

SOCIO-CULTURAL IMPEDIMENTS TO UNDERSTANDING ADOLESCENT FEMALE SEXUALITY IN NIGERIA: AN INTERVENTIONIST PERSPECTIVE

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Abstracts:

Nigerian society has recently been saddled with rising cases of teenage pregnancy, abortions, drop-out, single parenthood and high-profile death cases among female adolescents hinged on various cultural constraints which are multi-faceted. This research was designed to address prevalent cultural barriers of female sexuality in southern Nigeria. Paper was anchored on socio-psychological theories of behaviour and adopted the use of thematic content analysis to interpret the Qualitative data derived from interviews involving forty participants in line with study objectives. Findings revealed that Nigerian cultural orientation hinders rather than help the understanding of female sexuality. Thus, it made a case for government intervention through nationwide sensitization/re-orientation and introduction of comprehensive sex education into the Nigerian school curricula to effectively eliminate adverse cultural impediments to female sexuality.

Keywords: *Adolescence, sexuality, Nigeria, Teenage, Pregnancy*

There is no man or woman who does not face in his or her lifetime the concerns of sexual tensions (Society for Obstetricians & Gynecologists-Canada). From 1960's onward, the global support for sexuality discourse on a comprehensive scale gained widespread support. Experts on issues of sexuality have stressed the need for broader sexual health concerns due to low quality of sexuality education most societies formerly imbibed (SIECUS, 2009). They frowned that the narrow reserve of sexual expression only in marriage has predisposed most adolescents¹ to unhealthy and risky

sexual behaviors which ultimately affects Sexual Reproductive Health-SRH (Planned Parenthood Federation of America, 2012).

This worldwide crusade for understanding on sexuality² issues among adolescents

"adolescents" is often a general term used to refer to persons between this ranges.

¹ The word adolescence is a coinage from a Latin Verb "adolescere" meaning "to grow into maturity". This therefore follows that adolescence is a process which in turn is part of the five stages of human development spanning from; infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood to old age (Olakunle, 2007). This usually include persons between the ages of 10 and 19 which falls within WHO's definition of young persons' between ages of 10 and 24. This accounts for why

² **Sexuality** on the other hand is simply defined as, an integral part of who we are, what we believe in, what we feel and how we respond to others. It also goes beyond to include concerns of gender identity, gender roles, sexual orientations, body image, sexual experiences, thoughts, ideas, fantasies, feelings etc (Quint 2015). The Merriam – Webster online dictionary similarly defined sexuality as sexual habits and desires of a person which is translated into the quality or state of being sexual. Thus, the need to point out that sexuality is usually influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, legal, political, ethical, historical, religious and spiritual factors (WHO, 2006a).



attracted the call to the first international conference on population held in Bucharest in 1974 which led many countries of the world into the joint resolve to start engaging adolescents³ positively on sexuality issues (UNFPA, 1994; Odumegwu, 2005). The gesture was thus believed to have spearheaded a national guidance task force convened in America in 1990, comprising of renowned professionals, employed to design effective curricula for comprehensive sexuality education⁴ which birthed a coalition body known as the Sexuality Information and Education of the United States (SIECUS) currently having 140-member organizations jointly boosting comprehensive, effective and curricular based programs throughout America (SIECUS, 2009; Planned Parenthood Federation of America, 2012).

Many countries also took positive step to safeguard the lives of their adolescents and young persons. Eko et al (2013) gave an expose of some countries across Europe that imbibed new approach to sexuality education; Western Europe in the early 60s, Sweden since 1966 when sexuality education become a mandatory school curricular, Germany since 1970 and by 1992, it became a government duty by law. Furthermore, in Japan, sex education became mandatory

³ Encyclopedia Britannica submitted that that the concept of “adolescence” is narrowly equated with “puberty” and also loosely used interchangeably with the word “teen”, and adolescents are thus often referred to as “teenagers” who often experience heightened urge for adventure and experimentation as a result of various physical changes which culminates in sexual and reproductive maturity.

⁴ The interconnectedness of sexuality to almost every facet of human life affirms the importance of **Sexuality education** which is also referred to as **family life education** and simply defined as “the means of impacting the complete knowledge on sexuality”, usually taking two forms- abstinence-only and comprehensive sexuality education (Mckee, 2008). Conversely, Collins (2008) attempted the definition of comprehensive sexuality education as encompassing “education about all aspects of sexuality including family planning, reproduction, body image, sexual orientation, sexual pleasure, values, decision-making, communication, dating, relationships, STDs and how to avoid them, as well as birth control methods”.

from age 10 or 11years, while in China and Sri Lanka, it comprised compulsory readings in biology textbooks.

All these efforts were mainly targeted at adolescents at young persons of these nations because this stage was generally observed to be the formative years when behavior and character traits have not been fully formed as well as the period when they reach sexual maturity before they actually develop the mental, emotional and social skills needed to appreciate the consequences of engaging in sexual attitudes (UNFPA, 1994; Benzaken, Palep & Gill, 2011).

Conversely however and despite the sweeping global crusade for comprehensive sex education, most sub-Saharan African countries **Nigeria** inclusive still see sex education as a taboo subject; female adolescents especially are yet not allowed to have requisite access to sexual health information (Eko et al, 2013; **Isuigo-Abanihe, 2015**). This is because of perceived societal beliefs that such exposure corrupts the growing female to become a likely victim of early sexual debut/intercourse (Obiajulu, 2004). By extension, traditional predominant values of the past within Nigerian Milieu which centers mainly on over-indulgence in abstinence-only teachings backed up by widely excepted culture of keeping “sealed lips” on every sensitive issue concerning sexuality (Isuigo-Abanihe, 2015).

Comprehensive sexuality education constitutes the following programs: human growth and development, relationships, life skills, sexual attitude and behaviour, sexual

health, society and culture, alcohol and drug use/abuse, vulnerability to sexual advances, premarital sex problems, personal hygiene, puberty, sports, reproductive system education, aging, menopause, abstinence education, HIV/AIDS and other STDs (SIECUS, 2009; UNFPA, 1994, WHO, 2010).



By implication, comprehensive sexuality education does not only focus on refuting traditional widespread beliefs that sexual expressions are wrong but go beyond to clarify that sexual expressions are normal and what matters is how it is controlled or managed in the course of our everyday life as humans who are sexual beings from birth (WHO, 2006a).

Thus, it was against the background that this research was set to examine socio-cultural impediments to understanding sexuality among Nigerian female adolescents.

1. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVE

Studies conducted across Sub-Saharan African region between 1980 and 2011 on parent-child sexuality communication investigating; frequency, content, style, tone of discussion, preferences, as well as associations with and barriers to sexuality issues revealed that in virtually all parts of Africa, sexual discussions tend to be authoritarian, uni-directional and characterized by vague warnings rather than direct open discussions i.e comprehensive education (Bastien, Kajula & Muhwezi, 2011).

This can be seen in the Nigerian case where Ajuwon (2005) revealed that parents, schools, religious bodies, governmental, NGOs etc find still it difficult to open up on sexuality issues. Moreover, (Eko et al, 2013) quoting the 2003 Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), asserted that the first comprehensive proposal for sexuality education drafted by Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in conjunction with Federal Ministry of Education for primary and post primary school curricula was received with mixed feeling and generated raging controversy from all quarters mostly among religious leaders to the point that within a short time, the discussion on its acceptability or rejection was hijacked and put to an end by these religious leaders and

other gate-keepers in authority with different connotations and colorations ranging from promotion of early sexual debut to possibility of increasing sexual promiscuity among females (Eko et al, 2013; Ajuwon, 2005).

On the contrary, the barriers to sexuality education within most countries of sub-Saharan Africa have rather proven negative to the point that a significant percentage of young persons have reportedly experienced their first sexual intercourse by age 15 (Gutmacher Institute, 2011a), another instance cited from Benin, Nigeria in Ezimokhai by (Eko et al, 2013), further revealed 55% of secondary school girls within having had sexual intercourse by age 16 and 40% admitting to at least one previous pregnancy. Similarly, Ajuwon (2005) quoting Slap et al revealed a survey in Plateau State where over a quarter of a sample of secondary school girls reportedly having sexual intercourse by age 13 and several abortion cases among female adolescents between ages 12-20 across few hospitals in Nigeria.

These citations lends credence to the fact that abstinence-only sexuality education in Nigeria has not in any way delayed early sexual debut and neither does its continuity embrace the hope of reducing dangers of risky sexual behaviors as widely believed. Rather, comprehensive sexuality education proves to equip adolescents more in navigating sexual relationships more, fostering positive attitudes and healthy outcomes in adult years (SIECUS, 2009; Kirby, 2008; Rosen, Murray & Moreland, 2004).

Consequently, there is an urgent need to examine the various socio-cultural impediments to understanding sexuality among female adolescents in Nigeria with a practical reference to Calabar in southern Nigeria in a bid to advocating practical measures to this ugly trend.

This research was set to examine the following themes;



- *Socio-cultural* impediments to understanding sexuality issues among female adolescents of Calabar, Nigeria.
- *Effects/Consequences* of these socio-cultural impediments
- Practical measures to eliminating these socio-cultural impediments.
- *Review the success* of proposed intervention program for adolescents across selected schools at the end of the study.

2. THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

The Self Perception Theory and the Social Learning Theory are two social psychological premises which constitute the theoretical anchorage of this research. Both theories were chosen due to their root in observational learning.

The self perception theory espoused by Daryl Bem (1965) posits that people make attributions about their own attitudes, feelings and behaviors by relying on their observation of external behaviours and the circumstances under which such behaviours occur. By implication, a person acting interprets their own overt behaviours rationally in the same way they attempt to explain others' behaviours in order to infer what is the perceived "right" or "wrong".

In the same vein, social learning theory of Albert Bandura (1970) suggests that a person's motivation to behave in a certain way is the product of learning which has taken place at an earlier time and such choices to behave in that way are not free. This implies that social learning theorists downplay the role of freewill in behavior formation. Thus, the theory maintains that people learn by observing others who serve as a strong influence on their behavior. To do this however, the person must first pay

attention to what the other person called a model (usually parents or elders) are doing.

Realistically, despite criticisms these theories bring to fore the situational realities surrounding sexuality issues in Nigeria, this is because the role of internal thoughts and emotions surrounding attitude formation on matters of sexuality are downplayed while emphasizing the role of observation and patterned ways of treating sexuality concerns. Thus, relating both theories to the understanding of sexuality among Nigerian female adolescents, show that adolescents have through their observation of the culture of sealed lips on matters of their sexuality by their parents and elders imbibed similar attitudes and beliefs that sexuality is something secret and not to be discussed openly (Isiugo-Abanihe et al, 2015).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is a qualitative one specifically chosen due to its ability to ensure an enabling emotional disposition of participants for probes, monitoring moods and expressions (both verbal/non-verbal) because of the sensitive nature of this topic within Calabar and by extension the Nigeria socio-cultural context.

The research was conducted in two purposively selected locations within Calabar South Local Government (LG) and Calabar Municipality both in Cross River State of Nigeria. It is mainly an **Efik speaking** area although with minor **dialects such as ()** and it shares certain cultural affinities with neighbouring Akwa Ibom, Rivers, Bayelsa, Enugu, Imo, Abia, and Ebonyi states all of which formerly constituted eastern Nigeria.

The study population consists of mainly females: (parents, teachers/students, NGO workers, female opinion leaders) within study locations; female teachers and students from four (4) selected schools (two from each LG) were drawn for In-Depth Interviews (IDI). Using the snowballing



technique, eight (8) parents mainly women, two (2) female NGO staff and two (2) women opinion leaders from the both LGs who were assumed to be knowledgeable about Efik culture regarding the topic constituted Respondents for Key informant interview (KII). Also, a total of twenty-eight (28) In-Depth interviews were conducted, five (5) students from each of the schools and eight (8) female teachers (two from each school). Altogether, a total of forty (40) participants were interviewed.

4. RESULTS

The finding of this study are presented and analyzed according to the study themes. Data collated in English and Efik **dialect**, those in **Efik** were first transcribed by research Assistants from the area and thereafter translated to English & thematically analyzed using manual content analysis techniques.

Factors impeding the understanding of sexuality issues among adolescent females in Calabar Respondents generally believed that in as much as parents and elders are usually blamed for leaving their roles on sexuality education, most of the factors impeding sexuality is found mostly within the various constraints of the Nigerian socio-cultural setting.

Respondent-1: (Female NGO Coordinator, 52 years old).

“Hmm! In as much as we do our best to guide our children through many NGOs programs, or even our homes/schools, there is need to also take into cognizance the label placed on the issue of sex discussion in the open throughout Nigeria. It is built into our system and thus limits everyone; parents, religious/community leaders, and in fact the entire public frown at such gestures with the belief that you are corrupting the little minds which you address”

Respondent's Parents: “That is how we were brought up in our time, you cannot discuss sexuality as a young girl if you are unmarried. We live in a male dominated society which restricts women's choice of words somehow. We

avoid that kind of topic in the homes and hope they teach our boys/girls in church to help them grow into responsible adults, although children of nowadays learn/do things you can't even imagine” (female parent, 58 years old civil servant).

Respondent's Community Leader: “We in community leadership are trying our best to teach the young and grown –up ones to live pure; we do our part at home and community level. Sometimes we even allow Counselors who come occasionally to teach them how make good decisions on matters concerning their health. We open up and tell them effects of engaging in sex, smoking drinking etc. Yes! We are doing our part” (female women leader, 64 years)

Respondent-2: (female parent and housewife, 51 years old).

“The truth is that when you look at it very well, there are many things that affect the sex life of our children today which we still find hard to discuss with them, I think it is because Nigeria is too conservative with strict cultural norms also affecting our Efik community. We try to keep issues about sexuality secret from these young unmarried ones believing they will understand when they marry, this often cause many young boys and girls the mistake they regret throughout their life”

Respondent-3: (female SS2 student, 17 years old).

“I grew up finding it difficult to talk to my parents or elders around me about sex or anything concerning my body, in fact, the word “**Kung**” (sex) is the heaviest word in Efik dialect because if you say it openly everyone around will look at you as a spoilt child; I remember when I had something scratching me on my bum-bum (itching of the private part) while living in the dormitory during my junior secondary, I was so afraid of telling anyone and even when I went to a hospital near the school, I was asked to bring my parents. It was my school mother who later took me to a chemist where they gave me drugs”.

Respondent-4: (female JSS3 student, 15+ years).

“Argh! Fear will not let me discuss sex topic with my mum o, she will kill me that day,



she will tell my father and even our pastor about it. Sometimes, if I have something to ask, I talk to my friends because I am free with them. My mother used to tell me and my sisters that a girl is not supposed to talk about sex, it is for married women. So even when discussing it with her friends, she sends us to our room”

Respondent-5: (female SS 3 student, 19).

“My parents are disciplinarians and you don’t try nonsense with them, when I was in primary school there was a day I asked my sister something and she jokingly said, “**itidifo**” (your buttocks in Efik dialect), so I angrily retorted, “**itid fo**” (your vagina). My mother heard us from the bedroom, came with cane and gave us the flogging of our lives. Since then we learnt never to mention such around our house

Consequences and solutions to socio-cultural factors impeding understanding of adolescent sexuality From KII responses:

Respondent-6: (female teacher, 35 years old).

“In fact, our eyes have seen it all. While trying to keep our mouths closed and not teach these children all about their bodies and sexual issues they keep making the wrong moves a lot of things are spoiling before our own very eyes. Many under aged girls are pregnant, young mother and even drop out of school because of this, it is really sad”

Respondent-5: (female parent 49 years).

“Many of our young girls have wasted their lives today because of ignorance; cases of STDs and AIDs are rampant now even among young persons, abortion is now like an easy task that girls you think are innocent engage in many times, some damage their womb in the process and when they marry, it becomes a big problem”

Respondent-6: (Female Parent 41 years)

“We do not need to be asked the consequences as it is clear for all to see, a beautiful young girl died in my neighborhood few months back from excessive bleeding caused by abortion complication, I think we NGO workers have a big role to play that is if the government and society

allow an enabling environment, they can help by creating facilities strictly for counseling and provision of services that will solve the sexuality needs of young girls. This will help a long way in changing our orientation.

Respondent-7: (female teacher, 46 years old).

“I think our churches/mosques should also get involved in giving sexuality education to these girls by maybe changing the approach of giving only bible/Koran recitations to them. Also I think government and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) can engage various Non-Governmental-Organizations (NGOs) and CBOs at the grassroots to empower girls early in life with complete sexuality education”

Respondent-8: (59 years old, community women leader).

Finally, an opinion leader submitted that: “Proverb 22 vs. 6 tells us to train up a child the way he/she should go so that when old, they will not depart from it. I think every parent should learn to teach their children all they need to know on time. We should stop using our culture as an excuse for not teaching them about their body or saying they are being taught in school, doing this will help parents gain their children’s trust and closeness, so that they will always tell you when they have any sexual problem in the future”

5. DISCUSSION ON FINDINGS

Results from the study revealed that the scope and nature of most sexuality education programs still being conducted across Calabar/Municipal LGs are still very limited and still fall under the scope of abstinence-only programs contrary to the findings of Isiugo-Abanihe et al (2015) that, there is comprehensive sex education which has given rise to increased knowledge of adolescents in Nigeria and Ghana on reproductive health issues and has thus stimulated the interests of these adolescents in seeking sexuality education.

This study recorded lapses in such beliefs but corroborates the findings of McKeon (2008), which submitted that many



governments in sub-Saharan Africa are yet to provide detailed sexuality education for adolescents and that more still needs to be accomplished in this regard. This is more so because it is almost impossible to teach adventurous youth to desist from sex (abstinence-only) without clearly telling them why they should or how they should manage the feelings they have as sexual humans.

Furthermore, the various socio-cultural impediments revealed by this study such as; traditional norms and values, government complacent position on sexual matters, lack of access to healthcare services such as counseling or treatment, parental ignorance, religious barriers, male domination (patriarchy) even in sexual concerns, among others which pose grave dangers ranging from early sexual debut/non use of contraceptives, unwanted pregnancies/unsafe abortions, damage to reproductive system, STDs, HIV/AIDS, , drop-outs etc are in sharp contrast to the principles guiding comprehensive sexuality education.

This agrees with Obiajulu (2004) who citing Isiugo-Abanihe (2003) noted that, "*men are undisputed gate keepers on matters of sexuality and women as mothers, wives and girls are culturally constrained in Nigeria against making decisions on matters concerning them especially on aspects that relate to SRH*" thereby leaving negative backlash. This gave rise to Respondents in this study generally agreeing that a reform of the aspect of our culture regarding sexuality discourse will drastically reduce if not totally eliminate likely consequences of lack/inadequate sexuality education.

6. CONCLUSION

In sum, findings revealed various socio-cultural impediments to understanding sexuality as well as its consequences among female adolescents of Calabar in Cross River State and by extension the Nigerian female adolescents. Also, this research revealed that contrary to general belief that sexuality education may be counter-productive for

young persons, intervention methods result in several positive outcomes.

Unfortunately, despite these strong arguments by scholars supporting that sexuality education in Nigeria should go beyond what it is currently (abstinence – only) to include abstinence – plus (comprehensive sex education) program, it has still till date secured very minimal support from appropriate authorities who should enforce it, such as; governmental organizations, NGOs, ministries/departments of health, schools and CBOs etc. There is an urgent need for this and to salvage such situation, the blame must be shared by every citizen who failed to play their various roles.

Consequently, the researcher with the aid of some volunteer Assistants concluded this work with an intervention program which lasted for a period of six (6) months across selected schools in the study locations with Student-Volunteers who met for trainings on SRH issues once every week. In assessing the success, it remains an undeniable fact that this intervention program is limited in scope. Secondly, it still sent mixed signals to some parents/guardians who withdrew their children/wards from participating in the training, although some who volunteered were allowed to finish the training at the end.

In line with the findings of this work, the following recommendations were made:

1. A *nationwide orientation* to educate parents/guardians who fail to enlighten females on sexuality issues due to cultural constraints.
2. *Effective involvement of* Education administrators, religious leaders, stakeholder, policymakers with the government in re- strategizing on ways to combat extreme cultural impediments to sexuality. Also Other relevant professionals such as Social workers, Psychologists, Medical Doctors, health workers etc to collaborate on boosting sexuality education in Nigeria.



3. *Sensitization programs* by key partners such as NGOs and, CSOs, CBOs etc. Also intervention program at the end of this research or a large-scale type recommended for other areas in Nigeria with the involvement of government and non-government, corporate and social communities.
4. *Sex education* by Government effectively drawing up comprehensive curricula for primary and post primary educational institutions throughout Nigeria.

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