Author’s response to reviews

Title: Predictors of primary and secondary sexual abstinence among never-married youth in urban poor Accra, Ghana

Authors:

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Author’s response to reviews:

Reviewer # 1:

1. Reviewer # 1 indicated that the background was not clear on why the study is needed. Response: To address this comment, we provided more information to the background showing the gaps in the abstinence literature and the benefits of the study (page 5, line 98-109).

2. The reviewer noted that the first sentence of the background was a strong statement that needed to be supported by an authority. Response: We have provided references to support the statement (Page 4, line 76).

3. The reviewer asked us to summarize the literature review section and integrate it into the background in order to fit into the journal format. Response: We therefore summarized the literature review and integrated it into the background (Pages 6-7, line 113-156).

4. The reviewer further suggested that we describe sampling of households and individuals properly as it was not clear how many households per community and how many individuals per household were sampled. Response: We have provided a detailed description of the sampling technique including the number of enumeration areas selected from each community, the number of households sampled from each community and the eligibility of and number of individuals selected from the sampled households (page 13-14, line 284-299).

5. The reviewer drew our attention to a sentence in the ethical consideration section which indicated that consent was obtained for respondents below 18 years, when our sample only included youth between 20 and 24 years. Response: We addressed this inconsistency by deleting that sentence from the manuscript (page 15, line 317-318).
6. In the measurement of variables section, the reviewer suggested that we should not assign numbers to categorical variables in the text. In addition, the reviewer asked us to summarize the section.
Response: To address this comment, we removed the numbers we initially assigned to the categorical variables (pages 16-19). In addition, we summarized the description of all the predictor variables into one section (page 16-17, line 339-371).

7. In the results section, the reviewer requested that we present the characteristics of the respondents first before the sexual status.
Response: Accordingly, we presented the sentences describing the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents first (page 13, line 583-594) and those describing their sexual status after that (page 20-21, line 432-453).

8. The reviewer noted that line 321 of the initial manuscript, after “males (24.3%)”, was not clear.
Response: We addressed this comment by replacing the phrase “there so” with “in school” to ensure that the meaning of the sentence is clear (page 20, line 435-436).

9. The reviewer noted that in the 1st, 2nd and 6th paragraphs of the discussion section, the findings were not compared with previous studies.
Response: We addressed this comment by comparing the findings in the 1st paragraph with findings from a national survey (page 24-25, line 535-541). We also compared the findings in the now 7th paragraph with findings from a previous study (page 27, line 591-594). However, while we appreciate the reviewer’s suggestion on the 2nd paragraph, we noted that the paragraph (now the 3rd paragraph) only sought to summarize the overall findings of the study before discussing each finding in detail.

10. Further on the discussion section, the reviewer asked us to present each finding, its interpretation, implication and what other studies have said about it in a separate paragraph.
Response: We addressed this comment by ensuring that each paragraph in the discussion was dedicated to a finding, its interpretation and relation with previous studies. Specifically, we moved the implication of each finding from the “conclusion and implications on abstinence programmes” section to the discussion and integrated each findings implication into its discussion.

11. The reviewer suggested that we separate the conclusion and implications sections.
Response: As noted in the previous response, we integrated the implications of the findings into the discussion. Therefore, we now have a section dedicated to the conclusion. We also revised the conclusion to ensure that it is succinct (page 31-32, line 681-700).

12. The reviewer asked us to clarity what we mean by “abstinence programmes”.
Response: This phrase was used to refer generally to interventions and efforts aimed at delaying sexual debut or promoting secondary abstinence among youth, and not to a specific abstinence programme. We therefore revised the manuscript to clarify this.
13. Regarding the limitations and strengths of the study, the reviewer indicated that the limitations were clear but that the strengths were weak. Response: We addressed this comment by providing more information on the strengths of the study (page 31, line 673-679).

14. Finally, the reviewer asked us to cross-check the list of references to ensure that they correspond with the in-text citation. The reviewer also suggested that we cite more recent publications. Response: We have cross-checked all the references and made sure that each study cited in the manuscript is included in the reference list. In addition, we have taken out references that were in the list but not in the text. Finally, we also cited some relevant recent publications (reference #1, #7, and #36).

Reviewer #2

1. Reviewer #2 suggested that we mention the fact that poverty pushes some youth into sexual intercourse as part of the background of the manuscript just as we did in the discussion of the findings. Response: We addressed this comment by including a sentence in the background to state this fact (page 5, line 85-87).

2. The reviewer was worried that the paper could be misconstrued as arguing that sexual abstinence was the only way of preventing unwanted pregnancies and STIs. Response: We appreciate the reviewer’s sentiment on this. To address this, we included a sentence in the background explicitly warning against such a misconception (page 5, line 109-111).

3. The reviewer also indicated that the paper would benefit from clearly defining sexual intercourse as penetrative vaginal sex in the beginning. Response: We incorporated this comment into the manuscript by clearly defining what we mean by sexual abstinence in the background (page 5, line 111-112).

4. In the data description section, the reviewer asked us to elaborate a bit on the following statements: "We deemed youth in this age category to have had sufficient time to have made a decision to either engage in or abstain from sex as children". Response: We revised this statement to ensure that it clearly conveyed the intended meaning (page 14, line 306-307).

5. In the discussion section, the reviewer also suggested that we elaborate a bit on the following statement: "This finding suggests that many youth can transition from being sexually active to inactive, and points to the need to include sexually active youth into sexual abstinence programmes and interventions". Response: We responded to this suggestion by clarifying the statement and also providing alternative explanations of that finding (page 25, line 546-549).
6. The reviewer suggested that we elaborate a bit on the following statement: "Interventions at one level without efforts at other levels may fail to yield the desired benefits. Based on the finding that females are less likely to abstain from sex, there is the need for abstinence programmes to address the socio-economic and cultural factors that impede sexual abstinence among females."
Response: To respond to this comment, we clarified and elaborated on the statement providing an example to buttress our point (page 31-32, line 696-700).