

“Knowledge I seek because culture doesn’t work anymore ... It doesn’t work, death comes”: The experiences of third generation female caregivers (“gogos”) in South Africa discussing sex and HIV and AIDS with children in their care

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Abstract

Sexual reproductive health communication between parents and children has been shown to promote safer sexual choices. Where third generation female caregivers, often grandmothers or other older females, commonly called *gogos* in South Africa, are primary care givers, the responsibility of talking about sex and related issues has shifted to them. This study explored the experiences of *gogos* in Alexandra, Johannesburg, talking about sex, sexuality and HIV and AIDS with the children they are raising. Ten primary caregivers were purposively sampled. Data were collected through in-depth individual interviews. Thematic analysis was performed and inductive codes and themes identified. All *gogos* sampled found it difficult to discuss sex, sexuality and HIV and AIDS due to culture and traditional values impacting on personal experiences and generation and gender barriers. Perceived low self-efficacy due to low levels of knowledge and limited skills in speaking about sex and HIV and AIDS also contributed to the low levels of sexual reproductive health communication. This study highlights the need for interventions that focus on improving *gogos'* knowledge about HIV and AIDS in addition to providing them with the skills to talk about sex, sexuality and HIV and AIDS with children in their care.

Introduction

Despite the declining HIV and AIDS prevalence globally, nearly half of all new HIV infections still occur among youth, especially in sub-Saharan Africa (1). In South Africa, of the 231 000 new HIV infections in 2017, 38% were among persons aged 15–24 years, with around 66 000 of these new infections in girls and young women (2). Improving sexual and reproductive health in youth is a global priority (5). Adolescents are vulnerable to HIV infection as adolescence is a time of experimentation with sex (3) and a time when sexuality and sexual behaviour is shaped (4). Adolescent sexual decision making and behaviour are influenced by a number of factors at individual, peer, family, community and societal levels, with parents in particular playing a significant role in the development of the sexual behaviour of their children (5). Interventions that encourage the development of healthy sexual norms among adolescents can lead to a reduction in risk taking behaviour (4) and research on the role of communication between parents and children in the development of adolescent sexual behaviour has established the importance of parent-child sexuality communication in reducing sexual risk behaviour (5–8).

Programmes to promote sexual communication with adolescents tend to target adolescents, mothers and sometimes, both parents (5). Globally, however, older people, usually older women and often grandmothers, are increasingly facing the challenges of raising children (9, 10). In South Africa, many older women have become the primary caregivers of children orphaned by AIDS (11–13) and other issues such as parents being absent from the home due to work migration or searching for work, ill health or incarceration (10). Recent research conducted by the Children's Gauge at the University of Cape Town, reports that, in 2018, nearly 4 million children in South Africa were living with a grandparent or an aunt (14). There are a number of challenges facing these older caregivers on a daily basis, which require new parenting strategies relevant to them, their experiences and their societies (10). For example, many of these grandparents, or older caregivers, find them themselves ill-equipped to deal with present-day social

and cultural issues and traditional grandparenting needs to adapt to the needs of children faced with current situations (10). Among the challenges faced by these grandparents is the increasingly important issue of sexual reproductive health (SRH) communication with the grandchildren in their care (15).

There is little available research globally on the role of grandmothers in SRH and the effectiveness of the grandparent-child dyad relationship in relation to SRH communication (16, 17). In the United States, studies found that African-American grandparent caregivers felt unprepared to discuss topics regarding sexuality and sexual health with their grandchildren (18). They required assistance communicating with their grandchildren about SRH because they belonged to a generation that found it embarrassing to discuss topics around sexuality (19). Another United States-based study found that, in spite of barriers to talking about sex, grandmothers wanted to have SRH conversations, and be able to have open SRH communications, with their grandchildren (16). Similar findings were reported by Cornelius and Xiong (2015), who reported a generational difference between parents and grandparents' feelings and experiences of SRH communication with children they were raising (17). Grandparents wanted to have open SRH conversations about sex and sexual behaviour with their grandchildren as opposed to parents who had limited SRH conversations with their children, with parent-child conversations placing value on sexual abstinence rather than addressing sex and sexuality (17).

Studies looking at the role of grandmothers and SRH in sub-Saharan Africa, found that grandmothers can play an important role in the SRH behaviour and choices of children in their care (20–22). In Ghana, grandmothers served as important resources in a project with adolescents aimed at reducing HIV infection and unintended pregnancy and findings showed that both young people and elders found the intergenerational activities in this project beneficial (20). In another study in Malawi, “*agogos*” (the local name for grandmothers) helped young girls acquire sexual health information (21). *Agogos* who had been trained, and the girls they counselled, were more comfortable with communication about sexual issues and were more likely to have interactive SRH discussions (21). Meanwhile, a study in Botswana reported that grandmothers raising HIV-positive children found communication about sexuality and adolescent pregnancies were very difficult due to cultural beliefs and that programmes to support these conversations between grandmothers and children were needed to address the needs of grandmothers in particular (22).

In South Africa, there is some research on the role of caregivers and how they communicate with children in their care about SRH issues, and it was furthermore mentioned that these caregivers are not always biological parents (23, 24). An unpublished study that looked at grandparents' SRH communication with the children that they cared for in the Eastern Cape, found that grandparents were unsuccessful in communicating SRH matters to youth and that they should be supported in SRH communication with their grandchildren (25). A study based in Kwa-Zulu Natal used a structured, family-centered adolescent HIV prevention program, *Let's Talk*, to address individual HIV transmission risk factors common among orphaned and vulnerable adolescents (28). In this study, where nearly 50% of caregivers were grandmothers or aunts, statistically significant improvements in adolescents' HIV and condom use knowledge, as well as condom negotiation self-efficacy, was found although an improvement was not

reflected in sexual refusal self-efficacy (26). Communication about healthy sexuality between caregiver and adolescent also improved (26).

Although there is limited research in South Africa on the experiences of grandmothers of SRH communication with the children they are raising, there are number of South African studies that address the role of grandmothers in homes. A study looking at the implications of maternal grandmother co-residence and involvement for adolescent adjustment found greater maternal grandmother involvement was associated with more adolescent prosocial behaviour and fewer adolescents internalizing problems in 3-generation households (27). Another study looking at the relationship between grandparental involvement and the emotional and behavioural health of South African adolescents suggested that there is potential for grandparental involvement with adolescents to be a resource for promoting social and emotional competence in adolescents (28).

Literature on third generation caregivers also speaks to experiences of generational differences which are a unique feature of third generation caring (13, 15). In a study in Kwa-Zulu Natal, grandparents identified child discipline and a feeling of disharmony as problem areas in intergenerational relationships (13). In addition, this study found that the age and frailty of grandparents as caregivers makes older caregivers' experiences unique (13). Generational differences present their own specific challenges to grandparents who may not feel prepared to conduct SRH conversations and difficulties are exacerbated by the lack of resources to assist and prepare grandparents for SRH conversations (15, 22).

The research study that informed this paper set out to document the experiences of older women, including grandmothers and aunts referred to as *gogos*, in Alexandra, Johannesburg, of speaking to children in their care about sex, sexuality and HIV and AIDS both prior and subsequent to a skills-building workshop on SRH. The study also recorded their thoughts and experiences on the SRH workshop. The purpose of this paper is to describe and explore the *gogos'* experiences and perceptions of talking about sex, sexuality and HIV and AIDS with their grandchildren prior to the workshop.

For the purposes of this paper, "grandmothers" and *gogos* refer to "to experienced, senior women in the household who are knowledgeable about all matters related to the health, development and well-being of children and their mothers. This includes not only maternal and paternal grandmothers, but also aunts and other older women"(29). The term "grandchild/grandchildren" relates to all children being raised by a *gogo*, not just biological grandchildren.

Methods

Design

The study was qualitative in design and took place between February 2014 and January 2015.

Participant sampling and recruitment

Gogos living in Alexandra were recruited for the study. Alexandra is a crowded, low-income suburb situated in Johannesburg with high levels of unemployment, poverty and crime. The women were selected because they were the primary caregivers of children between the ages of 10 and 18 and because of the fact that they self-identified as *gogos*. They all attended “GOGO Days” on a Thursday at Ratang Bana, a community-based non-profit organisation (NPO) based in Alexandra that cares for around 600 vulnerable children from the community.

A purposive sample of ten *gogos* or older female caregivers/relatives was recruited. These *gogos* spoke and understood English although interviews were conducted in isiZulu. The purposive sample was based on maximum variation which included selecting *gogos* who were the primary caregivers of boys and girls, as well as those who were taking care of children of different ages. The women who were recruited were not all biological *grandmothers* of the children for whom they were caring.

Data collection

Data were collected through in-depth individual interviews conducted by the primary researcher (JS) and a trained research assistant who spoke the vernacular languages of participants which included Setswana and isiZulu. The research assistant was trained by the researcher on the purpose of the research study and the data collection methods. The head of Ratang Bana in Alexandra granted permission to recruit participants for the study and informed consent was obtained from each *gogo* who expressed an interest in participating in the study. A separate consent form was used to get permission for creating audio-recordings of the interviews. The Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of the Witwatersrand approved the research study.

Interviews were held in either a room on the premises of Ratang Bana, which was private and designated for counselling at the centre, or at the homes of the individual participants depending on their preference. Basic socio-demographic information such as age, education, number, age and sex of grandchildren was collected, as well as sources of income including foster-care grants, old age “pensions” or other streams of income. Audio interviews were recorded after obtaining the written consent of the interviewee.

The interviews were guided by an interview guide with a scripted introduction, which was read at the beginning of each in-depth interview. The guide consisted of open-ended, non-directive questions, moving from the general to the specific. The interviewer started by asking about the *gogos'* relationships with the children in their care in terms of activities, needs and demands, and whether there were problems experienced looking after such children. The interviewer then proceeded to questions specifically focusing on feelings about talking about sex, sexuality and HIV and AIDS; who should speak to children about sex, sexuality and HIV and AIDS; what would make it easier to have these conversations; and what difficulties were experienced when talking about sex, sexuality and HIV and AIDS. The *gogos* were also asked about the last time they had talked to children in their care about sex, sexuality and HIV and AIDS, and if they had never spoken their grandchildren about sex, sexuality and HIV and AIDS why not. Interviews lasted for about one hour.

Data analysis

Audio recordings of the interviews were translated and transcribed verbatim. Identifying information was removed. Transcripts were imported into MaxQDA 10 for data coding and analysis. The analysis was inductive, and codes and themes were developed after a close reading of the transcripts. Text segments from the transcripts were assigned codes based on each idea or category. The senior co-author (NC) reviewed the codes and definitions of each code and how they were applied to a transcript. Any ambiguity was discussed and clarified. Memos were written throughout the process of coding which tracked the patterns and co-occurring themes in the data. Codes were grouped into themes and then patterns. These patterns were then reviewed and interpreted. Relevant salient quotes for each emergent theme were selected to support each theme during the process of writing up.

Results

Socio demographic characteristics of participants

Two of the ten women who participated in the study were biological grandmothers and the others were aunts, great aunts, foster mothers, an adoptive mother and a caring older woman from the community. They all self-identified as a “gogo”. They cared for a combination of biological grandchildren, biologically-related children and other third generation children. The average age of the women who participated in the study was 60.3 years, with a range from 52–77 years (Table 1). The average number of children being cared for by each gogo was three. There were 18 male and 18 female children being cared for by the *gogos* in the study. The average age of the children was 13.5 years with a range from 2 to 21. All *gogos* were unemployed. Their sources of income were mainly from grants and a few had some form of self-generated income. This self-generated income took the form of home baking and selling, rentals and charitable support.

Table 1
Socio-demographic characteristics of *gogos*

| Pseudonym | Age | Number of dependants | Ages of children in in <i>gogos</i> care | Source of income | Total monthly income disclosed in interview |
|-----------|-----|----------------------|--|---|---|
| Thoko | 63 | 1 | 11 | Senior Citizen grant Foster Care Grant | R2150 |
| Thuli | 60 | 3 | 21,19,17 | Baking and Selling Scones Foster Care Grant | R840 |
| Bontle | 52 | 2 | 19,3 | Social Welfare Grant | R320 |
| Sindi | 59 | 4 | 15,8,5,2 | Rent Income Social Welfare Grant | R320 |
| Florence | 74 | 2 | 21,15 | Senior Citizen Grant Social Welfare Grant | R1670 |
| Bongi | 60 | 2 | 17, 4 | Not disclosed | - |
| Lerato | 59 | 2 | 16,13 | Social Welfare Grant Help from Ratang Bana | R320 |
| Agnes | 58 | 3 | 18,14,13 | Social Welfare Grant Monthly Stipend from Projects | R820 |
| Mercy | 54 | 2 | 14,11 | Foster Care Grant | R840 |
| Faith | 77 | 2 | 21,13 | Foster Care Grant Senior Citizen Grant | R2190 |

R100 = approximately 6.5 Euros

Experiences of the *gogos* talking about sex, sexuality and HIV and AIDS with their grandchildren

Various themes emerged regarding the *gogos*' feelings and perceptions regarding talking about sex, sexuality and HIV and AIDS with their grandchildren. These included personal, contextual and structural barriers. On a personal level, barriers between *gogos* and grandchildren about talking about sex, sexuality and HIV and AIDS included the difficulties experienced by *gogos* due to past experiences with talking about sex, a lack of skills and knowledge of how to have these conversations, and a fear that talking about sex would encourage sexual behaviour. Contextual and structural barriers housed in cultural beliefs, gender and generational differences also affected the feelings and experiences of these *gogos* related to talking about sex, sexuality and HIV and AIDS.

Personal barriers experienced by *gogos* in talking to grandchildren about sex:

Difficulty talking about sex, sexuality and HIV and AIDS

All of the participants expressed negative feelings regarding talking about sex, sexuality and HIV and AIDS and commented on the difficulty of speaking to their grandchildren about these issues:

"Hey lady..., that's going to be difficult. That is going to be really difficult." – Sindi (59, caregiver of four children)

Although all the participants found talking about sex difficult, there was an acceptance or understanding amongst the participants that "how things are today is nothing like they used to be" (Bongi) and that there is now a need to talk to children about SRH. Lerato talked about trying to discuss issues that were not spoken about to her when she was growing up and how difficult this made talking about HIV and AIDS, and sex and sexuality.

A number of *gogos* spoke about their lack of experience, knowledge and skills on this topic:

"The problem is that... I would not know what to say." – Bongi (60, caregiver of two children).

Some participants felt that, despite the fact that today's generation is far better informed than they were, knowing, for example, that babies come from the "stomach", and that the topic of sex does get covered at school, sex was still a very difficult topic for them to discuss. Reasons for this included cultural taboos, lack of SRH communication experiences in their own adolescence and general lack of information.

"Now you must discuss issues [that] weren't discussed with you and therefore aren't open about is a bit difficult ... When the time to discuss it all of these topics ... you feel overwhelmed and somewhat defeated." – Lerato (59, caregiver of two children)

Past experiences of talking about sex, sexuality, HIV and AIDS

A number of participants mentioned feelings of fear and experiences of corporal punishment at the hands of their parents linked to their own sexual experiences growing up. Florence described the way her parents used fear and threats when speaking about sex when she was growing up. She was also told falsehoods about where babies came from: “in suitcases delivered by nurses”. Shame was also mentioned as a reason to not talk about SRH:

“We are still ashamed to discuss certain issues. Sex this and that... It is difficult finding ways to tackling these issues as we never had such conversations nor was it ever taught to us at school.” – Sindi (59, caregiver of four children)

Fear of talking about sex, sexuality, HIV and AIDS

Another source of anxiety raised by one gogo was based on the belief that they had grown up with that talking about sex, sexuality, HIV and AIDS would encourage sexual activity.

“You see in our times, our parents felt if you taught a child about sex you were promoting the idea.” – Sindi (59, caregiver of four children)

Sindi (59) recounted that although she had spoken to her own children about sex in the past, she voiced her frustration at the fact that her children had had unplanned pregnancies in spite of the fact that she had spoken to them. She now regarded these past conversations about SRH as unsuccessful as it “failed us, because now we have these children [grandchildren] in the yard”. She expressed disappointment that her children had had babies in spite of her attempts to prevent this by speaking to them and “warning” them.

Contextual and structural barriers to talking about sex, sexuality and HIV and AIDS encountered by gogos

Contextual and structural barriers played a significant role in how effective *gogos* were in their communication with their grandchildren about sex and HIV and AIDS. Although contextual and structural, these barriers were informed and defined by the personal experiences of the participants and through their perceptions of culture, gender, age and the generation gap.

Cultural barriers

A number of *gogos* brought up cultural issues as a barrier to talking about sex, sexuality and HIV and AIDS with their grandchildren. Communication about sex was not something participants had experienced during their own adolescence, due to the belief that parents discussing sex with their children would encourage or enable sexual activity and the idea that HIV and AIDS did not exist in their youth.

Although Sindi explained “in our culture, we are not used to that” and “it was not easy when it came to my children”, she felt very strongly that cultural beliefs restricting the sharing of open and factual information on SRH needed to be rejected and that *gogos* needed to move beyond cultural norms and address these issues with their grandchildren in order to save lives.

“There isn’t a culture that I’m committed to, to the point where I would say, I don’t do this, I don’t do that, because of my culture. Knowledge I do seek because culture doesn’t work anymore ... It doesn’t work, death comes.” – Sindi (59, caregiver of four children).

Gender

Participants raised the issue of gender norms when speaking to grandchildren about sex, sexuality and HIV and AIDS. Not only did these gender norms apply to the *gogos* and who they spoke to, they also related to the *gogos*’ understanding of adolescent sexuality. Sindi explained how “[they] are used to boy children being spoken to by a man”, while one participant described how, when she tried to bring up the subject, her grandson got “uncomfortable” and tried to close down the conversation as soon as possible. In addition, these *gogos* felt that their already limited knowledge was particularly lacking when it came to speaking to their grandsons about issues pertaining to males. Sindi claimed boys would “puzzle” her, as she had no experience with them: “honestly I don’t know what I would say to a boy,” she said.

Generation barrier

A number of *gogos* spoke about the generation gap between themselves and their grandchildren and the need for increased understanding between them.

“There is a gap between us that needs to be bridged. They need to learn how to speak to us so we can understand one another.” – Patience (58, caregiver of three children)

Respect for the older generation, and the fear of this generation losing respect, were themes that emerged during the interviews. Agnes explained that she feared she would lose the respect of her grandchildren if she spoke to them about sex, sexuality and HIV and AIDS and, having lost respect for her, her grandchildren would be more likely to participate in sexual activity.

“If I speak to them about such issues... they will end up taking you for granted. Isn't it ‘Gogo can speak to me about this so...’ they’ll overstep their boundary” – Agnes (58, caregiver of three children)

Sindi suspected some of her grandchildren’s responses, which included laughter, could have been due to the fact she was “*gogo*” and that they were possibly embarrassed by this: “Since it came with *gogo*, they would laugh when they see some of the things.” Sindi also mentioned that the issue of age and the generation gap as a possible reason for difficulty talking about sex, sexuality and HIV and AIDS with her grandchildren. She explained that her grandchild (aged 9) was not as close to her as he would have been to his mother.

“That is going to be really difficult, especially when they are not your [biological child]. There is no way of going beyond the fact that I’m not his mother.” – Sindi (59, caregiver of four children)

Sindi and Lerato both spoke about the difficulties of trying to get their grandchildren to not only listen to their advice but also to subsequently follow this advice, rather than being influenced by other factors such as the behaviour of their peers.

“For me, it is not difficult to talk to my kids, but our kids do not want to listen. You can tell him or her something here in the house but when he is going outside to the friends, they teach their way of living.” – Sindi (59, caregiver of four children)

Discussion

The *gogos* in the study provided care and parenting to the children they looked after and expressed a common desire to keep them safe and healthy, even in cases where the *gogos* were not biological grandmothers of the children in their care. Despite acknowledging the need to speak to the children in their care about sex, sexuality and HIV and AIDS, the experiences of *gogos* in doing so were extremely limited and fraught with challenges and fears. The difficulties were exacerbated by contextual and structural barriers such as culture, gender and generational issues, as well as personal challenges which included past experiences of SRH conversations and lack of skills and knowledge around SRH. As a result of these difficulties most of the *gogos* had never spoken about sex, sexuality and HIV and AIDS to the children in their care.

Regarding the broader cultural context, SRH communication in Africa is difficult, as many communities regard conversations around puberty, sex and sexuality as taboo (5). All the *gogos* spoke about the complicated and difficult conversations about SRH that they had both with their own parents and while at school. Hence, traditional values and cultural norms were seen by the *gogos* as barriers to open conversations about sex, particularly as many *gogos* had very limited experiences of these types of conversations while growing up. When or if these conversations did occur, they were impacted by normative beliefs and culture and often contained misinformation. Gender and generation issues also appeared to impact perceptions of how to communicate about SRH, and these combined factors translated into challenges and barriers to SRH communications between primary caregivers and third generation children.

According to research on parent–child SRH communications, the genders of the parent and the child appear to play a dominant role for both parties as to the manner in which SRH discussions occurred, as women tended to speak to girls and men tended to speak to boys (5, 8). The *gogos* in this study did not express preferences related to which gender child they spoke to, but they did comment on the fact that it was the social norm for men to speak to boys and for women to speak to girls, and that they found it more difficult to speak to boys.

A number of the participants commented on the fact that they were *gogos* and not mothers of these grandchildren. Generational differences present their own specific challenges to grandparents who may not feel prepared to deal with these conversations (15). The *gogos* experienced aspects of intergenerational conflict as mentioned by Nyasani et al. (2009), with problems with child discipline and disharmony in the intergenerational relationship between themselves and the grandchildren they were caring for (13). This added to the problems and barriers around SRH communication between *gogos* and their grandchildren. *Gogos* experienced perceived dismissal from grandchildren, feared losing respect in the eyes of their grandchildren and being laughed at by their grandchildren when attempting to initiate SRH communication.

According to a study by Armistead et al. (2014), parental involvement in sexual communication is generally a new notion for South African families (23). In addition to the cultural and social obstacles discussed previously, the *gogos'* explanation for the lack of SRH communication was that their parents feared that discussion and knowledge of sexual topics would lead to children engaging in sexual activities. In addition, the conversations about sex that the *gogos* had had with their own parents had often been negative and punitive. Many of the participants found themselves as parents having the same types of negative conversations about SRH with their own children and again when speaking to grandchildren about sex, sexuality and HIV and AIDS. Many *gogos* commented that how they did not know how to talk about HIV and AIDS as they had had no experiences of talking about HIV and AIDS when they were growing up.

The fear that speaking to children about sexual behaviour would promote sexual activity is a common theme in sub-Saharan Africa (5). The *gogos* in this study explained that their parents had also had this fear and it was at least partly responsible for the lack of perceived efficacy on the part of the *gogos* in addressing SRH with their own children, as they had had limited opportunities to experience these types of discussions during their own upbringings and while raising their own children. However, it is not necessarily a barrier to SRH conversations in and of itself and the *gogos* did not experience this fear when it came to speaking to their grandchildren as the *gogos* had experienced firsthand that not talking about sex did not result in children not having sex. A study by Cornelius et al. (2008) found that African American grandmothers did not fear that talking about sex would promote sexual behaviour in their grandchildren, and that these grandmothers embraced the idea of talking to their grandchildren about sex (18). African American grandmothers, in fact, wanted to talk about sex and were able to have open SRH communication with their grandchildren in contrast to the views and experiences of parents (17). The results of our study reflect the finding of Cornelius et al. (2015) as fear of promoting sexual activity was not mentioned by the *gogos* as a barrier to having conversations about sexuality with their grandchildren or children in their care although it had been a fear for their parents and when they were raising their own children. The *gogos* in this study showed that there has been a shift away from this belief based on their lived experiences that not talking about sex, sexuality and HIV does not prevent sexual behaviour or HIV infection. The *gogos* in this study, like the African American grandmothers in the study by Cornelius et al. (2015), wanted to be able to talk about SRH but both groups felt they lacked the skills to do this.

This is not to say that personal beliefs and experiences can be totally discounted as a barrier to SRH discussions, as many parents are from a generation where discussing sexuality topics was linked to embarrassment (5, 8) and, although grandparents in these cases are perhaps receptive to discussing sex and sexuality with their grandchildren, they experience different levels of comfort with these conversations (18). These findings were supported by our study as *gogos* expressed discomfort and a lack of confidence and ability to acknowledge, confront or discuss the difficult and uncomfortable topic and issues of adolescent sexual behavior, although this could potentially be mitigated by providing support for the *gogos*, enabling them to conduct the discussions more effectively.

In fact, despite increasing evidence of programmes that target grandmothers (as opposed to mothers) to support SRH communication having positive outcomes (20, 21), only one *gogo* in our study had received any prior HIV training. Cornelius et al. (2015), likewise found that African American grandmothers were unprepared for discussing topics regarding sexuality and sexual health with their grandchildren or the children in their care and required assistance when communicating with their grandchildren about SRH in order to do this more effectively (17). In South Africa, a study conducted by Mangxola (2007) demonstrated that grandparents in the Eastern Cape were unsuccessful in communicating SRH matters to youth and concluded that grandparents should be supported in communicating sexual matters to their grandchildren (25). A similar need was identified through our research, with the participants acknowledging the value of these conversations in reducing HIV infection and unintended pregnancy and our findings clearly demonstrate the need to engage with *gogos* to increase effective SRH communications. All the participants expressed the wish to be able to have these SRH conversations more effectively with increased knowledge about SRH.

This study supports the view that it has become imperative to examine the changes in family composition in sexuality education in South Africa (23, 26, 27, 28). A number of studies in South Africa have commented on the importance of the extended family and caregivers other than parents (23, 24, 26, 27, 28). In addition, this study supported findings in other research (17, 22) for the need for healthcare providers and programmes to recognise that there are differences in SRH communication and conversations between parents and grandparents.

Research conducted by Aubel (2005) showed that the concern that grandmothers might be biased and unable to adapt to modern practices and new ideas was incorrect and that this should not be a reason that interventions do not make use of older people as drivers in community and family-based interventions (29). Aubel (2005) reports that grandmothers are in fact open and receptive to change and new ideas and can in fact be very powerful resources in promoting health changes (29). Like Aubel (2005), our findings challenged the stereotype of grandmothers as being conservative and resistant to change as all the *gogos* expressed a desire to be able to have informed and effective SRH conversations with the grandchildren they were looking after or raising.

The findings need to be considered in the light of the following limitations related to the collection of data and the role of the researcher. The lead researcher (JS) was female, white, middle class, and had prior

links to Ratang Bana. However, these attributes of the lead researcher did not impact on the data collection as the primary interviewer was a black African woman of a similar age group to the *gogos*. Nevertheless, it is possible that her interpretation of the findings and the coding of data could have been affected by the fact that the researcher was aware of the difficulties experienced by the participants; she was sympathetic to parenting issues as a mother of adolescent children herself, and had established relationships with some of the participants prior to the commencement of the research. In addition, the participants all came from the same centre, Ratang Bana which could have influenced which details were shared. However, this was mitigated by having an interviewer who did not have any prior connection with the organisation. Furthermore, although the participants were typical of *gogos* in Alexandra, they were all accessing support at a local NGO which could have influenced their experiences and how they engaged in the interviews.

Conclusion

Talking about sex is not easy for *gogos* due to personal and contextual and structural barriers. Personal barriers for the *gogos* included the difficulty and fear of talking about sex and past experiences of talking about sex, sexuality and HIV and AIDS in childhood and as parents. Contextual and structural barriers to talking about sex, sexuality and HIV and AIDS included cultural beliefs and practices, gender issues and the generation gap experienced between the *gogos* and the children they were raising. Many grandmothers and older female members in the community, the *gogos*, are primary caregivers of children and are fulfilling parental roles in raising children. This parental role needs to be recognised and issues affecting *gogos* in particular need to be acknowledged. *Gogos* need to become part of, if not particularly targeted by, interventions to improve the SRH outcomes of the children they are raising.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Ethics approval to conduct and report the study was given by The Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of the Witwatersrand and written consent was given by participants prior to participation.

Consent for publication

Consent has been given by all authors

Competing interests

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors

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Authors' contributions

Jane Simmonds conducted the research under the supervision of Nicola Christofides, and Charles Parry, Fareed Abdullah, Nadine Burnhams and Nicola Christofides contributed to the writing, analysis and preparation of the manuscript.

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