

# Adolescent girls' voices on their need for sexuality education: A cry for mutual sexual emancipation

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'Teachers expect parents to teach you. Parents expect teachers to teach you. So actually you learn nothing and nobody wants to talk about it'. This quote from this research study is an adolescent girls' cry for liberation from the silence related to sexuality because of the general reluctance of adults to talk to them about it. Given the growing concerns raised about the sexual and reproductive health of adolescents in South Africa, the aim of this study was to conduct research with adolescent girls as subjects in order for girls' voices to enhance adult researchers' understanding of children's need for support and guidance in the context of sexuality education. The purposively selected sample included 75 participants from three diverse high schools in the Western Cape. The research was conducted using a phenomenological approach that values the lived experiences of participants as significant in contributing to the knowledge on adolescent sexuality. A qualitative interpretative research design was applied to collect the data. This article argues that adults cannot help adolescents in their sexual emancipation – to be free – if they themselves are not free. If they were free, they would have been able and willing to engage with adolescents in every aspect, which includes their sexuality. Including adolescent girls as partners in transforming sexuality education is presented as a core principle for the sexual emancipation of both adolescent girls and adults.

**Keywords:** Adolescent girls; Sexuality; Emancipation; Sexuality education; Child agency.

## Introduction

The phase of adolescence brings challenges with regard to sexuality and adolescents, and particularly girls (Jewkes & Morrell 2012:1729) are at risk. In order for girls to make informed decisions that promote sexual and reproductive health, they need support and guidance from adults. Insufficient guidance from adults can contribute to adolescent girls' involvement in risky sexual behaviour and may leave them more vulnerable to exploitation by sexual predators such as 'sugar daddies'<sup>1</sup> (a term that was mentioned by girls in this study). This will put girls at risk of HIV infection and other sexually transmitted infections, teenage pregnancy, consequent early school dropout and the effects thereof and the harmful physical and mental health implications of abortion, to name but a few.

Although more openness regarding sexuality does exist at present, adolescents still find it difficult to make informed decisions regarding sexual behaviour mainly because of contradictory messages from various sources (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana 2006:235; Enfield 2003:22; Louw, Louw & Ferns 2010:289–290).

Adults tend to generally ignore the topic of sexuality or discourage sexual activity. Consequently, they do not necessarily provide girls with adequate information and guidance regarding responsible sexual attitudes and behaviour (Louw et al. 2010:290). Girls are also warned by adults about the negative consequences of having sex, therefore associating having sex with fear of what might happen as a result thereof. When girls ask questions about sex or express their sexual desires and the need to explore their sexuality, it is often met with anger by adults, a response that might evoke feelings of guilt and shame and leave them uninformed and vulnerable.

1. Adolescent girls' 'illegitimate' sexual activity, unintended pregnancies, induced abortions and deteriorating sexual and reproductive health are often linked to the 'sugar daddy' phenomenon, the fact that young girls are objects of (older) men's choices. Adolescent girls are normally seen as victims and easy preys of (often older and married) men's sexual exploitation. With increasing awareness of HIV or AIDS, these men are now increasingly blamed for luring younger, 'safer' girls who are hopefully too young to be infected by HIV into sexual relations by promising them some degree of financial security (Silberschmidt & Rasch 2001:1815–1816).

**Note:** Doing Theology with Children: Exploring Emancipatory Methodologies, sub-edited by Stephan de Beer (UP Centre for Contextual Ministry) and Hannelie Yates (North-West University).

Current research in South Africa on adolescent girls' sexuality have been conducted with limited consideration of girls' voices. The United Nations Children Rights Commission (UNCRC) emphasises the agency and right of children (in this case adolescents) to participate in matters pertinent to their lives. In the context of research, this implies that they should be considered as co-researchers who can contribute significantly to the development of new knowledge that could ensure that they are equipped with knowledge and skills that will ensure healthy sexual development. To enhance the agency of girls, it is imperative that they are pro-actively engaged in healthy conversations about sexuality in order for them to be able to make sensible choices and become more comfortable with their own sexuality. This implies that we first and foremost have to listen to their voices on the ways in which adults engage with them in conversations about sexuality.

Therefore, more research in this regard is needed. Ncitakalo (2011:75) advises that child participation is necessary as they would be able to explain more about what preventive methods or interventions could be acceptable and what could work best for them. It is thus imperative that girls are included as it is perceived as an injustice to exclude them as subjects in research that deals with the issues they face. The emphasis is on the importance of children as agents that have the capacity and right to participate (Ansell 2005:19–22, 169–170, 233–234, 226–254; Montgomery 2003:215; Wall 2006:523–548; Yates 2010:165–166), also within the context of research (Christensen & Allison 2012). It would be a fundamental flaw to exclude adolescent girls from research about their sexuality. In this way, adults can also learn from girls and not only about girls, but also about themselves and the ways in which they approach the topic of sexuality education with girls. The focus is on the importance of including children in research that is about them – and the topic of sexuality that is clearly too often not discussed with children.

The broader research study's primary aim was to include children as participants by integrating adolescent girls' voices on sexual decision-making to make recommendations for the development and presentation of the sexuality education programme that forms part of the Life Orientation subject in South African schools. Given the current practices of sexuality education in South Africa (Beyers 2013; Francis 2010, 2019; Motalingoane-Khau 2010; Naidoo 2006; Shefer & Macleod 2015; Smith & Harrison 2013), and the void in the knowledge corpus regarding the topic (Louw et al. 2010:291; Macleod 1999:8; Onyeonoro et al. 2011:295; Panday et al. 2009:85; Shefer 2008:92), the following research question was formulated for the purpose of this article: how do adolescent girls' voices enhance our understanding of children's need for support and guidance in the context of sexuality education?

This article forms part of a collection that focuses on theology keeping children in mind by reflecting on emancipatory outcomes for researchers and participants. This article will

firstly provide an explanation of the research process used to hear the voices of adolescent girls. Secondly, the voices of adolescent girls on the role of adults in influencing their sexual decision-making processes will be presented, after which conclusions will be drawn with regard to the call of adolescent girls for sexual emancipation.

The research was informed by a phenomenological theoretical approach that emphasises the importance of lived experiences as a legitimate source of knowledge (Davidsen 2013). The aim of this article is to report adolescent girls' voices on current and expected responses to their need for support and guidance to ensure the proper development of their sexuality. The question addressed is: How can research that adolescent girls' voices on their need for support and guidance in the context of sexuality as explored from a psychological perspective enhance the role of adults who are doing theology with children in the development of healthy reproductive and sexual health for this group?

The rationale for reporting the findings in the contexts of theology keeping children in mind is to contribute to an interdisciplinary conversation that could lead to the development of more cohesive strategies to address the needs of children and youth in South Africa. As authors we share a concern about the limited emphasis on participant voices when we work with children. Research that emphasises the quest for recognition of children's rights to be included in the conversations about their lives has also become essential in an era in which children are exposed to various problems such as assault, abuse, exposure to pornography and human trafficking. To efficiently address these problems, we need to listen to one another across disciplines, recognise our own disciplinary limitations and embrace one another's strengths.

## Research process

To hear girls' voices and include them as active participants in the process of research, a social justice paradigm supported by an advocacy or participatory worldview informed the research (Creswell 2009:9–10; Mertens 2007:212). The paradigm fitted the purpose of setting an action agenda for transformation that could be beneficial for various stakeholders committed to the promotion of sexual health of adolescent girls and to encourage appreciation for girls' agency in the context of sexuality (Creswell 2009:9).

A qualitative interpretive descriptive research design was applied. A qualitative approach was used to answer questions about the complex nature of adolescent girls' sexuality, with the purpose of understanding and describing the phenomena from their point of view (Fouché & Delport 2011:64). In line with the child participation and agency discourse, an inductive process was appropriate to ensure that the context and living realities of adolescent girls, as described by themselves, could be better understood when exploring their views and reflections on sexuality and their positions in sexual decision-making processes. An inductive strategy also

allowed the adolescent girls to engage in the research process in an open, honest and facilitated insight into their context and living realities when dealing with their own sexuality.

The participants in the research study represented the voices of 75 Grade 10 adolescent girls from diverse sociocultural contexts. With reference to language, 49 had Afrikaans as their mother tongue and 26 had Xhosa as their mother tongue. With reference to race, the adolescent girls were African ( $N = 27$ ), mixed race ( $N = 25$ ) and white ( $N = 23$ ). The participants were selected from three secondary schools of which two belonged to the lower socio-economic strata (quintiles 1 and 2) and one to the higher socio-economic strata (quintile 5).

The data collection methods applied to include the adolescent girls' voices included 13 focus group interviews that included all 75 participants. During the focus group interviews, the girls explained their thoughts and feelings regarding sexual decision-making processes. Eighteen semi-structured individual interviews were conducted, aimed at corroborating data that emerged from the focus group discussions (Maree 2007:87). Naive sketches allowed participants to reflect on the process of participation. The primary researcher also kept a reflexive journal of her own experience throughout the process to enhance the trustworthiness of this study. The reflexive journal was in the form of an Internet blog. Each day after interviews had taken place, the researcher added self-reflections to her blog. In this way the researcher could reflect on a continuous basis on her own position and presuppositions.

The primary researcher recorded, self-transcribed and coded the collected data after which a variety of themes were identified and presented in a graph to sort, in ascending order, the topics that arose from most to least frequent. This inductive way of presenting data ensured that the results were truly a description of girls' voices with regard to their sexuality and not preconceived ideas held by the researcher. Codes that emerged from the data were then organised into categories, themes and sub-themes (Nieuwenhuis 2007:108).

Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Health Sciences of the North-West University (ethics number NWU-00060-12-A1). The Western Cape Education Department (WCED), the respective school principals, parents of the participants, the Life Orientation educators and the participants themselves granted permission through written consent. Participation was voluntary and also with parents' consent, girls were free to withdraw at any time, not to partake at all or to refuse to answer questions. An educational psychologist was at hand to offer assistance to participants who experienced emotional distress, which was the case for one out of the 75 participants. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, names were omitted and numbers were used when referring to participants. Participants in focus group discussions were also asked to treat discussed matters with confidentiality. Data were

securely stored and passwords protected during the research and were safely stored at the North-West University.

## Presenting adolescent girls' voices

Before presenting girls' voices it is necessary to clarify the difference between the concepts of sex and sexuality. For the purpose of this study, sexuality was defined as an integral dimension of a human being that encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction (Loeber et al. 2010:170). Even though the term 'sexuality' was specifically used during interviews and other methods of data collection, it was evident that girls mostly talked about sex (i.e. the deed of having sex, being sexually active or engaging sexually) in answer to questions about their agency in sexual decision-making processes.

The girls' voices are presented with reference to the way in which adolescents speak to them about sexuality and how they would prefer adults to speak to them.

## How do adults speak with girls about sexuality?

Despite growing concerns raised about the sexual and reproductive health of adolescent girls and the complex challenges that girls face regarding their sexuality, it seems they get minimal or inadequate assistance from adults on how to exercise agency with regard to their sexual health and deal with these challenges. According to the girls, adults approach the topic of sexuality in the following ways:

### Silence about sexuality

Girls specifically reported on adults' silence about sexuality. Adults seemingly educate girls with regard to other aspects of their lives, yet they appear to be generally reluctant to speak with girls about their sexuality or avoid the topic completely. Girls indicated that this silence about sexuality impacts their lives negatively and often find themselves filled with regret after being exposed to sexual experiences.

I think they (adults) are shy about it, for instance I have told my mom that I do it (have sex) and then my mom kind of tries to avoid it. Like my mom didn't talk to me about sex and I knew nothing about it, I found out from my friends. And that's how I made my first mistake, because I didn't really know what leads to what. (Participant 1, school-going learner, Grade 10, female)

The adults in our area don't actually talk much about sex. They will talk more about drugs, jail and gangs, but they don't talk a lot about sex. And that was what has put me in the situation I am in today. Because neither my mother, nor anybody in the community helped me and gave me the disadvantages of it. So actually I didn't get a message from any adult. (Participant 12, school-going learner, Grade 10, female)

So if you were to fall pregnant that would be a disgrace, but I didn't know! My teachers don't talk to me, my parents don't talk to me, so how was I supposed to know? (Participant 4, school-going learner, Grade 10, female)

The major lesson I have learnt is that talking with girls about sexuality is often very much neglected – they are left in the dark. Often adults seem surprised or disappointed when girls engage

in sexual activity, but when the child is not informed about sex, who is then really to blame? (Koch n.d.:n.p.)

Even when girls ask adults downright for advice or information about sex, they are met with resistance. Girls then have to turn elsewhere to get their questions answered. According to one participant, 'I have asked my parents certain things, but even then I have to find most of the information somewhere else' (unspecified participant, school-going learner, Grade 10, female, in answer to Sketch 12).

In addition, it seems as if adults tend to rather shift the responsibility of talking to girls about their sexuality onto others; teachers expect parents to educate their children regarding sexuality while parents expect the school to do so:

The teachers expect the parents to teach you. The parents expect the teachers to teach you. So actually you learn nothing and nobody wants to talk about it. (Participant 4, school-going learner, Grade 10, female)

Participants indicated by means of naive sketches whether they have ever had the opportunity to speak with adults about sex. In response to this question, the majority of the participants reported that the focus group discussions as part of this research study were the first opportunity they have ever had to talk with an adult about their sexuality. One participant stated, 'I think one will sometimes touch on the subject slightly, but it was the first time that I have spoken to an adult like this' (unspecified participant, school-going learner, Grade 10, female, in answer to Sketch 19).

Most participants, who had in fact spoken to adults, pointed out that it was usually a once-off discussion or that the subject was only briefly touched.

Many parents do not want to talk about it or want to talk about it in depth. Often when it comes to girls who start menstruating, they will talk to you about that, but they avoid sex. (Participant 1, school-going learner, Grade 10, female)

Adolescent girls' voices strongly suggested that the participants perceive adults to be generally hesitant to discuss the matter of sexuality with them and that many adults avoid this topic completely or shift the responsibility of sexually educating adolescent girls onto others. Literature reports that parents are reluctant to discuss matters of sexuality with their children because of the discomfort related to talking about sex (Nathan 2018:32; Panday et al. 2009:85).

### **Imposing blame, shame and fear about sex**

The girls reported that attempts to engage in conversations about sexuality are often met with a judgemental attitude or that teachers seem to find excuses not to talk about sexuality. This gives way to girls starting to doubt themselves, leaving them with questions on whether they are allowed to talk to adults and the aftermath of such conversations:

Often times the teacher is judgemental. If you say something (about sex) they will think you are doing it. (Group 1, school-going learners, Grade 10, female)

Other teachers will not talk to us in this way (as we were talking in the interview). They are busy. They are scared. Just as you start the conversation they will... yes, if you want to talk to them, you will think like, am I allowed to talk to teacher? What if she will judge me forever about what I tell her? Is it acceptable to talk about it? Can I tell her? Do we know one another well? Does she want me to speak to her? (Group 4, school-going learners, Grade 10, female)

This is an explicit and heartfelt cry from adolescent girls about how badly they would like to speak to adults, but how they are countered by numerous internal questions that they ask themselves about whether they can trust adults enough to open up to them without being met with resistance and judgement.

The girls indicate that adults tend to inflict a very negative view upon girls with regard to sex and sexuality. They particularly emphasise on the negative aftermath of sex to encourage avoidance of sexual activity. In some instances, adults scare and shock girls by communicating with them and conveying how 'bad' sex is. One such example was the use of 'flour sack babies' where girls were encouraged to walk around with a sack of flour for the whole of the duration at school to teach them the responsibility of having to care for a child:

No, it is not good enough (she refers to sexuality education) because there are, those thing like if flour sack babies, they are in the textbook, the teacher in that school, the teacher in that school give the learners the flour so everyday you can go out and you will know how hard is the baby when you have the real baby. (Participant 15, school-going learner, Grade 10, female)

They (adults) say (sex) it is a bad thing. (Participant 16, school-going learner, Grade 10, female)

Sacred experiences such as sex and motherhood are portrayed by adults in this very negative light which would logically make it very difficult for girls to view sexuality in a positive way. Sex, pregnancy and motherhood are presented to children as something 'bad'.

### **Responding with resentment and judgement**

Participants mentioned that there is a tendency of adults to get upset or angry when girls would like to talk with them about sexuality:

Many adults push you down. They will chase you away. I don't have the courage to speak with adults. (unspecified participant, school-going learner, Grade 10, female, in answer to Sketch 23)

If you were to talk to them, they would scream at you. They would just say to you, 'Go!'. They will ignore you because you are talking about these things. (Participant 7, school-going learner, Grade 10, female)

I never heard my parents talking about sex. When I want to ask them about sex they will go mad, so I don't want to talk about it. (Participant 14, school-going learner, Grade 10, female)

This tendency is often coupled with a judgemental attitude; moralistic perspectives (what is viewed as right and wrong

within certain cultures and religions) or fear is instilled to discourage girls to engage themselves sexually:

Our mothers are telling us every day, 'Please don't do sex, it is not the right thing, it has consequences'. (Group 10, school-going learners, Grade 10, female)

So she told me that I must not do it, because boys like to break our virginity and then leave us with nothing. (Participant 15, school-going learner, Grade 10, female)

I think it's a disgrace. Sex before marriage isn't right. At our age it's not right. We have to focus on our future. We mustn't think about sex and those things, even if it crosses your path, avoid it, because sex before marriage is not right, because that's how my mother raised me. (Group 6, school-going learners, Grade 10, female)

Participants furthermore mentioned that adults perceive inquiries about sex as a sign that girls are sexually active or have a desire to be:

Or you talk to them and then they think you do it. They think you have sex because you ask. I have the right to ask and to know what's going on. But people are scared to ask. That's why I don't talk to them (adults) at all. (Participant 7, school-going learner, Grade 10, female)

Girls are thus led to believe that even by just enquiring about sex and for being a sexual being with sexual needs, they are 'bad', sinful, lustful and acting inappropriately for their age. 'A lot of adults think when you want to speak with them about sex, you are horny. You are too big for your shoes.' (Participant 9, school-going learner, Grade 10, female)

When adolescents' need to talk about their sexuality, it is met with anger, resentment and judgement. Girls would want to keep this integral dimension of themselves hidden from the significant adults in their lives.

They will also not have the courage to ask questions, which will then contribute to the fact that they are not properly informed and assisted to make the best possible choices to maintain sexual and reproductive health. As a consequence, girls could be at risk of sexual exploitation. They might also carry these perceptions into marriage or intimate relationships when they are adults that could lead to trauma later in life (Van den Berg 2018) and continue to impact the way in which future generations are sexually informed and educated.

### How girls would like adults to speak with them about sexuality

By listening to the voices of adolescent girls and including them in research that is about them, it was evident how they would prefer adults to talk with them about sexuality and their voices were turned into suggestions for adults on how to interact with girls differently in this regard.

#### Girls want deeper conversations embedded in relationships

Girls are evidently in desperate need of frequent conversations about their sexuality that do not stop abruptly, but allow

them to engage more deeply. However, it seems as if teachers only talk because they have to, and have a tendency to, stop the conversations when girls still have the need to hear more, which leaves girls feeling upset. It could be that teachers stop conversations about sexuality with children the moment they become uncomfortable talking about it:

It's like the teachers are scared to talk about it. It's like they just want to get it over and done with as soon as possible. They just say sex is bad, that, that, that. And then they haven't answered any questions yet. And if the children want to ask questions, the teachers say, 'No, I don't want to talk about it', or something like that. (Participant 4, school-going learner, Grade 10, female)

Teacher doesn't talk to us about sex often in class and teacher must talk about it more with us. Yes, when she talks about it you can feel there is an atmosphere and a silence, you can even hear a pin drop, because they are so hungry for the talk. I would say that when the teacher does talk about it, I can see the boys, they are so focused on it, they know it's something interesting, it's something they need to know. They sit there open-mouthed and watch her, but just as it gets interesting she stops the conversation. (Participant 11, school-going learner, Grade 10, female)

This just showed me how much girls actually crave to speak about these things with adults. Where they seemed to be a little uncomfortable at first, it was as if later on, they could not get enough and there was not enough time to say all the things they wanted to say. (Koch n.d.:n.p.)

Girls indicated that they would prefer to be approached by adults in a direct, honest and open way and prefer these discussions to happen gradually, frequently (as opposed to once-off as is often the case) and within the context of a solid relationship of respect and trust that is free from blame and shame:

But I think the mothers must talk to them from a young age about boyfriends and things like that. So that they can feel that my mother and I have a very close relationship. And I think they mustn't immediately just come down on the children, they must tell them about it slowly. And not in the company of other people. You want to feel comfortable with that person. (Participant 1, school-going learner, Grade 10, female)

For me, I would prefer it if they speak openly to us, they mustn't [*sic*] come with twists and turns. I am getting older not younger, and I must prepare myself for the future ahead. (Participant 11, school-going learner, Grade 10, female)

I think we should all just sit together like we have spoken to miss, so that she can give us a chance to ask questions and to say things. Then the teacher doesn't just stand there and say this, this, this, this and then, okay we are finished. I think she must ask something, like this, like, 'Why do you think girls have sex?' and then we must talk amongst each other a bit. Because the more questions that are asked and the more the teacher answers, the more comfortable we feel. And the more we talk with one another, the more comfortable we feel. (Participant 1, school-going learner, Grade 10, female)

#### Girls would like conversations to be open, honest and free of fear

Girls do not want adults to talk in euphemisms and to tread lightly around the topic when it comes to sexuality.

They would like these talks to be frank so that they can be adequately informed in order to exercise agency:

For us it is easy to understand because she (the teacher) talks straightforward with us. Don't think we are children so you can't talk to us. Talk! In this way we can get it in our heads. Talk to us. Talk to us as if you are our friend. We will understand you much better. (Participant 9, school-going learner, Grade 10, female)

They must be straight with us, they must get to the point, because children will find out afterwards that my parents hid things from me, why didn't they tell us about this, we didn't know. It can influence our lives. (Participant 10, school-going learner, Grade 10, female)

You must be able to talk without being ashamed or being scared. (Group 1, school-going learners, Grade 10, female)

### Conversations must be based on adequate information

Girls furthermore indicated that they do not necessarily have trust in adults' ability to inform them about sexuality. It seems that girls think they know more about the sexual realities that girls face than teachers themselves and that teachers are uninformed:

I feel teachers don't always know much. We had Life Orientation and we talked with teacher about things that teacher did not even know about. The teachers are not really very much informed about what is happening in children's lives. (Group 4, school-going learners, Grade 10, female)

In conclusion, it is noteworthy to mention that throughout conversing with girls about sexuality, they generally struggled even to say the word 'sex' and that they often rather referred to sex as 'it'. It just goes to show that even the word 'sex' is a heavy and weighted term. The way the girls often used euphemisms when talking about sex or sexual acts, or saying the word softly, shows how embarrassed girls are to talk about it and because of the negative connotations to sex, even saying the word is perceived as 'wrong'.

As one girl expressed it, adolescents are 'hungry' for talks with adults about their sexuality. Girls have a need for assistance and guidance from informed adults and for adults to enter into discussions about sexuality more frequently, comfortably, openly, explicitly and with confidence.

## Adolescent girls as partners in transforming sexuality education

The girls have spoken – and it is imperative that we listen to their voices. Firstly, they spoke about the nature of the current conversations between them and adults. Girls rightfully perceive adults to be generally unwilling to speak about sexuality. This reluctance seems to be based on adults' own discomfort with sexuality. As a result of this silence, adolescents are left ignorant and vulnerable to exploitation. The girls also identified the notion of adults blaming and shaming them for wanting to talk about sexuality and that adults instil fear in them by focusing strongly on the harmful

consequences of sex. Moreover, the girls are well aware of the undertones of aggression and resentment when they do dare to speak about their sexuality.

Adults tend to think that adolescents who talk about sex are sexually active, a situation that they probably resent based on their convictions about abstinence from sex. Furthermore, the girls indicated very eloquently what they want from adults when talking about sexuality.

The most important challenge posed by the young participants is for adults to become less ignorant about the topic and to develop with them a solid relationship of trust within which deeper conversations can happen often and gradually. These conversations must be free of interrogation and must be to-the-point without tiptoeing around the topic.

Adults need to become free from the uneasiness when discussing the issue of sexuality with children and become aware of why the discomfort is there and where it originates from. If adults themselves were 'taught' (whether directly or indirectly) that sex is 'wrong', sinful and shameful, chances are that it will be projected onto children they are in contact with in various contexts. Awareness as such could help them to break free from the symbolic chains that are keeping them bound with regard to sexuality. In this way, not only girls but also adults could be at liberty to explore, embrace, celebrate and responsibly enjoy their sexuality in order to take care of, take pride in and take ownership of it and consequently not allow any form of sexual exploitation. Thus, instead of sexuality being negatively perceived as sinful, bad, wrong and shameful, sexuality should be viewed more positively. Adolescents and adults can be free in knowing that there is nothing wrong with that aspect of themselves and that sexuality is part and parcel of our basic being, that it is a normal part of being human and that all human beings are sexual from birth until death (Louw 2012:202). In this way, adults can become free and be able to guide adolescent girls towards sexual emancipation.

The researcher's blog is a concrete example of how interaction with children as active agents in research that is about them, could lead to awareness, enlightenment and sexual emancipation of researchers themselves. In reflection, not only the process of research, but also the writing of this article, left me with feelings of guilt, sadness and empathy. Guilt because I came to the realisation that as an ex-high school teacher, I too solely focused on abstinence and the negative consequences of sex, which means I contributed to the problem. Sadness and empathy, not only towards girls who often find themselves in difficult situations because they did not necessarily know any better, but also towards adults. I realised that adults' intensions and approaches towards sexuality education generally originates from a place of concern and the intension to protect girls from harm. Ironically, it is this exact approach that puts girls even

more at risk of being exploited as it leaves them uninformed and unprepared to deal with the complex challenges related to their sexuality in the 21st century. This research process freed me in various ways: 1) to transform guilt into an opportunity to, based on what I learnt, interact differently with girls and adults in this regard, 2) as a Method of Life Orientation lecturer at a Higher Education Institution, it enlightened me on how to educate students in alternative ways, and 3) as a 35 year old, never-married woman, I took a gentle stance towards my own sexuality and the very harsh restrictions, shame and blame I often place upon myself that probably originates from my own upbringing and exposure to church.

This links to the strength of the study in that the active participation of girls in this research made it possible to hear from them in a variety of ways about the role adults play with regard to their sexuality.

In addition, girls were able to question, confront and offer alternatives and suggestions for adults about how they would like to be sexually educated in order for them to become more free when discussing such topics and their lived experiences of sexuality.

In an enabling environment and within the context of this research study, meaningful participation would implicate, however, that girls should be able to have conversations in their mother tongue. Speaking in one's mother tongue is a powerful enabling mechanism towards having more comfortable conversations. It is a pity that in this study not all girls were able to communicate in their mother tongue because the researcher was not familiar with the Xhosa language. Furthermore, because of the definite gender differences between boys and girls, it was deemed important for this study to be gender-specific. Therefore, there was a specific focus on the sexuality of girls and the sexuality of boys was not addressed at all in this study. Boys should be included in future research. In addition, the findings and discussion in this article might seem to be one-sided in the sense that it lacks what adults are in fact doing right in this regard. Girls voices' did indicate how adults, to a certain extent, succeeded in meeting their needs, but it was minimal and an exception to a much broader rule where proper guidance from adults is often ignored.

## Conclusion

Based on the empirical data gathered from adolescent girls, this article proposed to shed light on the question: how do adolescent girls' voices enhance adult researchers' understanding of children's need for support and guidance in the context of sexuality?

The girls' voices in this study indicated that when planning and implementing interventions of support towards sexual emancipation, it is imperative to include, listen to and

integrate adolescent girls' voices on how they are in need of adult support with regard to sexuality. A prerequisite to achieve this is to learn how adults could be sexually emancipated themselves. In order for adolescent girls to be sexually emancipated, they need the support and guidance of adults (within the context of solid and trustworthy relationships) to assist them in dealing with the complex challenges related to their sexuality. If adults are not emancipated themselves, they will continue to treat sexuality with silence and be numb towards this fact.

The core argument, thus, is that adults themselves need liberation from their own discomfort with sexuality and, therefore, emancipatory adult-child relations where reciprocal liberation is effected. Adults also need support regarding how to become aware and reflect on the implications of what they religiously believe and confess with regards to their thinking patterns, attitudes and actions about sexuality and sexuality education. In this way, with integrated efforts, focusing on the support of both adolescent girls and adults, the silence, restraints, exploitation and shame with regard to sexuality can be broken. To respond to this plea for help from adolescent girls, a plurality of interlocutors in various research contexts where children and adults are involved is needed. It is on this level where theology and the church can play a meaningful role. Just as much as the adolescent girls reckon that adults hold the key for their sexual emancipation – to be free – adolescent girls might themselves be holding a key for adults' sexual emancipation if adults are willing to listen.

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## Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

## Authors' contributions

R.K. was responsible for data collection and data analysis. H.Y. and A.E.K. were the supervisors of this research. R.K. wrote the manuscript with support and guidance from H.Y. and A.E.K.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Health Sciences of the North-West University (ethics number: NWU-00060-12-A1).

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## Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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