 1.5 hours.

The trained fieldworkers who participated in the data collection first transcribed the FGDs into the local languages in which the groups were conducted and then translated these transcripts into English. After a preliminary review by the researchers, the transcripts were fully

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<sup>1</sup> Because the FGDs constituted the preliminary fieldwork phase of the larger study, we chose to conduct these groups in neighboring communities in order to avoid any potential influence on the main study sites.

reviewed an additional time by one project team member to ensure the accuracy and quality of the transcriptions. The analytic process to examine these focus groups followed grounded theory techniques (Creswell, 1998; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) whereby the data were first coded using an open-coding technique and then coded a second time to reflect themes that emerge from the data. The qualitative findings presented here reflect the end-product of this process.

In addition to the 12 FGDs, we conducted a community-based survey of adolescents (N=1275) and their parents or adult caregivers in the two study areas in July and August of 2010. (The survey work was done in sections near, but not identical, to the sections from which the FGD participants were drawn.) The survey was carried out by teams of trained fieldworkers from the Institute for Statistical, Social, and Economic Research at the University of Ghana. The teams first visited every household in the community in order to compile a list of every resident aged 13, 14, 18 or 19 years. (Those aged 15 through 17 years were not eligible; this is because this survey is the first wave of a longitudinal study employing an accelerated cohort design.) The resulting lists comprised the sampling frame for the survey, and participants in each community were selected from these lists by simple random sampling. In most cases, both youth and a co-resident parent or other adult caregiver were interviewed, but in some cases only the youth interview was completed (mostly in cases involving 18- or 19-year-old youth residing without any adult caregiver). The overall response rate was 74%.

Survey interviews with youth included: a household roster, a section covering demographic background (ethnicity, schooling, household socioeconomic status), temperament, religiosity, lifecourse aspirations and expectations, time use, problem behaviors, romantic and sexual relationships, relationships with parents and other adults, communication with adults about sexual and reproductive health, peer attachment, friends' pro- and anti-social behaviors,



gender role attitudes, personal attitudes about sex and condom use, perceived parent/caregiver attitudes about sex and condom use, perceived friend/peer attitudes about sex and condom use, perceived reasons teenagers do and do not have sex, and HIV/AIDS knowledge. Similarly, parent/caregiver survey interviews covered the following topics: demographic background, personality, religiosity, gender role attitudes, the temperament of the focal youth, problem behaviors of the focal youth, aspirations and expectations for the focal youth, parent/caregiver-child relationships, adult communication with the focal youth about sexual and reproductive health, pro- and anti-social behaviors of the focal youth's friends, reasons teenagers do and do not have sex, attitudes toward teenage sexual behaviors, and HIV/AIDS knowledge.

Our analyses of the survey data focus on variables most directly relevant to transactional sex: (1) youth self-reports of lifetime sexual activity, being offered money or gifts in exchange for sex, actually receiving money or gifts in exchange for sex, offering someone money or gifts in exchange for sex, and actually giving someone money or gifts in exchange for sex; (2) youth and parent/caregiver reports of perceived attitudes of family adults toward youth involvement in a variety of sexual practices, including transactional sexual relationships; and (3) youth reports of perceived peer norms related to transactional sexual relationships. We examine frequencies and percentages for each relevant item, explore bivariate relationships by means of cross-tabulations with chi-squared tests of independence, and examine multivariate relationships by means of logistic regression analysis.

### **Focus Group Findings**

The 12 focus groups with in-school and out-of-school boys and girls and parents of adolescents in two communities in southeastern Ghana reveal how peer groups may influence adolescent transactional sex, the parental attitudes toward these relationships, and the approaches

that some parents use to curtail their adolescents' sexual behavior. The data reveal that adolescents experience many forms of gendered peer pressure around sexual relationships. Girls appear to experience pressure by their same-sex peers to take on boyfriends to receive the financial benefits of transactional relationships, while boys may pressure each other to give money and gifts to girls in order to have sex. Parental attitudes toward transactional sex are diverse. Many parents work hard to curtail these relationships while some parents may tacitly or explicitly support them. Parents who do not support adolescent transactional relationships use a range of parenting approaches in order to attempt to control their children's sexual behavior—from active monitoring of their children to refusing to pay for adolescents' needs. However, the focus groups suggest that not all of these parenting approaches may have the desired effect. Parents who punish their children by refusing to pay for their needs may actually push their children further into transactional sexual relationships. Other parents who support their adolescents' relationships—the focus groups suggest that a minority of parents do so—may do this because adolescent girls gain some financial independence from boyfriends, and these parents are relieved of providing for their daughter's financial needs. Thus strained family incomes are likely a contributing factor to parental support for adolescent transactional sex.

### Peer Group Influence

Pressure from peer groups plays a large role in girls' and boys' transactional sexual relationships in southeastern Ghana, and these influences are gendered in a number of ways. For adolescent girls, same-sex peers often encourage (and sometimes coerce) each other to participate in transactional sex. For girls who participate in these relationships, they are a means to secure financial necessities such as food or luxury goods that their parents may not be able to afford.

These respondents describe how the desire for material goods interacts with peer pressure to motivate girls to take boyfriends:

Sometimes when a friend wears attire you admire, you might ask about it and if she says it is her boyfriend who bought it ... your friend may ask, “won’t you take a boyfriend who will buy you stuff so you can enjoy or entertain yourself?”

Some [girls] too, when they see something that they like and they ask their mothers and they are unable to get it for them, their friends ... will say that they should go after men so that they can get it.

Girls’ peers not only verbally encourage their friends to take on boyfriends for financial gain, but they also facilitate the process of identifying and securing boyfriends. As this girl describes, friends help you because they “wish you to get involved in such things so that you also benefit”:

If your friend’s boyfriend buys her a couple of clothes and your mother can’t afford [to do the same] and perhaps your father is deceased, your friend would rather introduce you to a friend of her boyfriend’s in order to help you.

Beyond verbal encouragement and introducing girls to potential boyfriends, some girls actively bring their peers into transactional sexual relationships. As this girl describes, some peers will go to great lengths—almost acting as a recruiter—to encourage their friends to take on boyfriends for financial gain:

If you make a friend who [gets money from a man], she dresses you and spends on you for a while, and she will then say that she works at a particular place and ask that you follow her. When you get there, she will actually reveal to you what really goes on. First of all, she will teach you how to go about it and then she will be the one to go out and get you a man so that you sleep with him and bring money for spending.

Some peer pressure within girls’ peer groups is not motivated by a desire to ‘help’ friends get boyfriends, but rather girls are required to have boyfriends in order to participate in the peer group itself. As this girl describes, sometimes girls lose their friendships if they refuse to have boyfriends:

Seeing that you don't have friend who helps you financially, if she does tell you to do such a thing and you refuse, she will threaten to forsake you. You on the other hand for fear of losing your friendship will start such things.

Additionally, some of the out-of-school girls described situations in which girls experience even more severe pressure and coercion to participate in transactional sex from their female relatives, mainly sisters. Perhaps because these girls are not in school, they are more vulnerable to their sibling's pressure, or their out-of-school status may be reflective of overall poverty in their families. While the cause of the vulnerability described in these responses is unknown, the coercion—and the severe consequences of refusal—experienced by girls from their sisters are real:

If your sister is told by somebody that he likes you but you don't like the fellow, and your mother is not in [the house] and has left money for spending and [your sister] has the money with her, she can tell you to yield to the boy or else she will not give you any spending money for food.

If a girl goes to her sister in the city or town from the village and that sister doesn't have enough to live on, then if a man says that he likes you, she will force you to go ahead. This will force the girl to do it.

For boys, peer pressure to participate in transactional sex is more directly related to sex, rather than the financial rewards that come from transactional sex. Boys in both towns explained that their peers frequently save up their pocket money and steal from parents to maintain their relationships with girls. However, others explained that male peer group members can loan each other money for girlfriends, and even use money as a means of pressuring their friends to have girlfriends. As one boy explained, “if you don't do it, [your friends] will give about 1 Ghana Cedi [70 cents U.S.] to use it to get a girl.” And, even this small amount of money can be sufficient; as another boy remarked, “After all, most girls of present times are cheap. So [you can] go and have your time with them” for minimal cost.

Also, while some boys explain that their friends loan each other money for girlfriends to ‘help’ their friends to experience the pleasure of sex, other boys explain that having a girlfriend is essential to their peer group membership. As this boy articulated, having girlfriends can bring peer groups and friends together: “If my friend has a girlfriend and I don’t have one, he will pressure me to also look for a girlfriend so that we can have something in common.” Another boy explained that having a girlfriend can be essential to “be[ing] able to flow” with a specific group of boys.

In addition, a small number of boys recounted that same-sex peers can also encourage boys to have girlfriends as a means of securing financial resources. This form of peer pressure is much like the peer pressure that girls described; boys may advise their peers to ‘go after’ girls who are perceived as having money so that they can benefit financially from the relationship. Whether this is a common phenomenon remains unclear—the literature does not explore this concept and these focus groups did not provide concrete examples of boys having sex with girls for money. However, the majority of girls’ focus groups describe how ‘bad’ boys use their girlfriends for money and target girls from wealthier families for dates. Thus these data provide preliminary evidence that boys can also benefit financially from transactional sexual relationships.

#### Parental Approaches to Curtail Transactional Sex

The majority of parents in these focus groups do not support adolescent sexual relationships and they try to discourage transactional sex practices among their children. Parents are acutely aware of the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS, and their adolescents’ sexual behavior is a significant worry. While some parents felt at a loss as to handle their adolescents’ behavior and did not take action, others adopted a wide range of active strategies to attempt to stop their

children's sexual relationships. For example, some parents vigilantly care for the monetary needs of their children as a way to reduce their children's motivation to pursue sexual partners. As this mother explains, children are not always at fault—they may pursue relationships to ensure that their basic needs are met—and parents must take responsibility by providing for their children's needs and counseling them:

Maybe the child needs something and that is why he/she is behaving in that bad way. You that parent have to recognize that maybe it was because you have refused to provide what your child needs and that is why he/she has become stubborn or gone wayward. You the parent have to understand that the child is not at fault. Instead, you have to call the child and advice him/her to stop those bad behaviors and tell him/her that you will provide those needs.

Another mother explained how she has become hyper-vigilant about monitoring her children's new possessions, as these can be indicative of transactional sexual relationships:

I make sure I buy the dresses for my children. When you come back from school and have something on you that I did not buy, I will make sure you tell me where you got it from.

Yet because mothers often lack the financial resources to satisfy all the needs of their children, they have a difficult time preventing relationships. As this mother explained, she makes promises to her kids that she cannot fulfill, in hopes of staving off their sexual behavior:

So some of us parent talk to our children and tell them to be of good behavior and that if they obey, we promise them that we will buy something for them but in sincerity, we cannot buy it. We only do this to prevent them from going out. So we mothers do not have money to further our children's education. If you cannot further a child's education it is better that he does not go to school at all.

Other parents explained how it is better to intercede with the girl who is chasing a son, or the parents of the child involved with your own. One mother explained that "If the mother of the boy does not like the girl, she can give her money to take care of herself to stop following her son." Parents explain that this active approach—providing financial support, monitoring

children's possessions, and intervening with other adolescents or their parents—takes significant time and energy, and not all parents are willing or able to use these methods.

Other parents use more passive approaches to punish their children and attempt to prevent their transactional sexual relationships. These parents describe how they refuse to support their children when they misbehave and instead punish them through rejection. As one father explained, financial support—even for basic needs such as food—becomes contingent upon good behavior (and no sex):

Some parents deny their wards their needs. When all the pieces of advice do not work, they give good behavior a condition for the supply of the child's needs. Some parents even starve their children as punishment.

And, when children go wayward and become pregnant, parents may also refuse to help care for their grandchildren because their children did not heed their warnings. This mother explains how she rejected her daughter when she had a child as an adolescent:

My female child was 15 yrs old when I caught her [with men] and she just ran away. But when it “pricked her eye” [got her pregnant] I left her alone because she went looking for the trouble. She is now on her own. The man that she had the baby with has left and it has now become her burden. It is not [parents'] wish that they should be doing that.

Another mother articulated her own stance on rejecting teenage daughters who become pregnant as unmarried adolescents. She held a position with which many mothers agreed:

If you get pregnant, I will not take care of you any more, and not even the baby because, my suffering is too much. So if you get pregnant, I will send you packing to the man who impregnated you. Since you want a child, go and stay with the man and have your child. If you also suffer, the next time, you will learn from it.

Given the financial hardship that faces many families—and particularly mothers who are sole providers for their children—rejecting a wayward child's financial needs is a logical reaction to adolescent disobedience. This form of punishment also has the added benefit of easing strains on family resources. However, given that adolescent girls regularly cite financial

motivations as the primary reason for engaging in transactional sexual relationships—and the focus group data confirm that girls in this region do seek transactional sexual relationships for necessities as well as luxury goods—parents who reject their children as punishment for their sexual behavior may in fact be encouraging their children to continue or increase this risky behavior.

### Parents who Support Adolescent Transactional Sex

According to the focus groups with both parents and adolescents in these two communities, some parents may not see adolescent transactional sex as problematic. Instead, there are parents who actually encourage their children—either implicitly or explicitly—to participate in transactional sexual relationships. As one girl explained, some parents ask their children to take on boyfriends so that they can bring money into the household:

It is sometimes the fault of our parents. If for instance they don't have money they can tell you to go after men so that you can bring some money home for up-keeping or lets you go after men so as to bring money home.

Another girl describes how mothers can sometimes send their daughters directly to their boyfriends for things because they do not have the money to provide for them:

When we ask things of our mother and they don't have [them], they say we should go and tell your lovers or concubines to get [them] for us because they don't [the money].

Some parents will even use peer pressure to push their daughters to take on boyfriends, as this mother explains:

In my opinion, it's a joy for the parents! Some parents send the child because if she's at home and she's not involved or is not doing it, the parent will ask, "Can't you see your peers what about you?" so some actually are happy about the daughter's involvement with boys!

Other parents are more implicit in their support of adolescent transactional relationships. For example, mothers explained how some parents choose to ignore their daughters' new



possessions, while knowing that they do not have a source of income to acquire the items. Other parents described mothers and fathers that have given up on punishing their “stubborn” children, and no longer try to curtail their sexual relationships. Parents who adopt active approaches to prevent their children’s transactional relationships see this approach as condoning adolescent sex. While the acceptance of adolescent sexual relationships is not the prevailing perspective among parents in the focus groups, nonetheless it appears that some parents do go against the prevailing parental attitudes toward adolescent sex and encourage their children to have transactional sexual relationships.

### **Survey Findings**

The community-based survey of adolescents and parent/caregivers collected in the same high and low HIV prevalence areas of Ghana reveal a different perspective on adolescent transactional sex. Perhaps because the focus groups asked participants to discuss the social norms surrounding adolescent sexual behavior in their communities while the survey accessed the specific behaviors and attitudes of individual respondents, the data reveal some differences in the apparent frequency of and factors that contribute to adolescent transactional sex. Therefore we explore the survey findings independently before undertaking a larger discussion of the qualitative and quantitative data as a whole.

Select characteristics of the survey sample are displayed in Table 1. The fact that slightly more than half of the sample is female may reflect higher rates of out-migration or higher rates of refusal to participate among teenage boys or compared to girls. And, that there are fewer 19-year-olds than 13-, 14-, or 18-year-olds in the sample suggest that out-migration may commonly begin at around age 19. (Note that two youth who were 14-years-old and two who were 19-years-old at the time of listing had reached their 15th and 20th birthdays, respectively, by the

time they were interviewed.) A majority of participants had not (yet) made it beyond primary school, while a substantial minority reported at least some secondary schooling at the junior level and a smaller number reported having at least some senior secondary school.

Data on self-reported sexual behaviors are shown in Table 2. Approximately 21% of youth reported that they had ever had sex. A substantially smaller proportion (8.5%) reported that they had ever been offered money or other gifts in exchange for sex, and an even smaller proportion (1.8%, or just 23 youth) reported actually receiving money or gifts from someone in exchange for sex or for being in a sexual relationship. Likewise, only 2.1% (27 youth) reported that they had ever given anyone money or gifts for sex. However, given that more than half of the survey sample was under the age of 15 (56%) due to the accelerated cohort design, and that respondents may receive (or offer) gifts or money to/from sexual partners without defining this process as a formal exchange, these percentages likely underestimate the prevalence of transactional sex among the adolescent population in the study communities.

Youth also were asked a series of questions about how adults in their families would feel about them having sex. The response options were: Very true, Somewhat true, Not at all true, and Don't know. Similar questions were posed to the parents/caregivers of youth participants. Responses to several of these questions are shown in Table 3. Some questions are worded so that "Very true" indicates perceived tolerant or permissive attitudes, whereas others are worded so that "Very true" indicates intolerant or restrictive attitudes. In order to facilitate comparisons, the table shows the proportion of youth or parents/caregivers who endorsed a tolerant or permissive option. As the data in Table 3 show, youth and parents/caregiver responses both indicate that family adults are generally intolerant when it comes to youth involvement in sexual activity. Only 10% of youth and 6% of parents/caregivers, for example, said that it was "not at

all true” that adults in the family would disapprove of the youth having sex. Youth and parents/givers were likewise in agreement that the prospect of marriage would make youth sex more tolerable or permissible according to family adults (22% of youth and 12% of parents/caregivers reported that this was Very true or Somewhat true). In contrast, only 7% of youth and 3% of parents/caregivers said that it was Very true or Somewhat true that adults in the family would approve of the youth having sex if her or his partner gave her/him money or other gifts in return.

Table 4 shows that according to youth reports, the attitudes of family adults toward youth involvement in transactional sex are not associated with gender or community of residence. However, youth in the older cohort were more likely than those in the younger cohort (10% versus 5%) to say that it was Very true or Somewhat true that adults in their families would approve of them having sex if their partner gave them money or other gifts in return. The logistic regression results confirm the importance of age and the non-importance of gender and community of residence to youth perceptions of family adult attitudes toward their being involved in transactional sex.

Youth were also asked a series of questions intended to assess their perceptions of peer norms concerning sexual practices. The first question in this series asked, “If a [GIRL/BOY] your age had sex with a [BOYFRIEND/GIRLFRIEND] of about the same age, what would happen?” The response options were: Her/His friends would respect her/him more, Her/His friends would respect her/him less, It would not affect her/his friends’ respect, and Don’t know. Other questions in the series asked about having multiple partners, younger partners, older partners, inexperienced partners, more experienced partners. Most importantly, the last question in the series asked, “If a [GIRL/BOY] your age received money or gifts from someone with

whom they had sex, what would happen?” Responses to all questions in this series are shown in Table 5. These data show that 12% of youth said that receiving money or gifts from a sexual partner would cause a teenager’s friends to respect her or him more, while 10% said that it would have no effect on respect. A substantial majority (77%) said that this would cause a teenagers’ friends to respect her or him less. Responses on these and other questions in the series indicate a general attitude of disapproval toward sex among teenagers, although the extent or severity of the disapproval appears to vary depending upon the specific behavior. Having sex with an inexperienced partner is the least disapproved of, and having sex with someone five years younger is the most disapproved of.

Table 6 shows how responses to the item about transactional sex vary according to the sex, age, and community of residence of the respondent. According to both the bivariate and multivariate analyses, males and older youth are more likely than females and younger youth to report that their friends would respect them more if they received money or gifts from a sexual partner. Community of residence was not associated with responses to this item.

Finally, Table 7 shows how self-reports of actually receiving money or gifts in exchange for sex, and of actually giving money or gifts in exchange for sex, relate to the demographic characteristics of the youth and to perceptions of family adult attitudes and peer norms related to transactional sex. For being the recipient of money or gifts, the results of bivariate and multivariate analyses indicate that girls are more likely than boys, that older youth are more likely than younger youth, and that youth in the high prevalence community are more likely than youth in the low prevalence community to report that they had ever received money or gifts in exchange for sex. In contrast, perceptions of the attitudes of family adults toward transactional sex, and perceptions of peer norms related to transactional sex, had no influence on self-reported

behavior. Perceived family adult attitudes and perceived peer norms likewise had no influence on self-reports of giving money or gifts in exchange for sex. Boys were more likely than girls, and older youth were more likely than younger youth, to report ever having given someone money or gifts in exchange for sex. There was some indication that youth in the high prevalence community were more likely than youth in the low prevalence community ever to have given someone money or gifts in exchange for sex, but this finding was of marginal statistical significance in the bivariate analysis and was not statistically significant in the multivariate analysis.

## **Discussion**

This mixed methods study of parental and peer group influence on adolescent transactional sexual relationships in Southeastern Ghana utilizes data from focus group discussions and a community-based survey with adolescents and parents/caregivers. We collected these data in two peri-urban areas, both of which are between the capital city of Accra and the capital of the Volta region. While close in geographic proximity, these urban areas differ with regard to HIV prevalence; one of the communities has a prevalence rate of 8.4% while the other remains largely untouched by the disease.

The focus group findings reveal that adolescent boys and girls have a clear awareness of how peer pressure influences boys' and girls' participation in transactional sexual relationships. Both boys and girls describe how same-sex peers can encourage and facilitate transactional sexual relationships and use coercive methods to influence peers' behavior. Gender also effects peer pressure messages; girls tend to be motivated by the financial gains that these relationships bring (both necessities and luxury goods) while boys are more often motivated by a desire for sex.

However, analyses of the community-based survey find no significant correlation between adolescent beliefs about their peer group acceptance of transactional sex and whether youth engage in transactional sex. This may be a function of the different data collection approaches used for the focus groups and community-based survey. The focus group participants were asked to describe what they have observed in their own communities with regard to sexual peer pressure (social norms), while the survey asks respondents to describe their own sexual behavior and own peer groups' acceptance of transactional sex. It may be that adolescents' larger interpretation of peer group pressure in their communities—rather than the approval of their own specific group of friends—may have some influence on their sexual behavior. In other words, the hearsay stories of “what boys do” and “what girls do” may influence behaviors. This could in part explain the differing rates of transactional sex in the two study communities.

With regard to parental influences on adolescent transactional sex, the vast majority of parents and caregivers in these communities do not approve of their children's sexual behavior. The focus groups show that parents employ a number of strategies—from active monitoring of youth's possessions to strict punishments and restrictions—to curtail adolescent sexual relationships. Still, the survey findings suggest that parental attitudes toward adolescent sex are not significantly related to whether adolescents engage in transactional sex. In short, while parents are invested in their children's sexual health and look for successful ways to counsel and guide their children to become healthy adulthood, many are finding their efforts to be ineffective. As one mother in the high prevalence community explained, “we have done our best but it is not working.” Another mother in this community requested that the researchers “come on the radio and advise our children. We will be very grateful because we are almost at the point of giving up.” These findings suggest that better integration of parents into adolescent sexual health

promotion programs in West Africa could have an impact on the spread of the disease among this vital and vulnerable population.

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Table 1. Survey Sample Characteristics

	N	%
Sex		
Female	693	54.4
Male	582	45.7
Age		
13	361	28.3
14	354	27.8
15	2	0.2
18	352	27.6
19	204	16.0
20	2	0.2
Community		
Low Prevalence	619	48.6
High Prevalence	656	51.5
Max Schooling		
None or Primary	689	54.0
Some Junior Secondary	428	33.6
Some Senior Secondary	156	12.2
Missing	2	0.2
TOTAL	1275	

Table 2. Self Reports of Sexual Intercourse and Transactional Sex

	N	%
Have you ever in your life had sexual intercourse?		
No	975	76.5
Yes	267	20.9
Refused	33	2.6
Has anyone ever offered you money or other gifts in an attempt to get you to have sex with them or to be in a sexual relationship with them?		
No	1,165	91.4
Yes	108	8.5
Missing	2	0.2
Have you ever had sex with someone, or been in a sexual relationship with someone, in return for money or other gifts?		
No	1,243	97.5
Yes	23	1.8
Missing	9	0.7
Have you ever offered anyone money or other gifts in return for them having sex with you or being in a sexual relationship with you?		
No	1,248	97.9
Yes	27	2.1
Have you ever given anyone money or other gifts in return for them having sex with you or being in a sexual relationship with you?		
No	1,252	98.2
Yes	23	1.8

Table 3. Perceptions of Tolerance for Teen Sex among Family Adults: Youth and Parent/Caregiver Reports

	Reporter	%
Adults in your family would disapprove of you having sex. [Not at all true]	Youth	9.6
	P/C	5.5
Adults in your family would approve of you having sex if your partner gave you money or other gifts in return. [Very true or Somewhat true]	Youth	7.0
	P/C	3.0
Adults in your family would be very angry if you got (someone) pregnant. [Not at all true]	Youth	5.5
	P/C	3.4
Adults in your family would approve of you having sex if they thought it would lead to marriage. [Very true or Somewhat true]	Youth	21.9
	P/C	12.1
Adults in your family would be very angry if they discovered that you had sex with a casual partner. [Not at all true]	Youth	10.7
	P/C	6.4
Adults in your family think it is natural for young people to experiment with having sex. [Very true or Somewhat true]	Youth	15.0
	P/C	9.7

Table 4. Correlates of Youth Perceptions of Familial Adult Tolerance of Transactional Sex

	Bivariate				Multivariate	
	Very	Somewhat	Not At All	$\chi^2$ / p-value	AOR*	p-value
Female	3.03	3.61	93.36	0.37	.	.
Male	3.61	3.78	92.61	0.833	1.06	0.803
Younger	2.09	2.79	95.12	11.54	.	.
Older	4.84	4.84	90.32	0.003	2.06	0.001
Low Prevalence	2.26	4.04	93.70	4.36	.	.
High Prevalence	4.27	3.35	92.38	0.113	1.17	0.486

\* Odds ratio for Very true or Somewhat true vs. Not at all true.

Table 5. Perceived Peer Norms Regarding Transactional Sex and Other Sexual Behaviors (%)

	HER/HIS friends would respect HER/HIM...			
	More	No Effect	Less	Missing or Don't Know
If a GIRL/BOY your age received money or gifts from someone with whom they had sex, what would happen?	12.2	10.4	77.2	0.2
If a GIRL/BOY your age had sex with a BOYFRIEND/GIRLFRIEND of about the same age, what would happen?	7.9	21.3	70.7	0.1
If a GIRL/BOY your age had sexual relations with two partners at the same time, what would happen?	5.7	6.6	87.7	0.1
If a GIRL/BOY your age had sex with someone five years younger than HER/HIM, what would happen?	1.6	5.8	92.6	0.1
If a GIRL/BOY your age had sex with someone five years older than HER/HIM, what would happen?	12.2	11.3	76.3	0.2
If a GIRL/BOY your age had sex with someone who had not had sex before, what would happen?	18.2	13.7	67.8	0.2
If a GIRL/BOY your age had sex with someone who had many previous sexual partners, what would happen?	1.5	7.2	91.2	0.1

Table 6. Correlates of Perceived Peer Norms Related to Transactional Sex.

	Bivariate		Multivariate	
	Percent*	$\chi^2$ / p-value	AOR	p-value
Female	9.2	12.81		
Male	15.8	0.000	1.73	0.002
Younger	92.5	33.65		
Older	18.3	0.000	2.64	0.000
Low Prevalence	11.7	0.39		
High Prevalence	12.8	0.530	1.04	0.841

\* Percent reporting that receiving money or gifts from someone with whom they had sex would make a teenager's friends respect HER/HIM more.



Table 7. Correlates of Transactional Sex

	Bivariate			Multivariate	
	%	$\chi^2$	p-value	AOR	p-value
Received Money or Gifts					
Female	2.62				
Male	0.87	5.40	0.020	0.26	0.009
Younger	0.14				
Older	3.98	25.72	0.000	33.10	0.001
Low Prevalence	0.81				
High Prevalence	2.78	6.91	0.009	3.38	0.022
Intolerant Adults	1.87				
Tolerant Adults	1.12	0.026	0.612	0.34	.307
Not More Peer Respect	1.80	0.002	0.898	0.77	.687
More Peer Respect	1.95				
Gave Money or Gifts					
Female	0.58				
Male	3.26	12.90	0.000	5.36	0.003
Younger	0.84				
Older	3.05	8.65	0.003	3.23	0.016
Low Prevalence	1.13				
High Prevalence	2.44	3.08	0.079	2.01	0.131
Intolerant Adults	1.77				
Tolerant Adults	2.25	0.11	0.715	1.13	0.869
Not More Peer Respect	1.70				
More Peer Respect	2.56	0.58	0.447	0.97	0.951

Notes: Intolerant Adults versus Tolerant Adults is based on youth answers to the question, “Adults in your family would approve of you having sex if your partner gave you money or other gifts in return.” Those answering “Not at all true” are coded as “Intolerant,” and those answering “Very true” or “Somewhat true” are coded as “Tolerant.” More Peer Respect versus Not More Peer Respect is based on youth answers to the question, “If a GIRL/BOY your age received money or gifts from someone with whom they had sex, what would happen?” Those answering “HER/HIS friends would respect him more” are coded as “More Peer Respect.” Those answering “HER/HIS peers would respect him less” or “It would not affect HER/HIS friends’ respect” are coded “Not More Peer Respect.”