

# Parental Socialization of Young People's Gender and Sexual Orientation in Rural Ghana: Insights for Minority Inclusion

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## Abstract

The socialization of young people, influenced by cultural and societal contexts, significantly shapes their identities, relationships, and sense of belonging. While discussions on gender and sexual orientation have gained prominence, exploring these issues from a rural perspective is crucial. This paper, guided by a social constructionist perspective, analyzes narratives from parents in rural Ghana to explore discourses influencing parental attitudes towards gender construction and the sexual orientation of young people. The findings reveal deeply ingrained discourses shaping parental attitudes and interactions with their children, often reinforcing conservative gender roles and heteronormative cultural expectations. Despite this, generational shifts influenced by parental education and exposure are evident, particularly among middle-class parents across different age groups. The study suggests that public backlash against minority rights and queer legislation in Ghana may reflect generational differences in socialization approaches. Understanding parental roles in shaping sexuality-related issues is essential for promoting the well-being of young people.

**Keywords:** young people, sexuality, gender, minority rights, queer rights, gender construction, gender diversity

## Introduction

This study explored parents' narratives from rural Ghana to understand their perceptions and construction of young people's gender and sexual orientation. It drew on stories of 10 parents/guardians from the Adaklu community in the Volta Region of Ghana. We sought to engage parents from this part of the country to understand how sociocultural dynamics and generational differences (i.e., age and socioeconomic differences) among parents influenced the sexual socialization of young individuals.

Sexuality education in diverse societies across Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) typically commences within the family through socialization processes. Young people's socialization is a fundamental process of their identities, relationships, and sense of belonging.<sup>1</sup> In recent times, discussions surrounding gender and sexual orientation have surged to the forefront of scholarly and societal discourse, reflecting a growing awareness of their profound impact on individual lives and societal structures. For example, the ongoing debate about the anti-LGBTQ law highlights the normative conception of gender and sexual orientation, prompting critical reflections on societal attitudes towards non-heteronormative ideals and traditional views on gender and sexuality.

The process of sexual socialization is closely connected to the gender socialization of individuals.<sup>2</sup> In Ghana, sexual socialization tends to occur discretely, with information about sexuality primarily tied to gender roles. This typically revolves around topics such as menstrual care and personal hygiene, abstinence

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<sup>1</sup> Adjaye, J. K., & Aborampah, O. M. (2004). Intergenerational cultural transmission among the Akan of Ghana. *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships*, 2(3-4), 23-38.

<sup>2</sup> Ampofo, A. A. (2001). "When men speak women listen": gender socialization and young adolescents' attitudes to sexual and reproductive issues. *African Journal of Reproductive Health*, 196-212.

from sex (for young boys and girls) and placing significant emphasis on remaining chaste.<sup>3 4 5</sup> Primarily, these discussions focus on the behaviours expected from girls and boys, with other aspects of sexuality often reserved within the context of marriage. This reluctance to discuss certain aspects of sexuality is rooted in the longstanding taboo surrounding sex and sexuality issues, although such perceptions have begun to shift in recent times.

In Ghana, as in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, the interplay between cultural traditions, societal norms, and familial values shapes the socialization process profoundly.<sup>6</sup> Despite the increasing visibility of gender and sexual orientation discussions in the mass media, rural areas remain underexplored in this discourse, offering valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of identity formation and socialization. Studies within the Ghanaian and broader African context have shed light on the pivotal role of parental influence in shaping young people's behaviour.<sup>7 8</sup> However, there remains a gap in understanding how these influences intersect with discussions on gender and sexual orientation, particularly in rural communities marked by distinct social and cultural structures. Given its distinctive cultural fabric and traditional norms, Rural Ghana serves as a rich cultural milieu for understanding the complexities of socialization. By examining the issues through a rural lens, we gain a deeper understanding of the nuanced dynamics at play and how they intersect with broader sociocultural constructs. We therefore ask: what are the discourses that shape parental attitudes towards young people's gender and sexual orientation, and how have these propelled parents' interaction with their young ones?

## Methodology

This study was part of a larger study conducted in the Adaklu district in the Volta Region of Ghana to explore '*Sexual and Reproductive Health Education Among Rural Families*'. Adaklu is largely a rural area with agriculture as the most dominant economic activity which employs about 78% of the workforce.<sup>9</sup> Using purposive and convenience sampling strategies, we contacted parents and guardians who had adolescent boys or girls aged 16–19. Purposefully, we were interested in parents who had adolescents between such age groups, and then, based on their availability and willingness, we conveniently sampled them. All interviews were conducted by the first author (ASA), proficient in the local language, "Ewe." ASA's fluency in the participants' native tongue facilitated rapport-building, fostering trust and confidence, which is useful for conducting sensitive studies.<sup>10</sup> A semi-structured interview guide guided the interviewing process. Some issues explored included factors that influence parental attitudes towards young people's gender construction and sexual orientation, how such factors shape parental interactions with young people, what parents think about discussing gender and sexuality-related issues with young people and whether they think young people should know about these. One-on-one interviews were conducted with parents, and the essence was to delve deeper into the responses, exploring participants' experiences and interpretations of socializing their young ones on gender and sexuality-related issues. The one-on-one approach enhanced our understanding of the issues discussed by participants. Interview sessions lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity and safeguard their privacy. All recorded interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic content

<sup>3</sup> Agbeve, A. S., Fiaveh, D. Y., & Anto-Ocrah, M. (2022). A Qualitative assessment of adolescent-parent sex talk in Ghana. *African Journal of Reproductive Health*, 26(12), 146-160.

<sup>4</sup> Awusabo-Asare, K., Biddlecom, A., Kumi-Kyereme, A., & Patterson, K. (2006). Adolescent sexual and reproductive health in Ghana: results from the 2004 National Survey of Adolescents. *Occasional Report*, 22.

<sup>5</sup> Baku, E. A., Agbemafle, I., Kotoh, A. M., & Adanu, R. M. (2018). Parents' experiences and sexual topics discussed with adolescents in the Accra Metropolis, Ghana: a qualitative study. *Advances in Public Health*, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Anarfi, J. K., & Owusu, A. Y. (2011). The making of a sexual being in Ghana: The state, religion and the influence of society as agents of sexual socialization. *Sexuality & Culture*, 15, 1-18.

<sup>7</sup> Kumi-Kyereme, A., Awusabo-Asare, K., Tanle, A., & Biddlecom, A. (2007). Influence of social connectedness, communication and monitoring on adolescent sexual activity in Ghana. *African journal of reproductive health*, 11(3), 133-147.

<sup>8</sup> Manu, A. A., Mba, C. J., Asare, G. Q., Odoi-Agyarko, K., & Asante, R. K. O. (2015). Parent-child communication about sexual and reproductive health: evidence from the Brong Ahafo region, Ghana. *Reproductive health*, 12, 1-13.

<sup>9</sup> Ghana Statistical Service. 2010 Population and Housing Census: District Analytical Report. Accra: Ghana Statistical Service; 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Fiaveh, D. Y. (2019). *Understanding sexuality in sub-Saharan Africa: A manual approach to thematic analysis of in-depth interviews*. SAGE Publications, Limited.

analysis based on the themes and codes identified from the narratives. Ethical clearance for the study was granted by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Cape Coast (UCCIRB/CHLS/2019/38), ensuring compliance with ethical standards. Additionally, informed consent was obtained from all participants, affirming their voluntary participation in the study.

## Results

Ten parents participated in this phase of the study. This number offered sufficient information addressing the research question.<sup>11</sup> The parents comprised six females and four males, of whom eight were married and two divorced at the time of conducting the study. The parents' ages ranged between 37 and 56 years and had all attained some level of education. All parents were adherents of the Christian faith, largely due to Adaklu being predominantly dominated by Christians, constituting about 85.4 percent.<sup>12</sup>(see Table 1)

**Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Parents**

Pseudo name	Gender	Age	Educational Level	Religion	Marital Status
Mrs. Sedem	Female	41	Tertiary	Christian	Married
Sagah	Male	52	Technical	Christian	Divorced
Vincent	Male	42	Tertiary	Christian	Married
Mrs. Eli	Female	50	Tertiary	Christian	Married
Enyonam	Female	39	Tertiary	Christian	Married
Mawulorm	Female	37	Tertiary	Christian	Married
Ernest	Male	52	Secondary	Christian	Married
Kumah	Male	42	Basic	Christian	Divorced
Xornam	Female	58	Secondary	Christian	Married
Yayra	Female	38	Tertiary	Christian	Married

## Parents' attitudes toward gender construction and sexual orientation

The study revealed that parental attitudes towards gender construction and sexual orientation in this part of Ghana were profoundly shaped by a complex interplay of cultural, religious, and societal factors. For most parents, cultural norms deeply rooted in Ghanaian society dictate traditional gender roles and expectations, influencing how they perceive and approach discourse about gender and sexuality within the family. These norms prescribed specific behaviours, responsibilities, and expectations based on gender, which largely inhibited openness and acceptance towards diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. Moreover, religious beliefs significantly guided parental attitudes, particularly within the dominant Christian tradition. Religious teachings often uphold conservative values regarding gender roles and sexual orientations, which parents pass down to their children. Societal expectations, including prevailing attitudes, stigmas, and stereotypes surrounding gender and sexual identity, further shaped parental perspectives and led to hesitancy in discussing these topics openly. Additionally, parents' level of education and exposure to different perspectives influenced their attitudes. The findings of this study revealed that parents with higher educational backgrounds were more willing to open up to such discussions in a friendly and open approach, but with caution, so they did not appear to be endorsing such non-heteronormative sexualities. In contrast, parents with limited knowledge about gender and sexuality-related issues relied on traditional beliefs and societal norms to guide their interactions with their young ones.

<sup>11</sup> Patton MQ. Two decades of developments in qualitative inquiry: A personal, experiential perspective. *Qualitative social work*. 2002;1(3):261-283.

<sup>12</sup> Ghana Statistical Service. 2010 Population and Housing Census: District Analytical Report. Accra: Ghana Statistical Service; 2014.

### **Parent-child interactions on gender construction and sexual orientation**

Parental attitudes towards gender construction and sexual orientation significantly impacted interactions with their young ones, particularly regarding the sort of issues discussed and approaches employed. For instance, sociocultural norms that prescribed gender roles and expectations made some parents emphasize conformity to these roles in their interactions with their wards. Religious teachings also played a significant role in shaping parental interactions, as parents frequently contextualize discussions about gender and sexuality within the framework of their religious teachings. This resulted in discussions focusing on reinforcing gender stereotypes (such as avoiding discussions on non-heterosexual identities) and with approaches ranging from authoritarian to arbitrary, admonitory, and affectionate depending on the level of adherence to religious and cultural norms of the family. The portrayal of gender and sexuality-related issues by certain media and civil society groups also negatively influenced parental interactions. Some parents felt hesitant to address specific topics considered taboo or controversial in society, which resulted in a more passive approach where discussions about gender and sexual orientation are either avoided or downplayed.

### **Parents discussing gender construction and sexual orientation**

Some parents revealed that it was essential to have open and honest conversations about these topics to provide their children with the necessary knowledge and understanding to navigate their identities and relationships effectively. They regarded these discussions as essential for fostering healthy sexual attitudes and self-awareness among their wards. They recognized the importance of addressing these issues as the proliferation of the new media could potentially expose their young ones to inaccurate information, thereby risking their sexual health and well-being. For such parents, this was about protecting their wards and not about introducing them to LGBT practices. Contrary to that, some parents also held more conservative beliefs, viewing discussions about gender and sexuality as taboo or inappropriate for young people. They revealed that discussions on such topics should be reserved for adults as young people may be unable to appreciate the nuances of gender construction and sexual orientation. Additionally, fear of judgement and social repercussions for openly addressing these topics with their wards led them to avoid such discussions.

### **Conclusion**

The study found that parental interactions are deeply influenced by shared values and beliefs, shaping family dynamics and young people's socialization. Parents often uphold conservative gender roles and cultural norms, influencing a heteronormative approach to young people's sexuality. Parenting strategies were arbitrary, influenced by media fear-mongering and prejudices against unconventional gender and sexual behaviours. However, there are generational shifts influenced by parental educational levels and exposure, particularly among middle-class parents and different age groups. This suggests that public backlash against minority rights and queer sexuality legislation in Ghana may be more of a generational issue than purely cultural. As noted by the President of Ghana, Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, this may change with time. This means that understanding the dynamics of the parental generation in the socialization of young people is essential for addressing the evolving landscape of gender and sexuality-related discourses within the sub-region and promoting a more inclusive and informed discourse that contributes to the well-being of the younger generation.