
SOCIAL-CULTURAL CONTEXT AND YOUNG WOMEN'S SEXUALITIES IN NIGERIA: A STUDY OF FEMALE YOUNGSTERS IN THE NORTH CENTRAL ZONE

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ABSTRACT: *This study explores the various ways in which young women construct their sexualities and negotiate the meanings of sexuality. It considers the social processes through which they are encouraged to conform to dominant norms of femininity and the impact of such normative influences on their sexual relationships with men. A total of 52 young women participated in the focus groups and in-depth interviews. Analyses of the young women's accounts reveal a number of key themes of their sexual meanings and practices. The first, is their constructions of sex in relation to heterosexual and penetrative sex. The second relates to how they constructed sex as an expression of love and a means of sustaining a relationship. Finally, the study exposes how young women's construction of sex as a transactional activity is underpinned or motivated by the notion that men need and enjoy sex. The study concludes that young women's sexualities in Nigerian context are shaped by and embedded in local cultures of femininity and discourses that limit their sexual agency and safety.*

KEYWORDS: Young Women, Hetero(Sexualities), Sexual Practice, Femininity, Schoolers; Non-Schoolers

INTRODUCTION

This study argues that socio-cultural contexts, such as societal values, local gender norms and cultural discourse on sex and sexuality mediate in young women's sexual meanings and practices. This paper supports the social constructionist position which takes sexuality as a relational concept, sexuality is related to social and cultural contexts and modified by dominant discourses that may prevail at a particular time in a culture. Thus, by examining the young women's sexuality, I focus on revealing the patterns of sexual practice in terms of how their responses, desires, thoughts and feelings are acted out in relation to the normative expectations within their local context.

In analyzing the findings, this paper considers the value of the radical feminist social constructionist approach (such as Vance, 1995, Jackson, 1996, 2006; Holland et al., 1998, Tangwa, 2008) in explaining the influences on young women's sexualities. This approach provides an understanding of female sexuality as not inherently subordinate, just as the young men's is not inherently dominant. Although most young women in this study appeared to have accepted or assumed a position that somewhat reinforced the biological essentialist view of late nineteenth and early twentieth century male sexologists, which justified male dominance of heterosexual relationships, the data provide an understanding of different ways in which the young women's sexualities were socially constructed.

Analyses of the young women's accounts reveal three major ways in which their sexuality was constituted as 'culturally appropriate' within a heterosexual and patriarchal framework. First, heterosexual relationships were constructed as the normal and socially approved way of life, a natural kind of male-dominated activity. The young women were also found to have assumed (hetero)sexual relations within the framework of gender norms and practices that define male sexual identities in terms of power, dominance, strength, virility and superiority, while those of females are associated with submissiveness, passivity, weakness and inferiority.

Second, the young women were surrounded by contradictory discourses on sex and heterosexual relationships. For instance, dominant discourses emphasized their need to remain chaste until married, as required by their societal norms and cultural values, while also placing great value on sexual relationships as part of the development of what would become a lifelong or marital relationship. Moreover, a (hetero)sexual relationship is largely constructed as a way of achieving a socially recognized status of wifehood and motherhood for young women.

Third, for some of the young women, relationships with physically attractive and intelligent 'boys' were seen to accord a prestigious social status among their peers. For others, their decisions on whether to engage in sexual relationships were connected with economic needs and benefits. In this sense, some of the young women preferred to engage in relationships with men who were relatively prosperous. Importantly, this was found to have exacerbated their lack of sexual agency and weakened their ability to negotiate safer sex.

More specifically, the analyses which follow identify a number of key themes in the young women's accounts of their sexual meanings and practices. First, I reveal their constructions of sex in relation to heterosexual and penetrative sex. Second, I consider how they constructed sex as an expression of love and a means of sustaining a relationship. Finally, I reveal how young women's construction of sex as a transactional activity is underpinned or motivated by the notion that men need and enjoy sex.

Heterosexual culture and socio-cultural change

Several studies within different cultures have revealed that male dominance in heterosexual practices affects young women's sexual agency and negotiation for safer sex. Evidence from a group of feminists scholars (Holland et al., 1992), suggest that heterosexuality has continued to be socially reinforced through institutionalised gender power relations and effect of male supremacy which are grounded in different young women's experiences of sex in different social and cultural situations. The feminists thus began to consider the need to challenge the ideas that reinforce male dominance and female subordination in heterosexual relationships (Holland et al., 1998).

While several studies have reported that young women are becoming actively engaged in negotiating their sexual desires and made sense of their sexual identities and relationships (Shefer et al., 2001, Allen, 2003, Jackson et al., 2003; Mantell et al, 2009). Reports from other studies such as Maxwell (2007:541) have continue to argue that, "the extent and nature of any sustained change in heterosexual experiences remains uncertain". Thi is based on the fact that

young people especially in the case of young women's sexuality and their capacity for sexual negotiations have continued to be shaped by and within specific social and cultural contexts. As such, while a number of young people have been reported as operating their sexual practices in form of mixing up both traditional and 'non-traditional' values (O'Donnell et al., 2000:89), other studies have affirmed that young women are not often in position to consistently negotiate their sexual practices and desires (Shefer et al., 2001, Allen, 2003, Jackson et al., 2003, Maxwell, 2006, Imaledo et al, 2012; Rakhi et al., 2014).

In African contexts, studies have revealed little resistance or change to the dominant norms of heterosexual practices, despite the various developmental changes and modernization influences (Makinwa, 1992, Orubuloye et al., 1994, Masters et al., 2013). The dominant construction of sexuality has consistently been shaped by dominant heterosexual practice and conventional masculinity and femininity. For instance, Mill (2002) found that some dominant factors influencing women's sexual negotiation and vulnerability to HIV/AIDS in Ghana were connected with gender imbalances limiting women's access to the education and vocational skills which would have provided them with economic opportunities and empowerment. Interviews with 31 women in Ghana revealed that their literacy levels were low and that a number of them were living in poverty and depended on their male sexual partners (boyfriends or husbands) for their basic socio-economic needs. In consequence, despite the socio-cultural changes that may have been taking place, women were not empowered in this context.

It could be argued that the feminist authors (Holland et al., 1998) cited in this review have concentrated on heterosexual power, with limited focus on other contextual factors relating to age, education or access to social and economic resources. However, their findings provides a platform from which to further investigate other social contexts that intersect with heterosexual norms or gender power inequalities to shape young women's sexual practices, meanings and capacity for negotiating their sexual safety. As this study reveals, other contextual factors interact with heterosexual power to influence young people's sexual practices.

RESEARCH METHODS

A total sample of 52 young women aged 16-25 participated in six focus groups (out of which 4 with six young women in each) and 16 individual interviews. The population for this study was drawn through purposive and snowballing sampling techniques from young women that are currently attending school (referred to as schoolers) and young women that are currently out of school (referred to as non-schoolers) in Kabba.

Different approaches were adopted in negotiating access to and obtaining informed consent from the schoolers and non-schoolers. For the former, I sought the consent of the school principal to interview the students. In each school, I met with the principal, introduced myself and explained the purpose of the study, then asked for permission to interview students within the age range of 16-19 years. A major problem envisaged with this procedure was that young people might not feel free to express themselves in the presence of school teachers or their superiors at work. I therefore discussed this aspect with the teachers and with the association leaders.

Hence following approval, the recruitment of participants was designed to exclude the interference of association learders, their teachers and principals. I distributed an invitation letter to all young schoolers stating the objectives of the study and asking them to indicate if they would be willing to participate in the research. I included my contact address and the address of a popular venue (the town hall) with a specific time for a meeting.

I also visited a popular internet café, where I met a number of young people who had come to browse the Internet and others who were undergoing computer training at the centre. Most of the young people I met there were within the age range of 20-25 and had completed secondary school, while a few were still at school. I introduced the research topic to them and further invited them to the focus groups and interviews.

This enabled me to meet potential participants for the focus groups and individual interviews. At the point of meeting the potential participants I briefly introduced the research topic and told them what taking part would entail, the ground rules and how confidentiality would be maintained. Thereafter, I negotiated times and venues convenient to them, ensuring a relaxed atmosphere in which they discussed freely the topics of the study.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF MAJOR FINDINGS

Sex as heterosexual and penetrative

The interview data reveal that normative heterosexuality pervaded the lives of the Kabbarian young women. Thus, nearly all the female participants conceptualized sex in heterosexual terms: heterosexuality was the ‘natural’ and ‘legitimate’ form of sexual practice. Their responses revealed how they conceived heterosexuality based on the influence of their cultural environment:

Sex, [pause], it’s a *normal* thing people do in a relationship. [In what type of relationship?] As in sexual affair between man and woman...like mother and father, boyfriend and girlfriend...you know, just like it started from Adam and Eve in the Bible...[Younger schooler, aged 19].

Em, I think sex is just an act of making love which *usually* takes place when a man and woman are in a relationship... [Younger schooler, aged 18].

Um, [] that’s when a boy and girl are *making love* with each other... then it’s what God has *ordained* for us to maintain our generation... [Younger non-schooler, aged 17].

Um, I think... sex is the sexual act or sexual intercourse between man and woman... in fact it is an *expected* thing to do when there is a kind of closeness between a man and woman... and a more *legitimate* thing to do when they are married... [Older schooler, aged 24].

In these accounts, a strong impression is created of heterosexual sex as the ‘obvious’, ‘normal’, ‘usual’ ‘act of making love’, or as the ‘expected thing to do’ in a heterosexual relationship. Such accounts demonstrate how heterosexuality was normalised within the local context of the young women interviewed. They had grown up in a culture that offered them scripts constructing sex as

an activity between members of opposite genders. Their religious norms also had a powerful influence, making the young women to construct sex as ‘ordained by God’ or viewing it as an activity created by God within the heterosexual domain. Such accounts of sex as penetrative concur with several studies in African communities, where heterosexual culture has been reported as a long-established norm (Izugbara, 2005, Jaffray, 2006, Reddy et al., 2007, Masters et al., 2013).

Further, the young women demonstrated how they became socialized towards the norm of heterosexual practice based on the idea that its focus should be reproduction. This may be observed in one of the comments above, which expresses an understanding of sex based on its procreative features. A similar notion is conveyed by the following comments:

Sex is a means of producing children. Without sexual intercourse, a woman cannot be made pregnant and human generation will cease to exist [Younger non-schooler aged 19].

...sex is a sacred thing. If you read through the Bible you’ll understand that God created sex for us *primarily* to bear children...that is why it is always a *fearful* thing when people start having sex outside marriage... You know, you’re afraid what people will say about you, about your decency and stuff like that... [Younger schooler, aged 17].

These accounts represent a view of sex commonly held by the young women as heterosexual and purposefully made for procreation, through which the continuity of the entire society is ensured. This explains why many of the young women like those cited above placed emphasis on the legitimacy of sex within marital relationships. Such dominant discourse and ideals led to the fears expressed about the risk of downgrading their sense of ‘morality’ and ‘decency’ as well as the fear of facing condemnation if the people of their community should learn that they had been sexually active. These narratives expose the dominant sexual norm in the young women’s culture, which emphasized the importance of sex within the marital and reproductive contexts. This is consistent with the findings of other studies of African sexuality which have consistently reported that for most Africans, heterosexual relations are highly valued, based on the need for reproduction (Orubuloye et al., 1993, Oshi et al., 2004, Smith, 2004). Thus, African culture discourages young people, particularly women, from engaging in premarital sexual relations or learning about sexual safety, in the belief that such knowledge will encourage them into premarital sex and consequently premarital pregnancy.

Unsurprisingly, one of the implications of the dominant heterosexual norm among the young women is the homophobic traits reflected in their narratives throughout the study. It also reveals how their cultural socialization via parents, religion and peers has served to maintain heterosexuality as the social order in the research setting.

Interviewer: So, what other form of sexual intercourse do you know?

Ah, I don’t know of any other sex, except for those committing the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah that we all know from the *Bible*..., you know, those people did abominable thing before God, men were sleeping with men and women sleeping with women and that was why God destroyed them... (Younger non-schooler, aged 18).

Um, well, to me, I will say sex is an interaction of love...Could it be someone of the same sex as you?

Hey! God forbid, I've heard about some girls in single sex schools. Those girls must be evil!... Besides, I only heard of them, none of my friends are like that... My mum's friend is a teacher at Mary's school... She told my mum about those girls and mum warned us about such evil company... (Younger schooler, aged 18).

...I don't believe in anything like same sex... when I say sex I mean the natural sexual intercourse... not the unnatural kind of thing... [Younger schooler, aged 18].

Interestingly, one young woman suggested a definition of sex that included same-sex relationships. However, she had no preference for such patterns of behaviour.

...I think sex could be two males engaging in anal sex, though that's quite a strange kind of sex... but I don't think anyone here would opt for that...It's not a *popular* kind of thing in our culture... but I've read about it... (Older schooler, aged 22, female).

From the above narratives, homosexual practice was portrayed as abominable, a Sodomitic sin and an "unnatural thing". These comments underline the lack of recognition of alternative sexual practices in this research setting. Heterosexuality is a long-established norm, instilled in young people through cultural socialization, which often begins at family level. For instance, one of the above statements describing homosexual practice as evil was in accordance with the culture imbibed from parents. This is reflected in the warning from the participant's mother about the need for her to avoid homosexual schoolmates (regarded by the mother as 'evil company'). Moreover, several studies across the world have drawn attention to different ways in which the influence of religion, family and peer groups have continued to operate as key sites within which heterosexuality is produced and reproduced(Holland et al., 1998, Allen, 2003, Cranny-Francis, 2003, Izugbara, 2005, Jaffray, 2006, Froyum, 2007, Reddy et al., 2007).

Taking into account that the young women in this study constructed sex mainly within the prevailing cultural and normative expectations of their community, a conclusion can be drawn in line with Connell's (2002:4) suggestions that "being a man or a woman is not a fixed state. It is a becoming, a condition actively under construction". The young women's sexuality could be seen as a result of the patterns of socialization within the society in which they grew up (Connell, 2002). Indeed, the young women's accounts of their sexuality exemplified how they became heteronormatively sexualized by virtue of their culture. Their narratives seem to confirm social constructionist and feminist constructionist perspectives, which provide an understanding of individual patterns of sexuality and sexual practice in relation to dominant norms, values and beliefs in their socio-cultural environments (Plummer, 1995, Holland et al., 1998, Connell, 2002, Weeks et al., 2003).

Sex as an expression of love and a means of sustaining a relationship

The young women generally expressed the opinion that sex is a crucial way of demonstrating affection to a loved one and through which a lifelong relationship is formed. This theme emerges clearly from interviews with most of the young women, who constructed their involvement in (hetero)sexual intercourse as a symbol of *true love*.

... When two people are in love, sex may not be avoidable, and you may not be able to resist if *you truly love him*... you want to show him that you're *giving him all you have* [Interview: Younger schooler, aged 19].

... he's the only one I've ever slept [had sex] with... Besides, we are both good Christians and love each other... though our religion preaches against it [premarital sex] but sometimes, he just feel like, why not [have sex] and I agree because you can hardly convince a man that you're *deeply in love* without doing it [sex] with him... [Interview: Older non-schooler, aged 24].

...telling me about how much *he loves me* and I took him at his word. Then I like many things about him...very handsome, neat, he's just nice guy... So, I gave him a yes, and we started dating... Later, he said it made no sense to be in love and not *satisfying each other*, ...as in sexually, and that was how we started having sex... [Younger non-schooler, aged 19].

Well, *I actually love him*...I wanted to have a solid relationship... I didn't see anything wrong with *sleeping with him* [to have sex]... thinking it would bring us closer... [Older schooler, aged 24].

I allowed that because we were in love ... then he appeared serious ... told me several things... Later, I decided to relax and keep focus. We sometimes have sex, talk about the future and all about how we will be getting married in few years... I was so much affected when I realized that he was dating another girl... [silence]... [Older non-schooler, aged 20].

It is interesting to see, through these quotations, the various ways that many young women narrated their (hetero)sexual relationships with respect to expressing love to their partner(s). Phrases such as 'being in love', 'can't just stop him', 'I allowed him', 'giving him all you have', 'not able to resist him', or 'deeply in love' illustrate various ways in which the young women constructed (hetero)sexual intercourse as a central activity in their relationships. Their interpretation of love was related to their willingness to submit or consent to the sexual demands of their partner. Thus, most young women appropriated sexual intercourse as constitutive of their view of themselves as being in love with a partner or, as a way to establish a 'solid' relationship. Upon further probing, 'having a solid relationship' was explained as denoting an intention to develop a lifelong relationship, especially in terms of marrying a desired partner. Thus, for most of these young women, to engage in sex was an important symbol (or the climax) of displaying love to a potential life partner. What is even more striking about this finding is that while a majority of my female interviewees emphasized that they engaged in sexual intercourse to satisfy their male partners and for love, little was said about any pleasure or satisfaction which the women themselves derived from it. A major explanation for their behaviour is that dominant

definitions of womanhood are normatively linked with discourses on wifhood and motherhood. As revealed by the young females, it is expected in this culture that young women should have 'meaningful' and 'responsible' lifestyles, which entails marrying young, bearing children and remaining married.

...I've decided to take my time... It's just that I wish to marry early [Why early?] ...once you're working and of age like me, there's no point remaining single, otherwise people will see you as not being responsible or not living a meaningful life... In fact, when you remain single for too long ... people will start getting worried for you.... They will be wondering why no man has come to ask you for marriage... [Older non-schooler: aged 24]

...you know, it's more honourable to be married than to be looking for wealth or anything else... When you're not married, people look down on you as if you're not living a good life or something ... You're not *respected* anywhere... and if you're marrying late or divorced ..., people will see you as *onihan yho le hile* [the redundant fellows]... [Interview: Younger non-schooler, aged 18].

Considering these comments about the high level of importance attached to securing a marriage partner for life, it becomes clearer how heterosexual relations are scripted as the sexual codes for young women within their local context. The young women's narratives, especially those of mentioned above exemplify how the young women lived their sexual lives according to the norms that construct marriage as 'honourable', living a 'responsible' and 'meaningful' lifestyle. One such influential discourse is the strongly negative labelling of unmarried women alluded to in some of their accounts such as seeing the unmarried or divorced are seen as 'redundant' and less responsible than their married counterparts. Interestingly, it was further confirmed by the female respondents in the focus groups that women are not fully respected in their society until they are securely married.

Other studies have revealed that among the Yoruba, south-western Nigeria, husbands are referred to by their wives as "*olowo ori mi*" (the one who owns me). Hence, marriage is significant and generally desirable among this ethnic group (Jewkes et al., 2003, Ogunjuyigbe et al., 2005) including those in the present study. A younger non-schooler reported during an interview a popular saying among Kabba people that "there is no queen without a crown", where the crown represents the authority of the husband. Thus, most young women I interviewed overtly prioritized the need for a life partner in order to fulfil their societal expectation about wifhood and womanhood. The young women mainly operate within this framework of patriarchal culture, which promotes heterosexual relationships, while understanding their sexuality in line with the following assertion:

For African peoples, marriage is the focus of existence. Marriage is a drama in which everyone becomes an actor or actress and not just a spectator. Therefore, marriage is a duty, a requirement from corporate society, a rhythm of life in which everyone must participate. Otherwise, he who does not participate in it is a curse to the community, he is a rebel and law-breaker, he is not only abnormal but 'under human'. Failure to get married means that the person has rejected society and society rejects him in return (Mbiti 1969:133 cited by Muzvidziwa 2002:138).

Taking into account that the young women in this study were mainly driven by the normative influence and pressure to conform to the expectations of their community, it is not surprising that they were willing to fulfil their partners' sexual demands in order to sustain their relationships.

...I asked God for forgiveness daily because it's actually a sinful thing to be having a sexual affair before marriage...but...I did it many times to show him that I love him and because I don't want to lose him [Younger non-schooler, aged 18] .

...it's not that I really mean to disobey what my parents taught me about decency... but it's really hard to stay in a relationship, especially with a serious guy, and not have sex... In fact he won't believe that I love him... [Younger schooler, aged 19].

When younger schoolers were asked in a group session what they thought would help or work against safer sexual practice, these replies were elicited:

I think the major reason why people cannot really use condoms is because many people don't really know that they will have sex when they're visiting their boyfriends. ... Men by their nature are always *hungry* for sex ... you may not plan for it [sex] and the guy may just insist...then you do it before thinking of safety... (aged 19)

...and some people *comply* because they may not want to lose their guy to other girls that may be willing to have sex with him... after all, most men are the same when it comes to sex...(aged 18)

Similar ideas were expressed in another focus group with younger non-schoolers:

... a lot of girls don't really want to ask for a condom, because the guy may feel embarrassed that you think he has HIV or is not trustworthy... (aged 19)

Yeah, in fact, many girls engage in sex for the sake of pleasing their boyfriend,... They'd go for an abortion rather than ask for a condom... They don't want their guy to think they don't love him, or are arguing with him ... (aged 19)

These accounts of men as always wanting sex is similar to what Hollway (1984) describes as a "male sex drive discourse", which presents heterosexual men as naturally, frequently, urgently and insatiably sexual. In the present study, most female participants constructed their sexual relationships as a kind of interaction or activity performed for male sexual satisfaction. Such findings indicate that the young women lacked an understanding of heterosexuality or male dominance as being socially constructed; rather they viewed such traits of masculinity as natural and normal. For example,as stated above, a young woman in the focus group felt that male pressure for sex was innate and that in terms of sexual demands, "all men are the same".Such understandings were observed to be partly responsible for the complexities and contradictory values that surrounded the young women's sexuality in this community. A further analysis of data from most young women in this study shows that they would have preferred to have remained chaste until their wedding night, in line with the predominant moral discourse and

expectation. On the other hand, they were willing to engage in sex to secure a life partner and so to achieve a prescribed status that defined female sexuality within the context of wifehood and motherhood. As Hollway (1984) argues, the 'have/hold' discourse centres (hetero)sexuality within committed relationships for the purpose of procreation. It places women's sexuality within the context of their commitment to relationships with men. The desire for family life and children is constructed as innate to women, and sex is seen as the only way to achieve this. The present findings confirm that in the have/hold discourse, men are equally constructed as driven by biological needs, while women are seen as driven by emotional needs (Hollway, 1984), as well as fulfilling the social and cultural view of marriage as an ideal status.

More recently, Holland et al., (1998) have argued that heterosexuality is socially constructed through the 'gaze of men', who are said to be more privileged than women in achieving their sexual desires in the course of heterosexual interactions. This is also confirmed by the present findings which suggest that heterosexual practice reinforces the patriarchal culture, a system through which men demonstrate their strength, aggression and assertiveness towards women (Holland et al., 1990, Walby, 1990, Varga, 1997, Holland et al., 1998). Some of the implications of these normative influences, according to a number of accounts by young women, are disappointment and a feeling of having being used sexually and abandoned by their male partners:

... I thought of making things work []...hoping that we might end up *with something good* [marriage] so, I consented... but he *dumped* me and ended up with another girl... [Interview: Older non-schooler, aged 24].

... that I'm below his standard []. Yet he always lured me into sex at every opportunity... but I don't allow him to use me anymore. I've stopped seeing him... Many times I cried out loud... [pause, sober]... because I now realized that he was just using me... [Interview: Older non-schooler, aged 20].

... I didn't hesitate to accept him, because I also want to marry soon []... But he *played smart* on me [pause] pretending that he cared... Somehow, I yielded to his advances but he later *abandoned* me for another girl... I have another person at present but am still observing him, but you know, I just have to move on, you know, like the saying goes, *men are necessary evils*... [Interview: Older non-schooler, aged 23].

.... I thought it was going to be a *serious affair*, not knowing that he only wanted to satisfy his sexual urges... But somehow I began to notice that he didn't want to talk about the future of the relationship, in fact he didn't want to associate with me before his friends... He ended the relationship on the day I told him that I was pregnant by him... The baby is two months now, yet he still refuses to show up... [Younger non-schooler, aged 19].

These data are typical of the disappointments related by young women in the quest for potential life partners. Several accounts of the young women in the interviews reflected one or more regrettable experiences of being exploited by their male counterparts. This is evident from the terms that some of the female participants used to describe their sexual encounters: 'lured',

‘played smart on’, ‘used’ and ‘dumped’. Evidence from this study indicates that many young women maintained passive roles in their sexual relationships with men, even at the expense of their sexual safety. A few young women who became pregnant in their relationships revealed their bitter experiences of loneliness, particularly for those that had to drop out of school. However, despite their various disappointments, none of the young women hesitated to enter another relationship, taking a normative view of marriage as a status marker for womanhood within their socio-cultural milieu. The reference by another interviewee to men as ‘necessary evils’ also typifies a view of heterosexual relationships as inevitable

This pattern of relationships has been identified by several studies as characteristic of heterosexual and patriarchal societies (Walby, 1990, Shefer et al., 2001, Kehily, 2002, Allen, 2003, Cranny-Francis, 2003, Varga, 2003, Kambarami, 2006, Shefer et al., 2001;2007) have similarly found female identity to be constructed as subject to male sexual desires. As stated earlier, the findings of this study support the feminist argument that female sexuality has been mediated through the socially and culturally constructed inequalities in heterosexual relations, as opposed to the natural order (Meadows, 1997, Connell, 2002, Jackson, 2006).

Given that most young women in this study saw sex as a male pleasure and men as often desirous of (hetero)sexual intercourse, the next section examines how some of them in turn constructed their participation in (hetero)sexual encounters as a means of achieving aims other than marriage.

Transactional sex underpinned by the notion that men need and enjoy sex

There emerged among the young women a dominant construction of heterosexual sex as male pleasure. As we have seen, most young women in the study believed men to be more (hetero)sexually active than their female partners. This was emphasized in most of the interviews and in a particular group discussion with older schoolers (aged 20-25). Among this group, there was a general consensus that men often initiate sex in their relationships with women, even when such relationships are of the casual kind:

...you know that men love sex more than women and that's why they trick women into going to bed with them by giving them money, promising them marriage or anything they feel a woman wants from them...

[Nodding] Even when you're just ordinary friends, they can come up with that feeling of let's have sex...

That's right...[Nodding in agreement]

... maybe because God made them to be potent from cradle to grave...

This focus group is representative of how young women emphasized sex as serving men's satisfaction and consistently viewed heterosexuality in relation to male sexual needs. Interestingly, a number of them conceived their desirability to men as putting them in an advantaged position which they could use to achieve certain objectives from their relationships with men. It should be noted that a few of the young women who held this view appeared to be powerless or constrained in terms of their low economic status and the need for specific favours

at some points, obliging them to exploit their desirability to men. The following comments were emphatically stated in a short interview with two young women in a brothel:

...I've never stolen in my life and I've got no such intention... but at least some people desperately need something that belongs to me which *I can exchange for what I also need from them* to survive... People may be calling me *asewo* [prostitute], but I don't see myself as one. All I care about is my survival... [Older schooler, aged 23]

To me *sex is using what you have to get what you want*. That's how I can define sex... [Can you explain further?] men love sex, and I need money... and then I don't go for them, they come here to meet me.... [Older non-schooler, not willing to reveal age]

These young women explicitly constructed sex as a survival strategy or a way to improve their poor economic status. It could be observed that they were taking the opportunity of the dominant patriarchal system within their culture to augment their finances and meet their material needs. Interestingly, while some of them, as stated above, engaged in transactional sex within the public domain (e.g. in brothels), other young women were found to be developing 'informal' relationships with relatively affluent partners who they believed could support them financially or take them as life partners. For example, when asked in interview whether her desire to engage in a sexual relationship was met, an older non-schooler replied:

Well, [smiles], []. I'm okay with him because he's been good to me ... I lost my mum about 4 years ago and my father married another woman who will do everything to distract Dad from attending to us... so, myself and my two younger ones were left on our own. I'm from Bunu but I decided to move down to Kabba to face life and see what I could do to survive... but now, this man has been providing for my needs. He paid the fees for my apprenticeship and has promised to establish my own outlet afterwards. So, what else... The only thing I have to offer him is to satisfy him sexually... [IDI: Older non-schooler, female, aged 24].

Another young woman told a similar story:

...I live with my grandmother... [] I lost my Dad some years back and Mum relocated to Kaduna...I'm surviving well since I met this man...very nice to me.... paid my exam fee and many things... Along the line we became close and somehow we started dating... *I tried to make him comfortable so that I don't lose him to other girls*... I didn't even hide him from my grandmother, because our relationship has really been helpful for our survival...he took me to a clinic where I was given some contraceptives to avoid unwanted pregnancies... [Younger schooler, aged 19].

The above data reveal how other young women negotiated sexual relationships with regular partners who could support them economically, without viewing it as sex work. The younger schooler's story of her grandmother's support also indicates how poorer parents and carers may support the engagement of their daughters in this form of relationship, as opposed to the traditional norms and moral discourses that condemn transactional and premarital sex in this community.

Apart from those engaging in (hetero)sexual relations for financial or economic survival, another account suggests that some of the young women tended to develop heterosexual relations with men in advantageous positions to meet other needs.

He was working at that company as one of the overall bosses...we just met by chance and he seemed to like me, so I didn't hesitate to move closer to him ... because I knew he would be able to help me regarding a job and even for my brother... He was able to use his influence to secure the job for me and promised to assist my brother ... [Older schooler, aged 23].

Indeed, findings from this study corroborate Walby's (1990) argument that women are not all or only passive objects of patriarchy (as a system of power relations where men control, dominate and subjugate women's reproduction, production and sexuality) but active agents who can exploit patriarchal culture in their own rational interest. However, as observed in this study, while Walby's analysis suggests that young women facing economic hardship, unemployment and so on will find ways to have their needs met by engaging in sexual relationships with men who can ameliorate their social conditions, in this study such practice was found to have limited and constrained the young women's sexual agency.

Since patriarchy is a system of practice that dominates and subordinates women, particularly on the basis of religion, economics, ethnicity and socio-cultural practices (Shoveller et al., 2006), the unequal social and economic power relations between the young women and their male partners often limit women's exercise of their sexual agency and safety, such that young women quoted above were unable to insist on condom use. Further probing , about how they maintained sexual agency, revealed in one of the above quotes that she could not convince her partner to use a condom, rather the partner took her to be given a contraceptive device of which she had no detailed knowledge. In her own words, "I don't really have an idea of the type of contraceptive that was used for me, but I know I can't be pregnant for now". At this point, it is important to mention that the present study does not intend to problematise transactional sex or to judge the appropriateness of any pattern of sexual relations. Rather this analysis unfolds the extent to which some of these young women became powerless in their sexual interactions with men, based on the kind of 'paid for service' mode of interaction that existed between them.

Evidence from this study indicates that transactional sex presents some major implications for young women's sexual agency and safety. For instance, one female participant commented that she could only suggest the use of a condom but could not insist on her partner's compliance. Moreover, it has been reported in several studies that transactional sex is mostly unprotected, contributing to the increased transmission of HIV/AIDS among heterosexual partners (Ankomah, 1998, Nyanzi et al., 2001, LeClerc-Madlala, 2001a, Wojcicki, 2002, Selikow, 2004).

Another important implication of these findings is that due to the financial and material needs of these young women, they could not afford to take into account the emotional aspect of sexual relationships and seemed to have replaced their sense of intimacy and sexual desires with their material needs. For instance, one of the older schooler's view of her transactional sexual practice is revealed by her comment: "Well, it does not really matter whether I enjoy it. The sex is for

him, while the cash is mine...”. Her pleasure lay in the financial benefits, while she saw her partner as paying for the sexual pleasure.

Importantly, this study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing an alternative to the prevailing quantitative analysis in the area of young people’s sexuality in Africa and particularly in Nigeria. While most of the existing studies have focused on young people in school, this study made its distinctiveness by involving the voices of those out of school, that is, non-schoolers, providing concrete evidence that exposes the contextual factors impacting on young women’s sexuality as a whole. Most importantly, it engages the debate concerning the need for a paradigm shift from research seeking quantitative explanations and viewing young women’s sexuality as morally problematic¹ to studies that attend to the meanings and contexts of their sexual relations. This study has also challenged the psychological explanations that present individuals or their sexual partners as capable of making rational choices about engaging in protected sex.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the different ways in which the young women’s meanings of their sexual practices influenced their sexual negotiations for pleasure and safety. A number of conclusions can be drawn from the above findings.

Firstly, the young women held various contradictory views about their sexual practices. For example, while most of the young women viewed premarital sex as inappropriate in the focus groups, their individual interviews revealed that they often engaged in sexual activity as a means of securing marital relationships.

Secondly, given that the young women lived their sexual lives within the system of patriarchy that predominates in most African communities, their notions of sexuality and sexual practices have remained constituted in accordance with the conventional constructions of active masculinity and passive femininity, making young women feel that ‘all men are the same’ and that there is ‘no queen without a crown’, as well as prioritising the need to secure a life partner as an ultimate goal. This was also found to be responsible for the young women’s conceptions of sex as natural, as male pleasure and a means of achieving long-term relationships or financial benefits.

Clearly, socio-cultural factors including social norms, religion and cultural values, as well as material needs, remained a major influence on the young women’s sexuality and sexual practices. Importantly, based on the particular findings from this study, I conclude by restating the primary argument that young women’s sexualities, sexual practices and capacity for negotiating safer sex are not entirely based on their own rational choices or the decisions of their partners, but largely depend on socio-cultural contexts whose elements are the norms, values,

¹ In Nigeria, as in many other part of Africa, research on young women’s sexuality has been dominated by studies that specifically focus on the prevalence of sex-related problems: HIV/AIDS and other STIs, teenage pregnancy and deaths following abortion.

beliefs, practices and economic circumstances that shape their sexualities and sexual relationships with men.

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