**"Masculinities in Contemporary Africa: Understanding a Woman’s Sexuality in an Urban Ghanaian Community"**

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Data presented here is a version of my PhD dissertation, “Sexual Pleasure and the Construction of Masculinities: Understanding Sexuality in Ghana”. In this condensed version [focusing on women’s sexual initiation] of my PhD study then, drawing on the narratives of 15 women and 15 men aged 25 to 79 years in Madina, a suburb in Accra, Ghana, I provide exploratory evidence that argues that sexual pleasure is a significant constituent of femininity and is one of those sexual agentic moments that a woman may not compromise in sexual unions even if these are not necessarily overt.

The study is explaratory and the choice of Madina was based solely on convenience.  The study conformed to the required ethical guidance (***NMIMR-IRB CPN 048/11-12***). As a Ghanaian male, I am aware of the potential blurring of boundaries between myself and my participants especially the female participants. Despite this concern, experts assert that through reflection, researchers may become conscious of what allows them to see and what may inhibit their seeing (Watt, 2007).

The way sexuality is presented in the literature appears that women do not have control over their sexuality at all. Various discourses on the subject matter particularly between the major perspectives in the literature (e.g. essentialists and the constructionists) suggest that men control women’s sexuality. This is mainly because women’s sexuality is seen in relation to reproduction (Fortes, 1950; Foucault, 1978; Freud, 1980), a powerful force that needs control (McFadden, 2003).

But, the issue is that in most popular cultures across the world, sexual intercourse transcends reproduction. It also has a lot to do with the sexual satisfaction of the partners involved. More so, sexual displeasure has been found to be a major factor of sexual infidelity, relationship instability and negative health behaviors. This means that although the Ghanaian cultural values may stress on the importance of reproduction and infertility could constitute ground for divorce (Anarfi & Fayorsey, 1999), other researches (e.g. Aidoo, 1985; Awusabo-Asare et al., 1993; Oniye, 2008; Pereira, 2003) also shows that the sexual dissatisfaction of a partner could also create conflict and tension between partners, and ultimately also constitute ground for divorce or even the infidelity of a partner.

Yet, the discourses around sexuality particularly in Ghana have often been studied within “safe zones” (McFadden, 2003) such as reproduction, sexual violations and power, which are important topics, but there is still room for improvement. Sexual pleasure as a central concept has barely been studied although regarded as an important aspect of sexuality (WHO, 2006). Whereas some African feminists (such as McFadden, 2003) argue for the critical need to distinguish sexuality from reproduction and calls for the need to move the study of sexuality beyond ‘safe zone’, others (including Pereira, 2003: 61) would argue the need to appreciate the difficulty in African feminists realities for fear of being condemned given the historical conditions of colonial expansion and racist representation of African bodies and eroticism by Europeans. This Pereira explains as being partly responsible for the reasons why women’s sexuality is under researched.  Thus, African feminist do not want to face the same condemnations that Western scholars suffered.

In this study, therefore, I investigate the constructions of women and men’s own understanding of sexual pleasure, for understanding sexuality in Ghana. This would address the nuances of contradictions, complexities and interconnections in order to contribute to developing appropriate bodies of feminist thought and strategy.

So, I ask, are Ghanaian women sexually repressed in seeking their sexual satisfaction and does this repression apply across all categories of women (education, marriage, religious, age divides, sexual experience), and in the same way?  How then can we deconstruct stereotypes in order to better analyze the complexities of African sexualities? These are some of the questions I engaged with in discussing the present situation of sexuality in Ghana where men’s hegemony is still contentious.

**Preliminary Findings**

The brief discussion of sexuality in this study raises some key issues that point to promising directions for advancing the discourse on African sexualities. First, this case study showed that both sexes [i.e. women and men] had ever experienced forced sex which impacted negatively on their sexual reception even within marital relationships. However,individual differences in women’s ability to discuss sexual matters emerged based on factors such as the protection of privacy and secrecy, issues bordering on past sexual experiences, and more of moral persuasions than religion. Similarly, the seemingly ‘common’ view that ‘good’ women do not discuss their sexuality in the open [especially with men] —because of the associated disgrace it connotes to her spouse/and their persona, was pronounced among older women than younger women. The study also showed that although religion had a role to play in the willingness to discuss sexual matters, the terrain of sexuality is more a matter of living up to the accepted standards of society. Thus, the prohibition of women from discussing their sexuality was more a question of morality.

Second, the data showed the effect of age, education, religion, and moral persuasions on the likelihood that women’s sexual initiation increased irrespective of their marital status. Compared to older women and less educated women, younger and highly educated women were less likely to hold strong religious commitment to sexual abstinence, and more likely to hold strong moral commitment in prioritizing their sexual desire, but not for male participants. Even for those with higher education, there were difficulties in the discussion of sexual matters. Thus, it is expected that a [younger] woman who is more inclined into believing that women are subordinate to men would have a less positive attitude towards women’s active involvement in sex. Findings also suggested that other categories of women (e.g. never married and divorced) like those in marital unions exhibited higher propensity for sexual intercourse initiation even in non-marital relationships.

Third, the preconceived notions of sexual dissatisfaction, partners’ narrow-mindedness, moral and religious restrictions, being in a ‘bad mood for sex, and menstrual cycle challenges partly explained the various contexts (when and how) women initiated or accepted sexual advances from their spouses. Furthermore, although differences in socio-demographic profile, sexual abuse, and open-mindedness from partners [husbands] create different barriers to sex initiation amongst different categories of women, generally, women were not powerless and instead found ways to exercise sexual agency to obtain sexual contact with their partners.

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