Global Perspectives on the Sociocultural, Economic, and Political Contexts Shaping Adolescent Sexual Behaviors: Introduction to a Special Issue

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Accepted: 26 March 2021 / Published online: 4 May 2021

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Adolescence is one of the most crucial developmental periods and is characterized by complex physical, emotional, and cognitive changes. During this period, sexual development is pronounced. Youth may experience several challenges such as early sexual debut, inadequate access to contraceptives, increased risk for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV, unintended pregnancies, and early parenthood. Current trends indicate significant improvements in adolescent sexual and reproductive health within the last two decades and outline areas that have emerged or persisted as challenges (United Nations, 2019). Annual data on sexual and reproductive health showed that of the 35 nations that have completed annual tracking, 29 had a decline in early sexual debut among adolescent girls (Liang et al., 2019; STAT Compiler, 2019). However, a decline in early sexual debut was not shared equally as there was no decrease in early sexual debut within Latin American and Caribbean nations. While child marriage—another key indicator—has declined in many nations over the last two decades, there remains little change in Sub-Saharan Africa (Liang et al., 2019). Of note, child marriage among those aged 10–14 accounted for the primary context in which youth engaged in early sexual debut in Sub-Saharan Africa (Liang et al., 2019). Overall, while there have been considerable declines in child marriage in North Africa and Asian countries, much like in Sub-Saharan Africa, these declines are not seen in Latin American or Caribbean nations (United Nations, 2019).

Even though improved outcomes show a consistent downward trend in births among adolescents, there has been an increased and persistent unmet contraceptive need (United Nations, 2019). The most concerning trends seem to be related to STIs. The overall prevalence of STIs (except for chlamydia) among adolescents has continued to rise since 1994 (Liang et al., 2019). Despite this rise, there has

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been great improvement in the survival of children living with HIV over the last two decades; however, the same improvements have not been seen among adolescents (UNAIDS, 2020). Globally, youth aged 10–24 face a disproportionate burden of HIV. This is particularly true for young women, young men who have sex with men, and youth sex workers. In 2020, it was estimated that 1.7 million youth (aged 10–19) were living with HIV and approximately 170,000 were believed to be newly infected with HIV in the same year (UNAIDS, 2020).

The sexual and reproductive health of adolescents remains a longstanding public health concern with economic, political, and sociocultural factors that constrain efforts towards improvement. More specifically, economic hardship, political instability, cultural and societal expectations, and constructions of masculinity and femininity may contribute to risky behaviors such as multiple sexual partners, early sexual debut, and forced or coerced sexual encounters (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Geary et al., 2006; Stockman et al., 2013). The multiple intersecting aspects of the community and society that impact youth require continued and careful examination. The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS 2020) has emphasized a need to address the sociocultural factors that increase youth's sexual risk. Better understanding these influences will enhance public health and governmental responses aimed at improving adolescent sexual health and decision-making (Bell et al., 2008; Kreuter & Wray, 2003). As a response to an urgent need, this special issue presents strategies tackling adolescent sexual and reproductive health factors at the individual and sociocultural levels.

The first article in this special issue is a brief report that describes the impact of a community-based participatory research (CBPR) project designed with and for youth—the HIV Stigma-education through Education Empowerment and Research (SEERs) Project—on HIV testing and linkage to care in Kenya (Chenneville & Gabbidon, 2021). Authors report HIV testing uptake and linkage to care following SEERs programming and describe the benefits and challenges associated with this particular CBPR project. Findings build upon previous research demonstrating the potential efficacy of SEERs to increase HIV knowledge and decrease HIV stigma among youth in Kenya (Chenneville et al., 2019b), as well as research demonstrating the potential benefits and challenges of CBPR for facilitators and communities (Chenneville et al., 2019a).

The second article in this special issue focuses on HIV testing and condom use among Hispanic/Latinx college students in the US (Clarke et al., 2021). Authors compared traditional communication methods to social media methods for promoting culturally, linguistically, and developmentally tailored messages designed to promote HIV testing and condom use among Hispanic/Latinx students in a college setting. Based on their findings, the authors suggest that multiple communication methods—including using both traditional and social media—are important for reaching Hispanic/Latinx students in the US.

The third article in this issue reports findings from a quasi-experimental study designed to examine an adolescent pregnancy prevention program in a rural setting in Mexico (Campero et al., 2021). Based on their findings, the authors describe the potential benefits of community-based interventions that incorporate components of

comprehensive sexuality education on outcomes related to early pregnancy, including sexual and reproductive health knowledge and self-efficacy, sexual and reproductive rights knowledge, and gender role attitudes.

The fourth article in this issue focuses on participatory methodologies that may be useful for researching sensitive topics among adolescents, using a study of structural factors related to adolescents' alcohol use and risky sexual behavior in Tanzania (Sommer et al., 2021). Moving beyond traditional qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and archival reviews, the authors used participatory methodologies including drawings, storytelling, and photovoice techniques. The authors advocate for the use of participatory methods to promote agency among adolescents, establish trust between researchers and adolescent participants, engage in conversations around sensitive topics such as sex, and overcome some of the limitations associated with typical qualitative methods.

The fifth and final article in this special issue focuses on factors related to ineffective pregnancy prevention among adolescents in Portugal (Pires et al., 2021). Based on findings from a classification tree analysis, the authors describe the influence of a combination of variables such as religious beliefs, age at the time of first sexual intercourse, and maternal history of adolescent pregnancy, on pregnancy prevention behaviors. The authors warn against an overreliance on the cumulative presence of factors when assessing pregnancy risk and instead encourage a nuanced and individualized approach to risk assessment that takes into account the relative impact of individual factors (e.g., religious beliefs) within the context of other individual factors (e.g., educational level). Finally, the authors propose the development of an auxiliary pregnancy risk assessment tool to be used by adolescent healthcare providers.

In conclusion, adolescent sexual behavior remains a significant issue, and global research in this area is needed. This special issue contributes to conversations about sociocultural and contextual factors affecting adolescent sexual health by specifying ways to promote adolescent sexual and reproductive health through community-based participatory and culturally appropriate methods. We hope these articles will serve to help support youth and their communities, as well as societies, to achieve healthy reproductive and sexual health outcomes.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare they have no conflicts of interest.

Human and Animal Rights All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the University's Institutional Review Board and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standard. This paper did not require inclusion of human subjects.

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