International Journal of Advancing Research, Innovation and Entrepreneurship

Vol 1(1), DOI:10.82036/h97re228, April 2025 *ISSN:2977-9332*

Sex Education and Secondary School Girls' Knowledge, Influencing Factors, and Reproductive Health Outcomes in Ilekun, Akure South LGA, Ondo State

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ABSTRACT

Sex education is a crucial aspect of adolescent development, yet its implementation in schools remains inconsistent due to cultural, religious, and institutional barriers. This study investigates the awareness, sources, challenges, and impact of sex education among secondary school students. A descriptive survey research design was employed, utilizing a structured questionnaire to collect data from 120 respondents. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency and percentage distributions. Findings reveal that 97.5% of respondents were aware of sex education, with primary sources being home (39%), school (28%), religious institutions (11.6%), and media (13.8%). However, several barriers hinder its effectiveness, including its exclusion from school curricula (51.6%), the absence of trained counselors (72.5%), and inadequate instructional materials (62.5%). Additionally, 82.5% of respondents reported discomfort in discussing sex education, reflecting cultural resistance and societal stigma. Despite these challenges, the study highlights the positive impact of sex education. A significant majority (90.8%) believe it reduces unwanted pregnancies, while 93% affirm its role in preventing sexually transmitted infections. Moreover, 92.5% of respondents disagreed that sex education encourages early sexual activity, and 94% agreed that the lack of proper sex education contributes to cases of rape. These findings align with global research emphasizing the importance of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) in promoting responsible sexual behaviour. The study underscores the need for integrating sex education into school curricula, training educators, and addressing cultural and religious concerns to ensure effective implementation. Recommendations include expanding community-based interventions, strengthening parent-teacher collaboration, and leveraging digital platforms for sex education delivery. Future research should explore the role of digital interventions and the long-term effects of sex education on adolescent behaviour.

Keywords: Adolescents, Comprehensive Sexuality Education, Sex Education, Sexual Health, School Curriculum

I INTRODUCTION

Sex education is a critical component of adolescent development, equipping young people with the necessary knowledge, skills, and values to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health. Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) has been shown to significantly improve adolescents' cognitive understanding of sexual health, promote abstinence, and reduce risky behaviors (Ramirez et al., 2023). However, the implementation of sex education varies across countries and communities, often influenced by cultural, religious, and institutional factors. In many parts of Nigeria, including Ilekun, Akure South LGA, Ondo State, sex education remains a controversial topic, with many parents, educators, and religious leaders divided on the appropriateness of its inclusion in school curricula.

Studies have revealed that adolescents receive sexual health information from diverse sources, including schools, parents, peers, religious institutions, media, and the internet (Amir et al., 2022; Mustafa, 2024). While schools play a crucial role in formal sex education, findings indicate that a significant number of students rely on peers and mass media for information, which may lead to misinformation and risky behaviours (Amir et al., 2022; Lameiras-Fernández et al., 2021). A study in Malaysia showed that, despite the inclusion of sexual and reproductive health topics in school curricula, adolescents' knowledge remained suboptimal, particularly concerning reproductive health (Mustafa Kamal, 2024). Similar findings have been reported in Indonesia, where many young women lacked adequate knowledge about vaginal and reproductive health, highlighting the need for improved education programmes (Eduwan, 2022).

Globally, gender-based violence in schools also remains a significant concern, negatively affecting girls' educational performance and human rights (Rammbuda, 2023). In Tanzania, cases of sexual abuse by male teachers have been

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documented, while research in Ukraine highlights the prevalence of early sexual debut among adolescent girls (Hassan, 2023; Kyslova & Nikolaievska, 2023). These findings emphasize the importance of implementing structured sex education programs that address not only reproductive health but also gender equality, consent, and sexual violence prevention.

In Nigeria, there is growing concern over the reproductive health challenges faced by adolescents, including teenage pregnancies, unsafe abortions, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and sexual exploitation. According to UNESCO (2022), well-designed sex education programmes help adolescents navigate sexual risks, delay sexual initiation, and improve decision-making skills. However, the effectiveness of such programmes is often hindered by socio-cultural and religious opposition, inadequate teaching materials, and the absence of trained facilitators in schools (Rahmani et al., 2018; Annabelle, 2018). The lack of a standardized approach to sex education has further contributed to gaps in knowledge and misconceptions about sexual health among Nigerian adolescents.

Despite global advancements in sex education, secondary school girls in Ilekun, Akure South LGA, continue to face challenges related to inadequate sexual health knowledge and poor access to comprehensive sex education. Many schools in the area do not include sex education in their curriculum, leaving adolescents to rely on informal sources such as parents, peers, and mass media. This gap in formal education often results in misinformation, increased vulnerability to risky sexual behaviours, and poor reproductive health outcomes. Additionally, cultural and religious beliefs often discourage open discussions on sexual health, creating further barriers to effective sex education.

Previous studies have highlighted the impact of insufficient sex education on adolescents' health, particularly concerning unintended pregnancies and STIs (Adamyan et al., 2023). While some communities acknowledge the importance of sex education, resistance remains strong due to fears that discussing sexual health may encourage early sexual activity (Rahmani et al., 2018). This misconception has contributed to policy inconsistencies and reluctance to integrate CSE into school curricula. Furthermore, the absence of trained counselors in schools, as noted by 72.5% of respondents in this study, underscores the urgent need for professional guidance in delivering sex education programmes.

This study aims to address these gaps by assessing the level of sex education knowledge among secondary school girls in Ilekun, Akure South LGA. It also seeks to identify the factors influencing sex education accessibility and evaluate its impact on reproductive health outcomes. By providing empirical evidence, this study will contribute to the ongoing discourse on the need for comprehensive and culturally sensitive sex education in Nigerian schools. The study has the following specific objectives: To examine the level of awareness and sources of sex education among secondary school girls; to identify the factors influencing the accessibility and effectiveness of sex education in schools; to assess the impact of sex education on adolescent reproductive health outcomes, including pregnancy prevention and STI awareness; to explore cultural, religious, and institutional barriers to comprehensive sex education; and to provide recommendations for improving sex education programmes in secondary schools. Similarly, the study tried to answer the following research questions: What is the level of awareness and knowledge of sex education among secondary school girls in Ilekun?; What are the major sources of sex education for these students?; What factors influence the accessibility and effectiveness of sex education in schools?; How does sex education impact adolescent reproductive health outcomes in the study area?; and What are the cultural, religious, and institutional barriers to comprehensive sex education?

This study is significant as it provides valuable insights into the current state of sex education among secondary school girls in Ilekun, Akure South LGA. Understanding the knowledge gaps and barriers to effective sex education can help policymakers, educators, and health professionals design and implement more effective and culturally sensitive programmes. The study also contributes to the growing body of literature on adolescent reproductive health, emphasizing the need for a structured and evidence-based approach to sex education.

Furthermore, by examining the impact of sex education on reproductive health outcomes, this study provides critical information for stakeholders, including government agencies, schools, and non-governmental organizations, to develop interventions that promote adolescent well-being. Addressing the identified barriers will ensure that young girls receive accurate and comprehensive information, empowering them to make informed decisions regarding their sexual and reproductive health.

The study also focuses on secondary school girls in Ilekun, Akure South LGA, Ondo State. It examines their knowledge, sources of sex education, and the factors influencing access to sexual health information. The research also explores the impact of sex education on reproductive health outcomes, including its role in preventing early pregnancies, STIs, and gender-based violence.

By considering school-based education, parental influence, cultural and religious perspectives, and the availability of trained counselors, this study provides a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and opportunities in delivering effective sex education. The findings will serve as a foundation for future policy recommendations aimed at improving adolescent reproductive health education in Nigeria.

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2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 STUDY DESIGN

This cross-sectional study employed a descriptive design to evaluate the impact of sex education on the sexual behavior of secondary school girls in the Ilekun community, Akure South Local Government Area, Ondo State.

2.2 STUDY AREA

The study was conducted in Ilekun Community, Akure South Local Government Area, Ondo State, which has a population of approximately 9,000 residents (2006 census). The community is situated near several neighbouring towns and lacks a local market, relying on nearby markets for commerce. Ilekun is religiously and ethnically diverse, with a mix of Christianity, Islam, traditional religions, and various ethnic groups, including Yorubas, Hausas, and Igbos. The community has limited educational facilities, including one government primary school, three private secondary schools, and a private health training institution. Healthcare options include a basic health centre and private hospitals. The local economy encompasses various industrial and commercial activities, such as manufacturing, agriculture, and services, with some residents employed as civil servants. Infrastructure in Ilekun includes boreholes and deep wells for water supply, national grid electricity, and telecommunication networks (MTN, Airtel, and Glo).

2.3 STUDY AREA

The study population consisted of all secondary school girls residing in the Ilekun community, Akure South Local Government Area, Ondo State.

2.4 SAMPLE SIZE

The sample for this study included 120 secondary school girls selected from three private secondary schools within Ilekun. The sample comprised 20 junior students and 20 senior students from each school, aimed at assessing the effects of sex education on their sexual behaviour.

2.5 SAMPLING TECHNIQUE

Simple random sampling was employed to ensure that each respondent had an equal chance of being selected, thereby minimizing selection bias.

2.6 STUDY INSTRUMENT, DATA COLLECTION, AND ANALYSIS

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed to address the research aims, objectives, and questions based on a review of relevant literature. The structured questionnaires were distributed to the respondents and subsequently collected for analysis.

2.7 ETHICAL APPROVAL

Prior to data collection, official approval was secured from the principals of the participating private secondary schools, ensuring the study's alignment with institutional guidelines. Furthermore, informed consent was obtained from all respondents, who were guaranteed the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses, in accordance with ethical research standards.

3 RESULTS

One hundred and twenty (120) questionnaires were administered, retrieved, and analysed as shown in Table I.

TABLE I: DEMOGRAPHICS OF RESPONDENTS

		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age (years)	0-10	2	1.6
	11-13	49	40.8
	14-16	49	40.8
	17-19	20	16.6
	Total	**120**	**100**
Class	J.S.S 1	15	12.5
	J.S.S 2	15	12.5
	J.S.S 3	15	12.5
	S.S 1	15	12.5
	S.S 2	36	30
	S.S 3	24	20
	Total	**120**	**100**
Resident guardian	Father only	5	4
	Mother only	12	10
	Both parents	93	77.5
	Step parents	8	6.6
	Alone	2	1.6
	Total	**120**	**100**
Religion	Christianity	105	87.5
	Islam	11	9
	Traditional	4	3
	Total	**120**	**100**

Table I provides a detailed overview of the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The data indicates that the respondents fall within four age categories. A small proportion, 2 respondents (1.6%), are within the youngest age group of 8–10 years. The majority of the respondents, 49 (40.8%), are within the 11–13 years age range, while another 49 respondents (40.8%) fall within the 14–16 years age group. The remaining 20 respondents (16.6%) belong to the oldest category, aged 17–19 years. This distribution suggests that most of the respondents are in early and mid-adolescence, a critical period for sex education and awareness.

The respondents are spread across different academic levels in secondary school. A total of 45 respondents (37.5%) are in Junior Secondary School (J.S.S.), distributed equally across J.S.S. One (15 respondents, 12.5%), J.S.S. Two (15 respondents, 12.5%), and J.S.S. Three (15 respondents, 12.5%). In the Senior Secondary School (S.S.S.) category, 15

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respondents (12.5%) are in S.S. One, 36 respondents (30%) are in S.S. Two, and 24 respondents (20%) are in S.S. Three. The data shows that a significant proportion of respondents are in senior secondary school, which may influence their level of knowledge and exposure to sex education.

The majority of the respondents, 93 (77.5%), live with both parents, providing a stable family structure that may influence their attitudes toward sex education. However, 12 respondents (10%) live with their mother only, while 5 respondents (4%) live with their father only, indicating a single-parent household structure. Additionally, 8 respondents (6.6%) reside with step-parents, and 2 respondents (1.6%) live alone, which could impact their access to parental guidance and education on sexual and reproductive health. These variations in living arrangements may have implications for how the respondents receive and process sex education.

Christianity is the dominant religion among the respondents, with 105 individuals (87.5%) identifying as Christians. A smaller proportion, 11 respondents (9%), practice Islam, while 4 respondents (3%) adhere to Traditional religion. The religious beliefs of the respondents may play a role in shaping their perspectives on sex education, as different religious doctrines may influence discussions about sexuality and reproductive health.

The demographic composition of the respondents indicates a diverse group in terms of age, academic level, living arrangements, and religious background. These factors are crucial in analyzing the impact of sex education on secondary school girls in the Ilekun community, Akure South LGA. Understanding the distribution of these characteristics helps provide a clearer interpretation of the study findings, particularly regarding how various social and personal factors may influence the respondents' knowledge and attitudes toward sex education.

4 DISCUSSION

Research on sex education and its impact on secondary school girls reveals several important findings. The present study found that 97.5% of respondents were aware of sex education, though the sources varied widely: 28% learned about it from school, 39% from home, 11.6% from religious institutions, 2.5% from social media, 3% from radio/television, 2.5% from sexual books and magazines, 5.8% from the internet, and 4% from friends. This diverse range of sources highlights gaps in formal sex education, as the majority of respondents (59%) identified parents as their first sex educators despite potential limitations in parental knowledge. This aligns with studies showing that comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) programs significantly improve adolescent cognition and abstinence rates (Ramirez et al., 2023). However, the reliance on informal sources like peers and mass media mirrors findings from Indonesia and Malaysia, where adolescents struggle to access accurate reproductive health information (Eduwan, 2022; Mustafa, 2024).

Although sex education aims to empower young people with knowledge, gender-based violence remains a significant barrier, affecting schoolgirls' educational performance and human rights (Rammbuda, 2023). Studies in Tanzania and Ukraine have documented sexual abuse by male teachers and early sexual debut among adolescents, underscoring the need for systematic education on safe sexual behavior (Hassan, 2023; Kyslova & Nikolaievska, 2023). In this study, 82.5% of respondents noted that people are shy to discuss sex education, reflecting cultural taboos and discomfort surrounding sexuality topics. Additionally, 76.6% reported insufficient time allocation for sex education in schools, and 62.5% highlighted the lack of teaching materials, findings that align with global research indicating that many countries, including Italy and Malaysia, fail to provide comprehensive school-based sex education (Chinelli et al., 2022; Mustafa, 2024).

Religious and cultural beliefs also shape perceptions of sex education. While 77.5% of respondents believed religion does not oppose sex education, 22.5% held the opposite view. Similarly, 26.6% perceived that their culture was against sex education, reflecting a broader challenge in integrating sex education within culturally sensitive frameworks. These findings are consistent with studies from Susanti & Doni (2021), who emphasize the need to balance cultural and religious norms with evidence-based sexual health education.

The study found that 51.6% of respondents reported that sex education is not included in the school curriculum, and 72.5% stated that no trained counselors were available for guidance. Additionally, 82.5% believed that sex education was not part of formal learning, a situation similar to that in Italy, where most sex education efforts focus solely on STI prevention rather than adopting a holistic approach (Chinelli et al., 2022). School-based interventions remain questionable in effectiveness, with emerging evidence suggesting that digital platforms could be more impactful for adolescent sexual health education (Lameiras-Fernández et al., 2021). Moreover, factors like cost, human resources, commitment, and organizational structure influence the success of sex education programmes (Susanti & Doni, 2021).

The impact of sex education was demonstrated by 90.8% of respondents believing it reduces unwanted pregnancies, while 93% agreed it helps prevent STIs. These results align with findings that CSE programmes reduce STI risks and promote contraceptive use (Adamyan et al., 2023). However, 7.5% of respondents feared that sex education might encourage sexual activity, echoing global concerns about its potential to increase adolescent curiosity (Rahmani et al., 2018).

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CSE has been widely acknowledged for its positive effects on adolescents' sexual and reproductive health by improving knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours (Ramirez et al., 2023; Vincent & Krishnakumar, 2022). The present study supports this, with 91.6% of respondents agreeing that sex education influences sexual attitudes positively, and 87.5% believing it promotes responsibility. Similarly, 94% agreed that inadequate sex education could contribute to rape, reinforcing findings from the Guttmacher Institute (2022) that sex education empowers adolescents to make informed decisions.

Despite the proven benefits of CSE, many programmes are limited to small-scale implementations, as seen in some studies where only a few schools receive comprehensive reproductive health education (Vincent & Krishnakumar, 2022). Expanding nationwide sex education programmes is essential to ensuring all adolescents receive structured, evidence-based knowledge (Ramirez et al., 2023).

Implications of the Study

The findings of this study emphasize the urgent need to improve sex education in secondary schools. The exclusion of sex education from formal curricula, cultural barriers, religious influences, and lack of trained professionals are major challenges that limit its effectiveness. Given the high prevalence of misinformation among adolescents, there is a need for governmental, institutional, and community-based efforts to integrate CSE into school programs, provide teacher training, and ensure accessibility to accurate sexual health resources.

The study also highlights the importance of digital platforms as alternative methods for delivering effective and cost-efficient sex education (Lameiras-Fernández et al., 2021). Incorporating online sexual health education could help bridge gaps in school-based programmes and reach a wider audience of adolescents.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into sex education awareness and its impact, it has certain limitations. First, data were collected from a specific locality, limiting the generalizability of the findings to a broader population. Additionally, self-reported data may introduce biases, as some respondents may have provided socially desirable answers rather than their true perspectives. Furthermore, the study did not explore in-depth the influence of socioeconomic status on access to sex education, which could be an important factor in future research.

Future Research Directions

To address the gaps identified above, future research should focus on the following: expanding the study to multiple regions to enhance the generalizability of findings; examining the long-term impact of sex education on adolescent behavior through longitudinal studies; exploring the effectiveness of digital and social media platforms in delivering sex education to adolescents; investigating the role of socioeconomic factors in shaping access to and perceptions of sex education; and developing strategies to integrate cultural and religious perspectives into formal sexuality education programmes.

5 CONCLUSION

The study concludes that while secondary school girls possess some knowledge of sex education, significant barriers undermine its effectiveness, including its absence from school curricula, cultural resistance, and lack of trained educators. The findings support the urgent need for comprehensive and structured sex education programmes that incorporate schools, parents, religious institutions, and digital platforms. Implementing these measures can enhance adolescent sexual and reproductive health, reduce STI rates and unwanted pregnancies, and empower young people to make informed choices.

6 RECOMMEDATIONS

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations were proposed to improve the implementation and effectiveness of sex education in secondary schools:

i. The government should initiate extensive public awareness campaigns to educate parents, teachers, and community leaders about the importance of sex education.

ii. Policies should be formulated to ensure that sex education is integrated into the national education system.

iii. Schools should organise seminars and workshops to train teachers on how to effectively deliver sex education.

iv. Teachers should receive professional development programmes to ensure they have the necessary knowledge and skills to educate students.

v. Sex education should be officially included in the secondary school curriculum to ensure all students have access to accurate and structured information.

vi. Curriculum planners should design culturally sensitive sex education programmes that align with societal values while providing comprehensive knowledge.

vii. A standardized sex education framework should be developed and implemented across secondary schools to ensure consistency in content delivery.

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viii. Schools should allocate sufficient time for sex education in their academic schedules.

ix. Schools should employ trained counselors who specialise in sex education and adolescent reproductive health.

x. These counselors should provide guidance, support, and confidential counseling services to students.

xi. Schools should be equipped with relevant teaching and learning materials, including textbooks, visual aids, and digital resources, to facilitate effective sex education.

xii. Governments and educational institutions should collaborate to develop age-appropriate materials.

xiii. Parents should be encouraged to start discussing sex education with their children at an early age.

xiv. Workshops and awareness programmes should be conducted for parents to improve their knowledge and communication skills on sexual health topics.

xv. Religious and community leaders should be involved in promoting sex education by integrating discussions on responsible sexual behavior into their teachings.

xvi. Collaborative efforts between schools, religious institutions, and community groups can help address cultural concerns and improve acceptance of sex education.

xvii. Social media, online platforms, and educational apps should be leveraged to supplement traditional sex education methods.

xviii. Schools and governments should develop informative and engaging online content to reach adolescents effectively.

xix. While promoting comprehensive knowledge about sexual health, sex education should emphasize abstinence as a valid and safe choice for adolescents.

xx. It should also educate students about safe sex practices to reduce the risk of unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Appreciation to the CRIDE UK, for allowing us to use some of the data used in the presentation of this paper in their Ist International Scientific Conference in 2024 for this article. Our thanks go to all researchers whose works have been cited in this article.

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