

## EXPLORING THE CONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINE IDENTITIES AMONG YOUNG MEN IN THE CONTEXT OF HIV/AIDS IN NIGERIA

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### ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the problem of HIV/AIDS as it affects the realization of sustainable development in most African societies is highly connected to the socio-cultural context within which sexual meanings and practices are constructed. Essentially, this study takes into account the ways in which young men in the north central part of Nigeria construct their sexualities, and whether the factors that shape their sexual meanings and practices in the context of HIV/AIDS depart from the hegemonic ones documented previously in Africa. Through an analysis of qualitative data from 6 focus groups and 16 in-depth interviews with young men aged 16 to 25, the study illuminates how the young men actively displayed, constructed and maintained masculine identity through (hetero)sexual practice. The young men's sexualities were influenced by and embedded in local cultures of masculinity. The study concludes that young men in this setting, as in other African societies, do not articulate 'new' negotiated sexualities, but ones that are heteronormatively gendered in well-established ways.

**Keywords:** Masculine Identities,(Hetero)Sexual, Young Men, Schooler; Non-Schooler and Nigeria

## INTRODUCTION

The emergence of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) has remained an increasing global concern and constitutes serious health and developmental challenges for many developing countries particularly in Nigeria where the limited socio-economic development has been adversely affected by the epidemic (PEPFAR, 2008, Oladokun, 2010). As UNAIDS (2002:2) has asserted, “some countries bearing the brunt of such effects now face the prospects of ‘under-developing’- of seeing their development achievements dissolve in the wake of the epidemic”.

HIV/AIDS is affecting all population groups and particularly devastating for young age group. Consequently, studies into young people’s sexuality have received much scholarly attention especially in the context of African societies where young people are central to the discussion of problems related to sexual health and HIV/AIDS.

In Nigeria, various governmental and non-governmental organizations have initiated policies such as the Millennium Development (MDGs) Goals (6) and National Agency for the Control of AIDS (NACA) to address the problems attributed to sexual practice including young people’s vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. Despite these various efforts however, HIV/AIDS still pose a major health and developmental problems which are capable of making the mandate of the MDGs unachievable.

One of the major factors responsible for this is that there has not been an adequate understanding of the socio-cultural contexts in which young people’s sexuality is manifested and negotiated. While reports from previous studies are helpful in drawing public health attention to the status of young people’s sexual health, the important implications of the constructions of masculine identities on their sexual health and how these are influenced within their socio-cultural contexts have remained unclear. Even the research that attends to important areas of perceptions, norms and decision making power have mainly focused on the psychological aspects of sexuality, and the views of young people as primarily owning the rational decision power of sexual activity and of ‘risky’ sexual behaviours such as multiple sexual partnering and low or inconsistent use of condoms (Dada et al, 1998, Egbochuku et al., 2008, Olugbenga et al., 2008, Balogun et al., 2009;Oladokun et al., 2010).

In contrast to the psychological perspectives, it is evident that the socio-cultural context is an essential factor in young people’s constructions of their sexualities, particularly in terms of the meanings and practices they often attributed to masculinity, heterosexuality and their involvement in hetero(sexual) relations (Izugbara, 2004a). This study reveals the prevailing norms that prescribe young men’s sexuality and their constructions of masculinities as socially and culturally shaped and maintained by heterosexual culture which inculcates a sense of what is a normal or acceptable form of sexual practice for young men in their relationships with women. This study takes a social constructionist perspective, in which culture constructs the rules, beliefs, ideas, values and acceptable norms or behaviours which underlie the discourse and regulation of sexuality (Foucault, 1978, Connell 1995; Plummer 1995).

Although there are a number of poststructuralist positions, they share some similarities with respect to their ways of viewing sex and sexuality as socially constructed. For instance, Foucault (1978) discusses sexuality from a historical perspective and emphasizes power relations, arguing that sexuality is not based on natural force or subject to manipulation. He argues instead that what can be altered or manipulated are definitions and ideas, which regulate the

ways in which sexuality is thought of, viewed and expressed within specific social and historical contexts. Thus, sexualities can be constantly produced, changed and modified, and the nature of sexual discourse and experiences changes in accordance with prevailing knowledge.

As this paper will reveal, it could be observed that every society produces its own social reality or regime of truth (for example, heteronormativity is constructed and maintained through discourses as a form of truth in most African societies).

The interview data presented here provides an understanding of what influences young men's meanings and practices as well as their sexual negotiations. Essentially, it reveals the socio-cultural context that influenced the complex meanings and power relations within which young men's (hetero)sexual practices and masculine identities are constituted.

While the data presented in this article is mainly focused on the young men's accounts, it is essential to mention that this paper is a part of an exploratory study of young people's sexual relationships, comprising an equal number of young men and women. The future article will deal with the experiences of young women in detail.

#### *Heterosexual culture and young people's sexuality in the context of HIV/AIDS in Africa*

Evidence from researching African societies indicates that HIV/AIDS pose a devastating effect on economic growth and sustainability of the social and environmental priorities across the continent. UNAIDS (2008) unfolds that HIV/AIDS is among the greatest challenges to sustainable economic, social and civil society development and remains a global crisis that undermines all aspects and all sectors of our entire society. Hence, it could be argued that an effective response demands an urgent attention to the important role of culture that has been neglected since the first decade of HIV infection.

As can be observed, various levels of reactions and efforts to control HIV/AIDS have concentrated on particular groups of people – sex workers, homosexuals, students of higher institutions and intravenous drug users – who were generally classified as 'high-risk groups'. Emphasis was also focused on individual sexual behaviour to the detriment of adequate attention to the important role of contextual factors that shape the sexual practices of individuals. However, recent studies have found that the leading route of contracting HIV/AIDS is through heterosexual practices and one of the most vulnerable or highly affected groups are the young people (Oladokun 2010; PEPFAR, 2008). In African context, young people's sexual practices are often shaped and lived through heterosexual culture (SSRHRN, 2001; Reddy and Dunne, 2007).

Thus, young people's sexuality and their capacity for safer sexual practices have continued to be shaped by and within specific social and cultural contexts. This is largely determined by the complex web of social interactions and forms of social 'control' including cultural, institutional (state, media, government policy, formal education) and informal processes (parental roles, peer influence) through which young people construct and pass on their sexual knowledge and practices, thus developing their sexual selves and relationships (Izugbara, 2004a;2004b). Although, young men in different social contexts have been reported as constructing their sexualities and sexual identities in a way that departs from the hegemonic type of (hetero)sexual practice (O'Donnell et al., 2000, Frosh et al., 2002), as Maxwell (2007:541) argues, "the extent and nature of any sustained change in heterosexual experiences remains uncertain".

While a number of young men have been reported as mixing up both traditional and ‘non-traditional’ values in their sexual practices (O’Donnell et al., 2000:89), other studies have affirmed that young people are not often in a position to consistently negotiate their sexual practices and desires (Allen, 2003, Maxwell, 2006).

In African contexts, studies have revealed little resistance or change to the dominant norms of heterosexual practices despite the influence of developmental changes and modernization. For example in a study that examined the accounts of male participants in eastern Nigeria, it was observed that young men’s sexuality and sexual practices were mediated by values within their culture. The first (hetero)sexual encounter by the young men represented a kind of embodied experience, marking their transition from adolescence to manhood (Izugbara, 2004a).

Similarly in South Africa, the manifestation of HIV/AIDS has promoted the examination of the construction of sexual identities and heterosexual practices among young people. Reddy and Dunne (2007) examine the dominant heterosexual identity of young South African women in relation to gender practices of femininity and masculinity, focusing on the implications for the spread of HIV/AIDS among young heterosexual people. They observed that heterosexual practice was an institutionalized form of sexual relationship among young people. Despite contradictory practices, there was general acceptance of normative heterosexuality and passive female identity in favour of male ‘active-masculinity’ and gender power. The study also found that the patriarchal system institutionalized men’s sexual practices to include different patterns such as wife-sharing, widowhood inheritance and having multiple sexual partners (generally characterized by unprotected sex), while women’s status was socially defined in terms of passive wifehood and motherhood.

By examining the various factors that influenced young men’s constructions of sexuality and sexual identities, the study reported here reveals that the transmission of HIV/AIDS or the capacity for maintaining sexual health among young heterosexual men is not entirely determined by their rational considerations or their sexual partners, but principally depends on the socio-cultural context in which the young men’s sexual practices and constructions of masculine identity occur.

## **THE STUDY**

This exploratory study of young people’s sexual relationships in relation to the transmission of HIV within Nigerian socio-cultural contexts was conducted in 2009 in a rural-urban community known as Kabba situated in Kogi state, Nigeria.<sup>1</sup> Using a qualitative research approach drawing on the work of Holland et al. (1998), the aim was to generate, through the use of one-to-one in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus-group discussions, qualitative data on personal and

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<sup>1</sup>Kabba is a small town in Kogi State<sup>1</sup> in the Northern Region (NPC, 2007) and the seat of the Kabba/Bunnu Local Government. It has an area of 2,706 km and a population of about 145,446 (Ilugbuhi, 1986). The community lies at the intersection of roads from the state capital (Lokoja) and a number of other cities and towns. As oral evidence suggests (Chairman, Road Transport Association), Kabba lies about 45 minutes drive from Lokoja and 3 hours from Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory of Nigeria. One major characteristic of a small town like Kabba is that it is predominantly a communal setting, where generations of families live within the same area. In terms of occupation, Kabba has an agrarian society. Culturally, the people are highly traditional and religious; their diet, dress, songs, rituals, dances, folklore, beliefs and entire existence are strictly bounded by their cultural and historical context.

collective accounts of young people's sexual practices, meanings and negotiations within their local context. A volunteer sample of 52 young men aged 16-25 took part in six focus groups (out of which 4 sessions were held in two selected schools and 2 other sessions with the out of school group, with six men in each) and 16 individual interviews. Most studies of young people and HIV/AIDS in Africa draw their samples from secondary schools, and use quantitative methods. As well as using qualitative methods, the sample in this case consisted of two major groups, 'schoolers': those who currently attended school or had completed secondary (high school): and 'non-schoolers': those who had never attended school or did not complete secondary school. Each group was further divided in the analysis into younger schoolers/non-schoolers aged 16-19 and older schoolers/non-schoolers aged 20-25.

Biographical details were elicited from participants at the beginning of each interview and focus group session. I followed the Ethical Guidelines for Sociological Research (2002) in conducting the study. The interviews were conducted at times and in places convenient to the respondents and took the form of informal conversations.

### **THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINITY**

Findings from this study reveal three themes in relation to the part that (hetero)sexual practice plays in young men's constructions of their masculinities and their interactions with young women. First, the construction of sex as heterosexual practice; second, the importance of sexual practice as a symbol of masculine maturity and 'being a man;' and third, the place of sexuality in building and maintaining a sense of masculine dominance.

#### *Construction of sex as heterosexual practice*

The responses of the young men indicate that sex was mainly understood in heterosexual terms. Heterosexual activity was viewed as the norm: a natural and ideal form of sexual activity. The following excerpts are representative of the responses of young men in this study:

Em ..., It's a male and female thing...it means to have sexual intercourse with a woman...

Interviewer: What else can you say about sex? (Younger schooler, aged 17)

Em...well, [pause] It's a man and woman thing, you know having fun, and through which they procreate...

(Older schooler, 23)

...it's what *God* has given man and woman to enjoy and have children... through sex you enjoy your relationship... (Older schooler, aged 21)

Interviewer: How did you learn about that?

Ah! Every one knows about that...That's what the bible tells us; even the Muslims have the same conviction because it's also written in their Koran...then, I have parents, families, elders and friends all around...it's just a normal thing...

In another interview, a younger schooler, aged 19, said:

Sex, that's the sexual affair or intercourse between man and woman.

Interviewer: Is that all you know about sex?

Yah, I know it's all about sexual affairs between a man and woman ...

Most of the male participants felt that sex was about heterosexual relations. Religious beliefs also appeared to have a powerful influence on their notions of sex. For example, their comments reveal a view commonly held by local young men that God created heterosexual sex for procreation and the enjoyment of sexual relationships. This was also observed in the various terms that were used across the sample describing heterosexuality as 'normal', 'natural', 'biblical', 'cultural', 'God-given' and 'divine'.

A majority of the young men came from Christian and Muslim backgrounds and this was reflected in a strong affiliation with specific religious norms concerning patterns of sexual practice. It could be observed that the Bible and the Koran constitute the critical texts for these religions, from which the norm of heterosexuality is derived and imposed on their followers. Thus, the young men's notions of sex appeared to have been developed within the dominant discourses of their religion, which prescribed heterosexual relations as the ideal form of sexual practice. Such influence can be observed to have impacted on the male respondents in that they persistently negotiated their sexual meanings with reference to God, pointing to heterosexuality as the normal and ideal form of sexual practice. Similarly, an older male schooler in a focus group discussion constructed heterosexual practice as "a divine gift from God..." and a majority of the group supported his opinion, while regarding any other form of sex as 'sinful' and 'uncultured'.

Further, religious belief was found to be reinforced by a traditional heterosexual culture that emphasizes vaginal-penetrative sex as the valued and conventional form of sex within the local context. Thus, the young men positioned themselves as inherently heterosexual by virtue of their cultural and religious orientations. This is consistent with research in many African societies, where heterosexuality is dominantly constructed as the acceptable norm and the ideal form of sexual practice (Scorgie et al, 2009).

Findings from this study also reveal that heterosexual activity was sustained through various meanings attributed to sexual relationships. This was observed in the way the young men closely connected heterosexual practice with expressions of love and other emotions. This is illustrated in the following excerpts, where some of the young men constructed heterosexual practice as an activity generating closer rapport between the sexes. The first is a younger non-schooler, aged 19:

Hunn... [pause] Sex is what really *draws a man and woman closer* and closer...you know, normally, you're on your own and even if you're friends you only talk and do things in casual way...but when it involves sexual relations, you may become so emotionally attached with that feeling ... you can make love... get so close... you know, as boyfriend/girlfriend or as husband and wife...

Interviewer: Do such relationships include people of the same sex?

Ha! Same sex! I don't know about that, because sex has to do with feelings that usually take place between man and woman... then as a Christian, I can tell you that any other type of sex is not biblical and in fact, not in our culture...

A second younger schooler said:

...Well, sex is the act of making love. That's how you know she's in love...so, you can be hanging out and may decide to have it [sex]....it's just normal... (Aged 17)

Interviewer: What other form of sex do you think can bring the same kind of feelings?

...other kind of sex? I can't talk of any... everyone knows about man and woman relations... like we were discussing among friends some time ago, I only know about the natural kind of relationship... as in, a kind of *relationship that naturally flows between male and female*...

...through sex you can really tell if you love her and whether she also loves you...you'll have an idea of what stuff she's made up....if she's right person for you and will make a good wife... [older non-schooler, aged 22]

From comments by the male respondents, (hetero)sexual intercourse appeared to be an integral component of expressing love and intimate relationships. Moreover, young men often noted the importance of sex as a way of ascertaining that their female partners are committed to loving them. For instance in the above (older non-schooler, aged 22) comments, sex was viewed as a means of getting the assurance that one is dating the 'right' partner that could be considered for a life time relationship. Heterosexual relation is thus a valued relationship among the young men.

The young men's accounts further considered heterosexual relation as a 'natural' and 'normal' activity between the opposite sexes particularly that generate a cordial relationship that would not have been achieved from other form of interactions. This suggests a regulatory discourse of heteronormativity that is deeply embedded in the young men's socio-cultural environment. Such discourse of naturalness and normality emphasised in the young men's accounts present heterosexual sex as the only way of expressing one's affection and securing intimate relationships.

A number of studies have reported similar accounts of young people across different societies having been dominantly shaped within the discourse of *normal* heterosexual sex and through which young people express romantic love, intimacy and commitment to their sexual partners (Holland et al., 1998, Hyde et al., 2009). While some of the young men confirmed having heard about homosexuality, a further probe of their knowledge of it and whether they had had same-sex relationships revealed the following:

Interviewer: What other type of sex do you know?

I don't really know any other type, though I read something about people making love, as in man to man and woman to woman, but it's *forbidden* in our culture (Interview: Male, Older non-schooler, aged 22).

...my friend told me that those girls at St Mary's college were doing it, maybe because they are all girls. Well, I'm not really sure whether it's true but it's an *uncommon* thing in our community ... I used to hear people talk about girls having fun with each other in some girls' hostel, but I *can't imagine it*, and

I don't believe it anyway... and I've not heard about boy to boy... I don't think they exist in our society (Interview: Male, younger schooler, aged 18).

From these accounts, some of the young men acknowledged their awareness of same sex relationships while disputing the possibility of such relationships in their own community. Based on their cultural socialization towards heterosexuality, the young men generally viewed homosexual relations as 'forbidden', 'uncommon' and beyond what they could imagine as a form of sexual practice while others expressed disbelief in the existence of homosexual relationships.

Two major implications of the dominant construction of sex as heterosexuality are of importance to this study. The first is that the young men had been socialized towards hetero-normative practices, such that any other form of sexual practice may be viewed as a threat to the existing norm, as deviant or unacceptable behaviour, or even as leading to homophobic views. This was evidenced by the above respondents' comments indicating that heterosexuality was given by God, while homosexuality was considered forbidden and sinful within the culture. Several studies of sexuality have shown that prevailing norms of sexuality and sexual conduct in contemporary Africa (including Nigeria) are socially produced and maintained by stereotyped heterosexual discourses which often prescribe appropriate norms or what is socially acceptable and unacceptable (Epprecht, 1998, Izugbara, 2004a, Pérez-Jiménez et al., 2007).

Secondly, in public at least, it constrained the young men to a particular pattern of sexual activity. This may be seen as reinforcing the existing patriarchal system which privileges males and exploits or subjugates females (Walby, 1990), as well as the domination of other forms of sexuality or the subordination of men by men through hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995). This finding agrees with other existing findings which reveal heterosexuality as the major form of sexual practice in African setting. Importantly, given that a number of previous studies have reported that HIV/AIDS is mainly transmitted through heterosexual practice (Holland et al., 1998; Reddy and Dunne, 2007, Oladokun, 2010,) the understanding of heterosexual practice within the local culture of the young men is a *sine qua non* to explanations on how heterosexuality has become a leading route in the transmission of HIV/AIDS and remains a major developmental challenge in Nigeria. This is reflected in the following paragraphs, where I explore the specific form of masculine maturity being constructed through the dominant heterosexual culture.

#### *Sex as a symbol of masculine maturity and 'being a real man'*

The recurrent themes in the interviews with young men in respect of what they expected from sexual relationships included the need to be seen as mature and as real men. The young men generally associated their first sexual encounter with the transition to adulthood, an important symbol of coming of age or becoming a man. This prevailing norm was found to have constructed (hetero)sexual practice as an instinctual need or what confers maleness on young men. According to a younger schooler, aged 17, "A boy needs the experience in order to be sure that he has become a man". Heterosexual activity had the value among the young men of leaving them with feelings of 'maturity' and 'completeness'. Other male respondents expressed similar views:

...this is my second relationship. I've had one in the past, but it wasn't anything serious. I only did that to get the experience that makes me a man... (Interview: younger non-schooler, aged 18).



...yes, I'm in a relationship, and I think am of age to do that... (Interview: Male, older non-schooler, aged 22).

...though I was a bit scared, you know... being the first time, but after that, I started feeling as *odo* (normal man) that people call us...you know, as if I'm even bigger in my physical stature... (Interview: Male, older non-schooler, aged 21).

...some guys can be very troublesome, they will make fun of you once they know that you've never had a girlfriend ...they may start calling you all sorts like 'baby boy'... (Interview: Male, older schooler, aged 24).

...it is particularly shameful for a boy to tell his friends that he has never had sexual intercourse. The person may become the object of mockery or ridicule among friends and classmates... they don't see you as *normal man* but as a baby or even think that one is not mature ...[do you ever considered the use of condom]...I don't have any infection, besides there is no way adult you can avoid adults from seeing you when buying condom...really difficult... (Interview: Male, younger schooler, aged 19).

These accounts demonstrate the dominant notion of the young men's sexuality as shaped by dominant gender-related norms which necessitate their engagement in (hetero)sexual practices .Moreover, the young men consistently noted the importance of achieving what in Kabba is known as *odo* status. *Odo (being a normal man)* is a concept of male social success and popularity which entails being (hetero)sexually experienced. It was interesting to observe that many young men appeared to have engaged in sexual relations, especially their first relationships, for the purpose of marking their transition to adulthood . Words that were commonly used by the male respondents to describe how they felt concerning their sexual experiences included 'being complete', 'feeling like a normal man' 'mature' 'becoming a man' and 'feeling bigger in stature'. Obviously, heterosexual activity had been constructed within the social context of the young men as a means of achieving social recognition and a sense of manhood. This demonstrates how the status of manhood was socially constructed as against their biological maleness. Such accounts reveal the context in which heterosexuality emerged as a valued, institutionalised and celebrated sexual practice among the young men with little or no consideration for safer sexual practice.

In addition, some of the male interviewees recounted how they were commonly ridiculed and socially excluded by their peers for lack of (hetero)sexual experience:

...in fact, once some classmates or friends around you get to know that you're not in any relationship, they will just take the person as an object of mockery or ridicule... they will address the person as a baby, or even think that he is impotent (Interview: younger schooler, aged 19).

...I remember one man that used to live beside my house; we gave him a special name, 'soje' [a restless man], because he was an older adult and yet never married or known with a female friend... people see him as extremely odd... (Interview: non-schooler, aged 23).

...I found myself in a discussion where my friends were discussing their experiences about sex... I was unable to contribute to the discussion since I never had it (sex)... They laughed at me and some even said I was impotent (Interview: Male, younger schooler, aged 19).

An important finding to be drawn out here is that sexual practices were commonly defined and expressed beyond the private domain. A closer examination of these accounts indicates different ways in which the young men were actively regulating and policing their peers through various forms of gossip, rumour and negative labelling of those lacking heterosexual experience. The young men above expressed fears of being given a negative label like 'baby boy', 'weakling' or 'soje', or being seen as incapacitated. The implication of this peer norm is that most young men appeared not to have total control over their sexual lives and the choice of when and with whom to have sex.

... just that people want to have it [sex] so that they can proudly say that they are of age, complete or stuff like that... (FGD: non-schoolers, ages 16-19).

You're right...in fact as people begin to see you with babes, they will start to respect you more... you know, they will know before telling them that your level has changed from a small boy to a mature man... (FGD: non-schoolers, 16-19).

though I never intended going out with some of these girls but I did, you know, just to prove that the rumour about me wasn't true. There is this girl that wanted to humiliate me... telling her friends that I'm impotent (locally referred to okobo) ...So, before the rumour goes too far, I made sure I slept with three of her close friends...condom, no, I've never tried it... (Interview: older non-schooler, aged 24).

...I don't have any girl at the moment. [Why?] I'm not ready for it...in fact the one I had in the past was never my choice... maybe I wouldn't have bothered to go for her if not for my friends that were making fun of me... (Interview: older schooler, aged 22).

A majority were more concerned with the need to become (hetero)sexually active in order to avoid the shame and stigma attached to those without sexual experience, as well as the need to achieve the status of manhood. The social status associated with being known as a man was found to generate pressure on most young men to maintain their sense of belongingness within the peer group and the 'superior' identity that heterosexual relations accorded them. These pressures became evident in one of the narratives above (younger schooler aged, 19), concerning how he could not contribute to discussions among his peers because of his lack of (hetero)sexual experience. Another account from the above comments reveal how a young man's neighbour also indicates strikingly the extent to which discrimination and negative labelling could be applied to young men suspected of lacking heterosexual relations. These narratives demonstrate that the young men in my research setting had little choice but to comply with the peer norms, since they were dependent on the peer group within the communal setting to confer on them the 'reputable' status of a superior man, hailed for potency and sexual prowess. Additionally, such dominant norms, promoting heterosexual practice in this setting as conferring a socially approved status and signifying male superiority and 'completeness', further made it almost impossible for them to ignore the compulsoriness of heterosexuality.

Apart from securing a masculine identity from their first sexual encounter, the male participants in the present study also believed that a young man should continuously engage in sexual relationship(s) to demonstrate what makes him a *real* man. As one of the male respondents remarked in a focus group (older non-schooler), “real men are always active”. Other interviewees made the following contributions:

...I think it's just a male thing, and *man will always be man*... especially if you're a *complete man*, you start feeling aroused and you want to do it [sex] *again and again* ... that's why God made us different from ladies... (IDI: non-schooler, aged 19).

... I think it's just normal for men to like sex, you know, once you're mature, you develop the feelings,...as in, it's just a male thing, that's what makes me continue being a real man...[but how often do you consider the use of condom] ...I've never tried it, it's not polite to go out there and buy condom...people will frown at someone of my age buying it...(IDI: older non-schooler, aged 21).

...though she said she wasn't set for it... but somehow it just happened as one of those things, you know,as *a man*, it's really difficult to avoid it [sex] when you're in a relationship...

... [Do you use a condom with her?] I'm sure she has a means of protecting herself, she has never complained of anything ... [But can you really go out to buy condoms?] Ah, that's a big question, it's really hard, people around will look at you as if you're a criminal... (IDI: younger schooler, aged 19).

It is clear from these comments that the young men were maintaining their social status as ‘real’ men through the dominant heterosexual culture. Moreover, failure to fulfil this expectation exposed them to taunts of lacking fitness to belong to the social group of ‘real men’. The young men’s analysis corroborates the findings of another study in Southern Nigeria that the cultural socialization of young men positions them as ideal men, often identified by some unique trait, such as being sexually aggressive, hard and dominant in their relationships with women (Smith, 2003; Izugbara 2004b).

By relating this finding to Connell’s analysis (2002) of ‘gender regimes’ with respect to sexuality, it could be suggested that the young were building their masculinity, which is a gender project, under the regime of dominant heterosexual practice in the Kabba community. The sexual culture of the young men defined their masculine identity as their ‘social manhood’ or being a man socially, as against the biological notion of sex or maleness. Empirical studies have found that in most societies, particularly in African contexts, young members are often socialized towards heterosexual culture and that masculinity is tied to sexuality (Selikow, 2004, Brown et al., 2005, Wight et al., 2006). Another important finding here is that a majority of young men in this study were sexually active, with little consideration for safer sexual practice. As indicated in the above data, a number of them lacked the freedom to buy condoms openly because their society constructed their age group to be too young to engage in sexual practice. Their sexual situations also pointed to the lack of an enabling environment where both partners could discuss and negotiate their sexual safety and pleasure. Arguably, this might be contributing to the continuous spread of HIV/AIDS among the young heterosexuals and further accounts for some of the factors inhibiting sustainable development as relates to public health in Nigeria.

### *Heterosexuality as building and maintaining a sense of masculine dominance*

Evidence arose repeatedly in the young men's accounts that they engaged in heterosexual relationships as a way of building their own sense of masculinity and dominance over their female counterparts. The accounts of the respondents suggest that sexual activity in this communal setting, as in other African societies (Scorgie, 2002, Eerdewijk, 2009, Hyde et al., 2009) was accorded a high level of importance and when a man engaged in sexual relations with a woman, the woman is invariably considered to have given up her pride. In this context, female virginity was socially constructed as a symbol of her pride, honour and decency. The responses of some of the young men indicated their view that when a young woman engaged in a sexual relationship with a man, she would lose her sense of pride to the man and according to tradition would be likely to develop some level of respect or regard for the male partner, who would now assume a position of headship over her. Following this defining gendered norm, it appears that a number of young men in this traditional setting tended to engage in (hetero)sexual relationships particularly because they desired special recognition or the kind of superiority that a man would earn from heterosexual relations.

In interview, a younger schooler affirmed the view that it was normal to engage in heterosexual relationships as a means of cautioning girls who appeared 'arrogant':

...well, I've not really had any serious relationship... what I did with the one I mentioned was just play... you know, I did that to curb her arrogant manner... [Interviewer: so, you believe she will respect you the more for sleeping with her?].... Very well, because she won't want me to tell people around that I slept with her...

In a similar account, an older non-schooler, proudly commented on how he had sex with a young woman to suppress her 'pride':

... not that I really love her, I went for her because she's always feeling too big, too proud ...and often posed around as if she's hard to get. I dated her for few weeks and she became pregnant. So we had to go for a D&C [abortion]... (Interview: older non-schooler, aged 23).

In one of the focus groups, some older schoolers discussed having engaged in sexual intercourse as a way of commanding respect from girls. The following responses emerged when participants were led to discuss obstacles to safer sexual practice in their community.

At times boys could just decide not to use a condom to prove to the girl that they are in charge... You know, some girls might be proving stubborn or try to dictate to a guy about what to do, you know, things like when to have sex or whether to use a condom. Because no man wants to be ruled by a woman, the guy may insist on having sex with her that moment and may not want to use a condom. You know, just to prove to her that he's in charge. And if the girl is not ready to lose him to other girls around, she may give in (Focus group: older schooler, aged 24).

That's true. And in some cases one may not really have a genuine interest in a girl but you do it [have sex] just to reduce her pride... especially if she's still a virgin, she won't want you tell anybody about it ... so she will always treat you well (Focus group: older schooler, aged 22).

The young men's accounts of seeking respect from their female counterparts, particularly those considered 'stubborn', 'arrogant' and 'proud', demonstrate the dominant position that they assumed in their relationships with women. Their accounts suggest that each young man viewed himself as the head, the superior or even the boss in his relationships with women. This demonstrates the impact of gender inequalities in the cultural positioning of young women and men in Kabba. It thus becomes clear that the conventional gendered norms which place significance on women's sexual lives and their engaging in sex (before marriage) as compromising their honour, pride and sense of decency also prescribe (hetero)sexual relations for men as prestigious for their social status. Such contradictory norms illuminate the unequal power in gender relations between the sexes. It follows that a number of young men in the interviews like those quoted above and those in the focus group) may be seen as exploiting heterosexual relationships as a weapon to subdue their female counterparts while building their own masculine identity. What is even more surprising in their narratives is that while young men could openly brag about their sexual experiences, such talk as revealed in some of the above comments was not socially condoned among young women, making them want to keep their relationships secret.

In another case, a young man had to end a relationship when his dominant position was threatened by his female partner:

...I actually trusted the first girl I was dating more than this present one.... [Interviewer: So why did you finish with the first one?].I realized that we were not compatible...., she didn't behave like a woman... too stubborn and always claiming to be right in her decisions...., then she was always finding excuses when it came to sex... so, I told her there's no basis for us to continue... (Older schooler, aged 24).

Young men's accounts such as that above suggest that traditional practices and social norms of maleness and femaleness overwhelmingly shaped their expectations in terms of the submissiveness, obedience and non-assertive traits often associated with the female identity. According to the prevailing norm in the local context of the above older schooler, it is expected that a woman will remain submissive, gentle and subject to male control in their relationship with men. In contrast, a man is expected to be strong, take charge and not be controlled by his female partner(s). Such gendering of values or cultural expectations attributed to male and female identities account for the older schooler's disappointment in his previous relationship, where his partner appeared to act differently. As he put it, the young woman was 'stubborn', 'not compatible' with him and not behaving 'like a woman'.

Earlier studies have described some of the key values around which Nigerian cultures construct the notions of being female and being male. Socialization practices in many Nigerian cultures aim largely to train males to be domineering, ruthless and controlling, and to see themselves as naturally superior to women. On the other hand, female socialization often aims at making women submissive and subject to control, seeing themselves as naturally subservient to men (Smith, 2003, Izugbara, 2004b). Thus, when a woman is observed to refuse to be dominated by men or to exhibit behaviours that appear to deviate from these normative expectations, she may be given a negative name or label such as 'iron lady', 'tomboy' or one of those used by the older schoolers quoted above.

Furthermore, other young men in the study asserted that a man needs to be 'hard' or strict with his sexual partners in order to learn how to manage his future family, of which he would be culturally positioned as the head. These young men particularly made reference to their fathers as occupying positions of power, control and authority in their families. They viewed their fathers as role models, illustrating how to handle relationships with women.

...I've got two girlfriends at the moment and I didn't hide it from either of them... [Interviewer: how do you mean?] Ah [smile], I'm dating two girls because I don't want to be *controlled* by any woman... it's a kind of check on both of them... when you have two of them they become *respectful and you're competitively cared for* since they know that you can quit any time... [How comfortable are you in loving both of them?] Very comfortable, I deal with them according to how good each person presents herself ...after all, my father has two wives and he's really *enjoying* his life... (Interview: Older non-schooler, aged 24).

...my father is the man of our house, my mum can't argue with him ...as a matter of fact, whatever Daddy says is the final... and that is how a man should be ...otherwise women will start taking you for granted... (Interview: Older non-schooler, aged 22).

These comments further illustrate that the young men were conscious of acquiring and maintaining a dominant position in their (hetero)sexual relationships based on their culturally scripted masculine status, which encouraged men to believe themselves able and entitled to dominate women.

This also explains the influence of gendered norms and beliefs in African societies which accord men a dominant position in the household (family), community, intimate relationships and structural institutions (Smith, 2000, Shefer and Foster, 2001, Froyum, 2007). Empirical studies by the Social Science & Reproductive Health Research Network (Social Science & Reproductive Health Research Network (SSRHRN), 1994, SSRHRN, 2001) reviewed by Izugbara, (2004) have shown that some key terms around which the ideal man is constructed in Nigerian cultures are 'strong', 'hard', 'unyielding', 'vigorous', 'stout-hearted', 'resolute', 'aggressive', 'active' and 'tough'. The good or ideal woman, on the other hand, is spoken of as 'dutiful', 'submissive', 'quiet', 'fearful', 'humble', 'faithful', 'patient' and 'careful'.

A closer examination of young men's constructions of masculine and dominant identities in accordance with their cultural values can be explained in relation to the argument of Plummer (1995) on the 'sexual scripts' which the culture imposes to define the expected behaviour of men and women. It could be observed from the young men's narratives that they were mainly complying with a culturally gendered set of expectations that seemed to legitimise their masculinity through their oppression and domination of their female counterparts in heterosexual interactions. Such expressions of dominant norm of hegemonic masculinity among the sampled young men suggest how young men might be fulfilling their desires in their relationships as well as limiting their female sexual partner from negotiating safer sex. The overall effect of masculine dominance of heterosexual relationships it often leads to the continuous spread of HIV/AIDS among the young group (see Reddy and Dunne, 2007), and set a drawback for the attainment of sustainable development in the public health and economic growth of the entire nation.

## CONCLUSION

The emergence of HIV/AIDS as a global epidemic has remained a contemporary issue of concern among social scientists, perhaps more than any other health phenomenon (Ogoh, 2001). Within sociological discourse, young people's sexual practices have also become an area of particular interest as sociologists attempt to contextualise sexual practices and HIV/AIDS within the socio-cultural milieu. This analysis concerns how young men's sexualities are imbued with gendered meanings. The young men whose words are quoted in this paper related their (hetero)sexual practice to their gendered sense of selves and to their establishment of masculine identities, making them feel like 'real men'. More importantly, my findings illuminate the social and cultural contexts in which these young Nigerians grew up as heterosexuals and the high level of importance attributed to (hetero)sexual practice in their community. Unsurprisingly, the narratives of most of the young male participants reveal a complex web of factors that shaped their sexual practices, the meanings which they assigned to these and their negotiations of safer sex. The young men's accounts reveal how they actively displayed, constructed and maintained masculine identity through heterosexual relationships. As such, heterosexual activity was viewed as the normal, natural form of sexual relations, with references to cultural norms and to having been learned through parents, friends, older adults, teachers, mass media and religious sources. The recurrent themes in young males' responses as to what prompted their involvement in (hetero)sexual activity included the need to be seen as (real) men and not as impotent. These normative constructs of the 'real man' and of male potency demonstrate the influence of dominant discourses in the meanings that the young men ascribed to their sexual relationships with women. In addition, the accounts of the young men's sexual meanings and practices speak volumes about power and the links between masculine dominance and (hetero)sexual relations.

Meanwhile, the young men's narratives concerning sexual pleasure suggest that heterosexual relations emerge as a means through which many young men seek to achieve sexual desires. In this respect, heterosexual sex was portrayed as extremely desirable, pleasurable and a male-female interaction that produced a high sense of satisfaction and emotional wellbeing for most young men in the study. For some of the young men, curiosity about engaging in (hetero)sexual relations arose from listening to sex talk among their friends and other peers, which made them more likely to engage in sexual experimentation. Such a demonstration of heterosexual sex as a pleasurable activity could be conceptualized in the light of the socio-cultural context of the sample young men, where heterosexuality had been established as the dominant form of sexual activity. None of these young men could suggest any form of sexual practice that would provide them with pleasure, other than penile-vaginal intercourse. In addition, while the study found sexual pleasure to be a factor shaping young men's sexual practice, it also revealed how such practices were related to the risk of HIV infection.

These findings confirm the social constructionist perspective adopted for this study as it illuminates the socio-cultural contexts that shaped young men's constructions of sex, sexuality and sexual practices. Such arguments made by Foucault (1978; and Gagnon et al., (1973) on sexuality and the influential roles of discourses, as well as Connell's analysis of gender regimes and socially constructed masculinities (Connell, 2002), corroborate the analysis of the young men's narratives to provide an understanding of the social formation of heterosexual masculinity within the socio-cultural context of the research sample. Although the social constructionist theories have been criticised for a failure to recognise that people can and at least to some extent do make decisions about their own actions (Plummer, 1995, Weeks, 2003), the

present study provides insights into the social and cultural environments of the young Nigerian men as a strong influence on their sexuality, including their negotiations for sexual practices and safety. The findings allow a conclusion that young men's sexualities are deeply embedded in and influenced by heteronormative practices, suggesting little or no evidence for negotiating alternative sexual practices or sexualities. Essentially, to achieve a sustainable development in the area of health especially as it relates to achieving the MDGs mandate of controlling HIV/AIDS in Nigeria by 2015, there is need to focus on the important implications of the socio-cultural context that shape the construction of sex and sexual practices among the young population. Sexual health programmes should involve sensitization of young people particularly the young men to the need to reconstruct the conventional norms associated with their sexualities and the discourses that reinforce the traditional notions of masculinity.

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