

*Review*

# Gender and heterosexual culture in improving young people's agency for pleasurable and healthful sexual relations

<sup>1</sup>Department of Sociology, Landmark University, Omu-Aran, Kwara State, Nigeria.

<sup>2</sup>Department of Political Science and International Relations, Landmark University, Omu-Aran, Kwara state, Nigeria.

Accepted 15 August, 2016

Within sociological discourse, young people's sexual practices have become an area of particular interest as sociologists attempt to contextualise sexuality as multifaceted social experiences rather than as psychological or psychoanalytic processes. This study introduces a conceptual framework for investigating young people's sexuality and sexual practices in African context. It was achieved through a critical review of the conceptual framework developed by a group of feminist authors in the UK context which identifies five interacting layers of power through which young people become sexually active and socially heterosexual. By adapting and modifying the feminists' framework, this study delves into the social processes through which certain norms, beliefs, gender practices intersect with heterosexual norms to constitute well-established practices among young Africans. This study concludes by asking for a space to redefine conventional practices of gender and heterosexual culture in order to enhance young people's agency for pleasurable and healthful sexual relations.

**Key words:** Gender, sexuality, heterosexual, culture, young people, Africa.

## INTRODUCTION

The development of sociological and anthropological approaches has remained important, since the biomedical and individualistic perspectives have proven to be inadequate and have failed to yield in-depth understanding of the social and cultural context especially as it concerns young people's sexual practices across different societies (Aggleton et al., 1995, 1997; Parker, 2001).

Our approach in this review relies on the conceptual framework postulated by a group of feminist scholars (Holland et al., 1998), based on empirical findings from the Women, Risk and AIDS Project (WRAP, 1988-90) and the Men, Risk and AIDS Project (MRAP, 1991-92) in the UK context. The two projects were concerned with young people's sexuality from a feminist and sociological viewpoint, which provided an understanding of sexual practices as complicated social experiences rather than as biological or psychological processes. The WRAP project was initially concerned with exploring the process of the spread of AIDS in relation to young women, based

\*Corresponding author. E-mail: [brotoboh35@yahoo.com](mailto:brotoboh35@yahoo.com)

on the general notion that they were at little risk of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s. While the study supported the idea of sexuality as socially constructed, it also aimed to examine the sexual meanings, beliefs and practices of young women as a way of identifying the social processes by which their sexuality and sexual practices were constructed, experienced and defined. In their conceptual framework, the authors further explored how young men were positioned differently from young women in their heterosexual relationships and encounters. Analysis of the accounts of both genders provided a clear conclusion around the idea of the “male-in-the-head”, that young people’s sexuality and negotiation power were both unequal and gendered (Holland et al., 1998).

The authors further identify five interacting layers of power through which young people become sexually active and socially heterosexual. In other words, the study observed that young people’s decisions to engage in sexual activity were regulated and conditioned by the dominant heterosexual culture prevailing in their social environments (Holland et al., 1998). The result is the unequal power relations in heterosexual relationships which the authors found expressed in young people’s ideas, norms, beliefs and practices, these being shaped by the following interacting layers: 1) Language and discourse, 2) Agency and action, 3) Structured, institutionalized power relations, 4) Embodied practices, sexual experiences and their meanings, and 5) Historical specificity (ibid).

Through a critical review of relevant studies of the specific features of the interacting layers, we will develop a similar but modified framework intended to guide a more complete understanding of the socio-cultural influences that shape young people’s sexual practices, particularly as these affect the negotiation for safer sexual practices among young people in Africa. Most importantly, the conceptual framework explores a broader context to reveal how young people were influenced in their relational positions, thus going beyond the approach of Holland et al. (1998), whose framework was largely restricted to the confirmation of inequalities of power in sexual relationships and encounters. This consideration allows the present study to address the social processes through which certain norms, beliefs, practices and other factors such as the economic situation intersect with heterosexual norms to constitute well-established practices and thus facilitate sexual related problems such as the spread of HIV/AIDS among young people in Nigeria.

### ***Language, discourse and young people’s sexuality***

Language and discourse constitute the major medium for expressing cultural norms, values, beliefs and other expectations across different societies. These influences form a powerful medium through which sexual practices

and identities are constructed, shaped and discussed.

According to WRAP/MRAP researchers, the language that young people use to talk about sexuality and its meanings demonstrates the manner in which discourses of masculine and feminine sexuality have remained a dominant practice. Thus, in presenting their findings (Holland et al., 1998), they carefully analyze ‘racial’ differences and issues around the ways that language reflects culture. Their findings reveal that the problem of unsafe sexual practice among young people, particularly as it affects young women, is related to the male-dominant norm of heterosexual practices prevailing in different socio-cultural environments. Using data from in-depth interviews with 148 young women and 46 young men in London and Manchester, they found that heterosexuality had been constructed as the dominant norm shaping young people’s meanings, negotiations and safer sexual practices. For example, the language and discourse for communicating issues related to sexual matters was found to be gendered, with male peer language tending to dominate the young people’s culture. Although their sexual stories tended to be diverse in terms of language skills and family background, it was observed that while the young men could talk freely about their sexual encounters within the dominant discourses relating to “sex, love and romance”, the young women had no ‘discourse of desire’ in which to express their sexuality or talk about sex. Thus, certain discourses regarding young women’s experience of sexuality, and especially sexual violence, were expressed in silence and within the private sphere, rather than in an open verbal expression (Holland et al., 1998:7).

The effects of this gender imbalance on the use of condoms, for instance, have been well documented; the WRAP study revealed that male power resisted condom use, giving it a negative or conflicting meaning. Female demands for condoms were associated with promiscuity or casual relationships, with the result that very few young women described themselves as having such relationships or as insisting on condom use (Holland et al., 1998). In addition, the use of the contraceptive pill was found to be highly symbolic of trust and commitment in young people’s sexual relationships, such that a consistent use of condoms was problematic within the context of the need to define a relationship as ‘steady’. This accounts for a number of young women’s sexual risk-taking (unprotected sex) and their vulnerability to HIV/AIDS.

The empirical analysis by Holland et al. (1998) of such ‘gendered discourse’ provides a good background for examining how social norms transmitted through discourse could influence the perceptions of young people concerning ‘appropriate’ sexual activity. Considering the poststructuralist positions in their ways of viewing sex and sexuality as socially constructed, Foucault discusses sexuality from a historical perspective. He emphasizes power relations in *History of sexuality: An Introduction*.

arguing that sexuality is not an internal force or “a stubborn drive, by nature alien and of necessity disobedient to a power which exhausts itself trying to subdue it and often fails to control it entirely”; rather, it is “an especially dense transfer point for relations of power” (Foucault, 1978:103). From this perspective, Foucault argues 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. That is to say, in Foucauldian terms, the production of knowledge is always bound up with historically specific regimes of power, so that every society produces its own ‘truths’ and social reality (e.g. acceptable forms of sexuality).

Thus, sexualities can be constantly produced, changed and modified, and the nature of sexual discourse and experiences changes in accordance with prevailing knowledge or as Clark (2005) argues, discourses can be constructed at different levels, ranging from family, local neighbourhood and up to societal level. Fundamental to this perspective on sexuality is Foucault’s idea that particularly in western society the beliefs about sexuality which form people’s knowledge (such as dominant heterosexuality) exist within complex social relations which are organized, hierarchical and constituted through discourses and practices, thus reproducing knowledge. As he further observes, “it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together” (Foucault, 1978:100). Moreover, while Foucault argues that knowledge produces power and vice versa, he claims that sexuality is brought under control by the power that is exercised through ‘discursive strategies’. However, rather than seeing power as a mode of subjugation of citizens in a given state or a general system of domination, he sees the positive aspect of relations of power as more complex and diffuse, not oppressive acts in themselves but mainly productive of knowledge (Foucault, 1978; Izugbara, 2004b).

One of the major criticisms of the Foucauldian perspective is that it ignores the unequal power relations between women and men because he treats the human body – ‘the docile body’ – as if the genders were undifferentiated by discourses on sexuality. From this perspective, Foucault’s analysis does not give an adequate account of how gender inequality in everyday expressions of power between women and men is constructed and maintained (McNay, 1992). This suggests the need to consider the different social contexts such as class, age, ethnicity and gender diversities which contribute to women’s oppression (Walby, 1990). Essentially, feminist criticisms shed light on the need to think beyond Foucault’s idea, to examine how societal structures and culture are constructed in gender terms, particularly how power relations between women and men are constructed in

practice. However, Foucault’s view of sexuality as a socially constructed concept and how discourse could be instrumental in reinforcing particular types of knowledge to regulate sexuality offer a useful contribution to this study.

In addition, Patton (1990) observes that most stereotypes and myths were indeed articulated and established by discourse with regard to what is said or not said, or how an image or certain practices are constructed within the socio-cultural context. For instance, most public statements about gays and AIDS in the West during the first decade of HIV had negative connotations. Patton examined the discourses connected with AIDS and homosexuality at the initial stage of the epidemic in western European countries. She found that media messages created a stable image in society of gay men as major victims of a deadly disease. Popular myths regarding the spread of AIDS constructed it as a disease of overindulgence which was categorized as part of the gay lifestyle. Thus, the media images portrayed homosexual practices as delinquent acts. This was followed by political pressure that stigmatized homosexual practices as dangerous, unsafe and unprotected (Patton, 1985, 1990).

In Africa, some social scientists have begun to pay more attention to gender and sexuality in exploring the discourses associated with sexual practices among young people. For instance, in a study conducted among rural adolescent boys (aged 10-21) in South-eastern Nigeria for example, Izugbara (2004a) explored participants’ notions of sex, sexuality and relationships. Using group interviews, he observed that participants generally believed that boys should endeavour to have sex frequently and with different girls. In this sense, there was a strong discourse of male sexual desires as natural and instinctual, while masculinity was attached to male sexual potency. Although the findings of Izugbara’s study do not account for how the discourse among young people influences their negotiation of safer sexual practices, it is significant, as it provides empirical data on the extent to which young Nigerians draw on the dominant discourse relating to patriarchy and heterosexual culture.

In South African context, Selikow (2004) observes the influence of social discursively promoted norms and ideologies that shape young people’s sexuality and sexual practices within the social context of South Africa. Based on discourse analysis and qualitative interviews (individual and group) with seventy young people, it was observed that young South Africans were not considering the use of condoms, despite engaging in multiple sexual relationships and transactional sex. There was also found to be an existing norm of a social status that defined a ‘real man’ (locally referred to as *ingagara*) among young South Africans. This item of local discourse was popularly used for men of high potency, such that young men were commonly socialised to seek a variety of sexual partners,

while young women were encouraged to keep multiple sexual partners in exchange for money and gifts. However, Selikow (2004) concluded that discourses are not as all-determining as Foucauldian analysis assumes, but depend on definitions given by a particular culture. This suggests that language and discourse can be deconstructed to create new discourses which could enhance the safety of sexual practices among young people

Additionally, a recent study conducted among rural Tanzanians identified some existing discourses such as masculinity, femininity, and traditional norms that were suggestive to have contributed to the increasing spread of the HIV pandemic among the young group. As observed by Wamoyi and Wight (2014), some of the existing discourses within the rural Tanzanians context encourage concurrent sexual partnerships, with two or more partners even when they had little consideration for protected sex. Concurrent sexual partnerships are recognized as being significantly responsible for the transmission of STIs, particularly heterosexual HIV transmission. There was also a masculinity discourse in their locality that viewed young men as the 'Approachers' and 'Providers' and constructed women as the 'Receivers'. These discourses were found to have reinforced male dominance in heterosexual relationships and portray sexual relationships based on economic and material reasons, a conception which usually limits young women's possibilities to negotiate safe sex.

In a study that explores discourses of young churchgoers from deprived areas of Kinshasa regarding masculinity and sexuality in the era of HIV, Lusey et al. (2014) observe that general religious teachings discourage premarital sex among youngsters in this region; despite this, the young people were engaging in sexual activities, and the young men especially were involved in multiple sexual partnering based on the dominant discourse of masculinity that demands the need to prove sexual potency among peers. A disturbing aspect of this finding is that the young men had little or no consideration for the implications of those relationships with respect to safer sex.

Meanwhile, most studies of young people's sexuality, particularly in African countries, have reported that premarital sexual activity remains unacceptable to some parents, family and religious bodies because of the long-established norms that construct sexual relationships as a means of procreation (Shorter et al., 1999, Smith, 2004). For instance, despite the problem of HIV/AIDS among young heterosexuals in Nigeria and the widespread knowledge that condom use is a safer sexual practice, some religions still perceive the use of condoms as contradicting moral values. This may be observed through certain religious discourses that promote the viewpoint that sex outside marriage is immoral and seek to limit the use of condoms among young people. For

instance, it has been documented that some religious leaders discourage the use of condoms among their congregations on the grounds that condom use would encourage immorality, sex on demand, promiscuity, irresponsibility and prostitution. As stated by a Nigerian Catholic Cardinal, Okogie (2006), condom use, knowingly and intentionally, "offends the ends of marriage, which is procreation and says no to the bearing of children but (yes to) promiscuity".<sup>i</sup> Thus, there has been a considerable level of resistance to the use of condoms among Nigerian young people in school (both male and female) due to religious beliefs and moral expectations. This remains a great challenge for HIV/AIDS prevention efforts by government and non-governmental organizations across the country.

To summarize this section, a number of studies have attempted to identify and discuss the language and discourses that influence young people's sexual practices. The dominant discourses across different cultures and societies appear to work to reinforce unhealthy sexual practices among young people. Although Holland et al. (1998) consider in their in-depth UK studies how discourses have shaped young people's sexual practices, the authors have overwhelmingly focused on gendered discourses as a primary responsible factor. It is also important, however, to investigate dimensions relating to other social conditions to gain a broader knowledge of how different discourses play an effective role in shaping young people's sexual practices. Furthermore, in terms of 'enforcing' and supporting norms, it is also important to explore the various ways in which families, peer groups, governments and diverse authorities influence young people's sexual negotiations, experiences and practices. This will enable us to address the themes of agency and action elaborated in the empirical discussions of Holland et al. (1998).

### ***Agency and Action***

In the context of young people's sexuality, the expression 'agency and action' refers to their capacity to construct and negotiate their sexual identities and practices. 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 pass on practices and construct their sexual knowledge and practices, thus developing their sexual selves and relationships.

Drawing on the empirical findings of Holland et al. (1998), the capacity of young people to negotiate their sexual practices is shaped by the social structures and institutions of their time, such that young people are constrained by feminine and masculine identities and practices. Socialization in the home and schools, and

through the media and peer pressure, promotes men's power and women's vulnerability. For example, the WRAP and MRAP studies reveal that while young women are socialized to values that promote ignorance, innocence and virginity, young men are socialized to be knowledgeable of sexual issues. Thus, although a number of their female respondents appeared to be relatively empowered to resist passive feminine roles by their negotiations for condom use and safer or pleasurable sexual practices, empowerment for young women was described as an "unstable process" (Holland et al., 1998:130): most of the female respondents could not effectively or consistently negotiate the use of condoms or resist sexual pressure from their male partners. While Holland et al. (1998) have demonstrated the impact of the social construction of masculine and feminine identities on young people's capacity for sexual negotiation, it is important to conduct research in specific cultural contexts into the different reasons why young people's sexuality can involve unsafe sexual practices. For instance, in most African societies, studies have revealed that many young Africans are greatly disadvantaged by the cultural values and norms that constrain young people's sexuality to clandestine forms of relationships. This was evident in a study conducted in Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa; Harrison (2008) reports that sexual activity was highly stigmatised, particularly for teenaged women. Dominant sexual discourses centred on 'good behaviour'; the idea that sex is 'wrong' and abstinence as a preferred prevention strategy. In addition, Michielsena et al. (2014) studied Rwandan young people's perceptions on sexuality and relationships. They observed that young people have major gaps in knowledge about sex due to lack of social support and information to make healthy and informed decisions to freely negotiate their pleasure or protection. This corresponds with a study on sexual relationships among young people (Oshi et al., 2004), which examines the cultural and social influences associated with the dissemination of sex education to in-school adolescents in Nigeria. The study revealed some interesting findings, as teachers demonstrated considerable knowledge of what sex education and HIV prevention entailed. However, some of the teachers showed their discontent with disseminating sex education to their students, arguing that this was an extracurricular activity. Teachers were influenced by their cultural values and the religious belief that sex education can corrupt the moral upbringing of young people. They did not view their work as entailing the promotion of sexual agency and autonomy amongst young people. These findings are consistent with those of other studies and reveal an important challenge to young people's sexual health arising from traditional African social values.

In a related study, Ganle et al. (2012) examine the ideas, beliefs and perceptions of young Ghaninans about

HIV/AIDS and Sex, and how these influence their HIV/AIDS risk construction and translation of knowledge of HIV/AIDS prevention into safe health practices. Findings reveal that a majority of young people still hold serious misconceptions about the existence of HIV/AIDS; its transmission in their community and what would constitute risky or safer sex. Considering their lack of knowledge of sexual health, risk and prevention strategies, it is unsurprising that many continue to underrate their own risk of infection and engage in behaviours that contribute to high HIV infection.

Furthermore, it could be observed in some societies that government policies have been identified as a factor that could shape the pattern of sexual practices among young people and limit their agency (Waites, 2005). In the UK, for example, the legal age of heterosexual consent is 16 years; this has implications in the sense that sex education is not formally provided to the under-16 age group (classified as 'pre-sexual'). Moreover, Thomson (2004) observes that the level of sexual activity among young people has generated some debate from different ideological perspectives, as some idealists have argued that the legal age of heterosexual consent should be lowered from 16 to 14 years. This proposition is based on the finding that many young people are already having sexual experiences below the legal age of consent without adequate knowledge of how to ensure their sexual safety and agency.

In Nigeria, sections 218-357 of the Criminal Code (CC) protect girls under 13 years from sexual assault, whether there is consent or not. However, this has not helped young girls, because Section 6 of the same CC excludes wives of the same age from this protection. The age of consent for a girl is 14 under the Penal Code and 13 under the CC (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999). Olateru-Olagbegi et al. (2004) argue that this provision needs to be reviewed in order to protect the female child, because there is a widespread practice of child marriage in Nigeria, particularly in the northern part of the country, where Islamic culture strictly disapproves of sexual practices among the unmarried (both male and female). Moreover, in most parts of the country, there is no legally defined minimum age of marriage (Okeke et al., 2008), although section 18 of the Marriage Act define persons under the age of 21 years as minors requiring parental consent to marry, while in Eastern Nigeria the marriageable age is sixteen.

Child marriage is generally justified by the parents concerned on the grounds that it prevents promiscuity during adolescence. At times, the reasons are related to religious or cultural norms; poverty is often a factor, affecting the financial need for the girl child to go to school. For instance, it has been observed from the viewpoint of African patriarchal society that families with limited economic resources prefer to enrol their male children in school before the females, because boys will

continue the family lineage (Okeke et al., 2008). In addition, it has been reported that parents sometimes subject their daughters to marriage at an early age or to child labour, for economic purposes (Olateru-Olagbegi et al., 2004). The 1991 population census in Nigeria revealed that about 2% of married women had been married by the age of 10, 8% at 12, 25% between 13 and 15, 40% at the age of 15 and 64% by the age of 18. The average age of marriage for females was found to be 16.5 years (Olateru-Olagbegi et al., 2004).

While the arguments and data of Olateru-Olagbegi et al. (2004) and Okeke et al. (2008) illuminate how young women are sexually exploited and disempowered for socio-economic reasons and because of inadequate government policies, these arguments could be further developed by a more nuanced empirical analysis. In understanding young people's sexual lives and the factors that shape their agency (or lack of it) with respect to sexuality, there is a need to examine the group empirically and generate data giving an account of their sexual practices, feelings and opinions. Such an approach would help to validate the above authors' conclusions about young people's sexual negotiations and vulnerability to unsafe sexual practices provide some understanding of the context into which new policies should be introduced.

As discussed above, research has found that social environments play an influential role in young people's sexual negotiation of such matters as whether to use or not to use condoms (Slap et al., 2003; Smith, 2003; AHI, 2010). In Nigeria context, research has identified poor child-parent/guardian/teacher communication and a culture of silence around young people's sexuality. Consequently, most young people in African setting relied heavily on counsel from sources like their peers and the mass media for sexuality information (Huaynoca et al., 2013). This corresponds with final stage, parents, relatives and fellow townfolk also place some restrictions on young people's fashion, music, hairstyles and choice of friends, to ensure their appropriate moral conduct and proper upbringing.

In a quantitative study Wolf and Pulewizt (2003) examined interpersonal communication about sexual information and safer sexual practice among young people in Ghana. It was observed that the different sources of information available to young people include peer educators and adults such as parents, older family members, teachers, religious leaders, youth group leaders and health professionals. However, the authors explain that contrary to expectations, the great majority (93%) identified peer educators (that is, age-mates specially trained to communicate on sexual issues with other young people) as their most trusted source of sexual information. Those who communicated with these peer educators were more likely to practice safer sex including the use of condoms, while interaction with

parents and other adults tended to reduce their capacity for safer sexual practices by emphasizing social norms that disapproved of sexual practices among young people. Exploratory qualitative interviews would have provided a deeper understanding of why the young people related more freely to peer educators as their main source of sex information in place of adults and why peer education appears to increase the agency of young people in relation to safer sex.

Meanwhile, in a study of young people (aged 15-24) in urban Cameroon, Meekers and Klein (2002) found that gender differences significantly influenced their capacity for safer sexual practice. The study, based on the analysis of quantitative data retrieved from 2,000 young people in a reproductive health survey, found that their negotiation of condom use was generally high. However, the young men were found to be more consistent in condom use, while the young women could not consistently negotiate the use of condoms in their relationships due to male dominance. The study indicates that the construction of passive feminine and active masculine roles limits young women's ability to negotiate safer sexual practice.

However, Meeker and Klein's (2002) arguments relating to self-efficacy suggest a psychological viewpoint, whereby young people's sexual practices and negotiations are seen as a function of individual rational decisions. There is a need to consider the influential roles of social norms, beliefs and cultural values in shaping young people's sexual agency. This will help to rectify the inadequate conceptions of the behavioural model that ignore the socio-cultural contexts within which young people's sexual interactions occur.

Taken together, the above studies illuminate different ways in which societal norms, beliefs and practices may constrain young people's agency and safety. However, the majority of the literature on Nigerian young people has paid little attention to different ways in which they are influenced by the socio-cultural contexts that hinder the provision of the knowledge that they need to enhance their sexual agency. It is important to know the different sources of formal and informal information available to young people and how these influence their sexual practices and identities. Another major criticism of the literature reviewed above is that most of the studies were conducted among young people attending secondary schools and tertiary institutions. There is a need to reach out-of-school young people in order to explore the disparities and similarities in their knowledge, sexual negotiations and sexual agency in relation to HIV transmission.

Having explored the themes of agency and action as they shape young people's knowledge and sexual negotiations, it is pertinent to expand this framework to examine heterosexual power and how it influences young people's sexual negotiations, which the next subsection

does.

### ***Structured and institutionalized power relations between sexual partners***

The concept of institutionalized power relations as discussed by Holland et al. (1998) explains that the practices of gender inequalities are embedded in a patriarchal system and manifested through heterosexual norms. The empirical findings of Holland et al. (Holland et al., 1998) confirm that young women and young men are constrained by the dominant ideals of femininity and masculinity respectively, within heterosexual relationships. The construction of feminine and masculine identities and practices provides insights into social norms which assert young women's passivity and subordination within their heterosexual relationships.

Similarly in a qualitative study conducted among young people in north central Nigeria, young women's sexuality were found to be constituted as 'culturally appropriate' within a heterosexual and patriarchal framework. Thus, the young women in the setting were 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 (Babatunde and Durowaiye, 2014a).

In similar vein, Marques et al. (2012) asserted that masculinity is deeply embedded in heterosexual practices in its different forms and strengthened by the common culture of dominance and power relations. This is also interlinked and even strengthens the constructions of hegemonic masculinity and male dominance both of women and of other men in marginalised positions.

Taking a critical look at the feminist argument, unequal power relations restrict young women's control of their sexual practices with respect to negotiating their sexual safety and pleasure. It further reveals that variables such as age, class, ethnicity and religion often interact with gender to create situations of male dominance and female subordination, further exposing the effects of unequal power relations for unsafe sexual practices among young heterosexual partners. This was found to be accompanied by an increased prevalence of HIV infection among young women (ibid). While we agree with Holland et al. (1998) that there is a dominant gender order across different cultures which constrain both men and women in their heterosexual practices and relationships, we would argue that each community or society has specific ideals and gender norms which may differ from the Western ones based on the socio-cultural context in which heterosexual relationships occur.

In many parts of Africa, there is a general consensus that masculinity requires men to occupy dominant posi-

tion in their relationships with women. For instance, Ramjee and Daniels (2013) reveal some factors that contribute to higher risk of HIV infection among South African young women. Among the multiple factors that increase women's vulnerability to HIV infection is the interactional context in which heterosexuality emerged as a valued, institutionalised and male dominated. Importantly, male dominant gender norm was found to have shaped the construction of passive feminine which often limits sexual agency and negotiation, especially in the case of women. Moreover, several studies conducted in Africa settings have affirmed that traditional gender norms that reinforce male power reduce women's capacity for negotiating safer sexual relationships (Santana et al., 2006; Jewkes and Morrell, 2010; Townsend et al., 2010).

Another important study reveals the manner in which young South Africans in two urban informal settlements construct respect and masculine identity. Using three focus groups and 19 in-depth interviews, Gibbs et al. (2014) reveal the institutionalized norm of 'traditional' masculinity in which men are expected to achieve considerable levels of economic power and control over the household. In this region, access to economic resources reinforced male power and encouraged men to behave in a dominant way towards women. This was found to result in gender inequality which is widespread throughout the region and contribute significantly to young people's vulnerability to HIV infection and to the spread of the disease. This corroborates with the preliminary finding of a demographic health survey by Pettifor et al. (2004), that young women (15-24) were more vulnerable to HIV infection than men. This was attributed in part to the South African socio-cultural norms that promote gender inequalities. For instance, while the patriarchal system restricts women to monogamous relationships, men are seen to have an inherent need to engage in multiple sexual relationships. According to these findings, coercive sex is common and mostly unprotected among the studied population. In addition, a large number of young South Africa women depend on transactional sex for socio-economic survival, as a result of which they are not in a position to negotiate protected sex.

Ryan (2001) presents an argument about individual capabilities to maintain safer sexual practice or sexual autonomy. Her study critically examines feminist research on the relationship between women's sexuality, power relations and safer sexual practice. Ryan argues that in response to HIV risk, feminist theory and sexual politics may find notions of sexual citizenship, sexual democracy and mutuality more appropriate than the recourse to discourses emphasizing women's lack of sexual agency. From Ryan's perspective, women are made vulnerable and have remained vulnerable to unsafe sexual practices by sexual risk-taking related to their bodily performance

or interaction during sexual encounters. Ryan (2001) argues that women actively desire to achieve pleasure and emotional fulfilment (or gratification); this often results in a loss of control over their bodies. She adds that women's sexual risk-taking is also associated with their desire for intimacy and trust in their heterosexual relationships. This was observed in empirical studies revealing that some women replaced condom use with oral contraceptive pills to avoid unplanned pregnancies, rather than addressing the risk of HIV infection (Willig, 1994; Sobo, 1995; Woods, 1996).

Thus, Ryan's (2001) assumption is that individuals can potentially at least transform the dominant norms in heterosexual relations into desired values and practices by articulating what is deemed moral. She proposes that the more an individual can articulate (or practice) democratic autonomy or sexual democracy, the more the corresponding practices and sexual autonomy can become the real practice among (hetero) sexual partners. However, her assumption about an individuals' rationality in deciding on safer sexual practice is not based on empirical findings. Thus, her argument fails to consider the influence of socio-cultural contexts such as the norms, beliefs and practices that could influence women's vulnerability to unsafe sexual practices in their heterosexual relations. It may be argued that Ryan's arguments are refuted by those of Ryan and Gavey (1998:152), who show that women are constrained by social norms and expectations to fulfil men's sexual desires. Drawing on one in-depth interview with a woman, Ryan and Gavey report that due to the influence of social norms that control heterosexual practice, the respondent could not resist unprotected sexual intercourse, despite her desire for safe sex. Moreover, she continued to say 'yes' even when her partner asked her not to pretend if she did not really want to have sex. This example demonstrates how an individual's sexual practice can be a product of institutionalized norms and cultural values governing heterosexual activity. Numerous studies across different cultures have shown that males are more likely to take the initiative in sexual encounters while girls/women remain passive or even apprehensive.

In a similar study conducted in Australia, Kippax et al. (1990) investigated women's capacity for sexual negotiation within heterosexual relationships. They used qualitative data (both verbal and non-verbal) obtained through a memory-work method among two groups of heterosexual women who reflected on their past sexual experiences. Kippax et al. (1990) argue that heterosexual sex is the main route for contracting HIV infection, that women are more susceptible due to the dominant power of males with regard to the institutionalized heterosexual relations, and that this unequal power relation has remained a major challenge to women's choice of sexual practices and negotiation for safer sex. Although this

study generated a limited set of empirical data, having a small sample size of women, it does confirm the findings of other researchers that women are perpetually confronted with the dominant views of passive femininity and active masculinity (Coward, 1987; Ryan et al., 1998).

Machel (2001) examined the reasons why young women aged 14-20 in Maputo, Mozambique were engaging in unsafe sexual practices with the aim of establishing whether the spread of HIV was due to socio-economic factors and/or patriarchal beliefs and mores. The study was based on in-depth interviews and questionnaires among 182 girls in two secondary schools in Maputo, one attended primarily by working-class and one mainly by middle-class students. The findings suggest that while gender dynamics worked against women overall, young middle-class women had fewer sexual partners, used condoms more often, seemed willing to challenge gender norms and were more assertive than their working-class counterparts. Hence, the middle-class youngsters were at a potential advantage in negotiating their sexual safety. In contrast, working-class women were more accepting of gender power, less assertive and more often dependent on their partners for material needs, which served to weaken their sexual negotiating power, making them more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. While this study contains important findings on the relationship between the socio-economic backgrounds of young people and the patterns of their sexual practices, there is a need to further pursue the issue of resources to provide explanations of what sexual relationships mean to different groups of young people and how such meanings affect their sexual negotiations.

It is important to conclude that a majority of the above studies confirm that the institutionalized power relations among heterosexual partners in all different age groups are such that women's sexual safety is undermined by the institutionalized structure of heterosexual relations, which afford men greater power (Holland et al., 1998). Although, some of above studies have relied too heavily on demographic health assessments based on group interviews and quantitative data. There is an imperative need to augment these findings with further work among young Africans and to pay particular attention to some neglected areas of the studies reviewed, such as how young people give meaning to their sexual relationships and how this varies among them according to gender, class and education.

### ***Embodied practices, sexual experiences and their meanings***

This section considers themes of embodiment, sexual experiences and how these link to social meanings attributed to sexual practices and processes that are constitutive of dominant heterosexual practices. In the

context of young people's sexualities, these themes typify the different ways in which relationships and experiences are shaped and lived through heterosexual culture. It is therefore important to know how young people experience their sexuality and to find out how their various conceptions of their sexual identities and practices facilitate or limit their sexual negotiations and give them access to sexual pleasure.

Feminists authors (Holland et al., 1992, 1998 ) have examined young people's critical consciousness and the embodiment of their sexual practices as they manifest sexual desires or achieve sexual pleasure. In light of their empirical findings, the dominant ideologies of feminine and masculine identities are also identified as having a major impact on young people's sexual negotiations and the different interpretations that are attributed to their sexual practices. According to their own accounts, particularly in relating their first sexual encounters, over a quarter of the young women sampled (148) had experienced sexual assault or rape and had simulated orgasm (Holland et al., 1998:121-128 ). In addition, findings from the WRAP/MRAP studies indicate that sexual activity was dominantly constructed by the young people as vaginal intercourse, with the young women viewing sex as a male need. Such conceptions in turn reflected an absence of bodily pleasure for young women. This also exerted a strong influence on young women's thinking about sex and on their decisions regarding condom or contraceptive use. The study found that condom use signalled a form of knowledge that was not feminine; thus, some young women in the sample took risks with their safety, as they tended to be embarrassed to mention condoms or demand their use. Even among those who insisted on the use of a condom, many did so for fear of pregnancy. Thus, while some of the female respondents reported having consciously resisted the disembodied state (or loss of control) in their heterosexual relations, others were found to be conditioned by the demands of conventional femininity, fulfilling men's sexual demands and giving meanings such as 'love and romance' to their sexual relationships (Izugbara, 2005).

Discussion of the empirical findings of Holland et al. regarding young people's embodied experiences suggests that sexual activity may have individualized meanings, such as sex for pleasure or tension release, and that coercive sexual practices are culturally mediated. 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 peer norms and values within their culture. Izugbara (2004b) found that the first sexual encounter by the young men represented a kind of embodied experience, marking their transition from adolescence to manhood.

Research indicates that young people's sexual mean-

ings are often influenced by certain motives such as concerns for socio-economic survival. For instance, Cockroft (2010) in a study of transactional sex in Tanzania found that economic constraints have rendered a high number of women less powerful in their relations with men; they are willing to exchange sexual activities and relationships for the material benefits that wealthy men can provide; and these exchanges are believed to contribute to the poor sexual health of young Tanzanians.

Arnfred (2007) provides insights into the social and economic environments in which females in Mozambique embodied their sexuality, including their negotiations for sexual practices and safety. The study reveals how young women's construction of sex as a transactional activity is underpinned or motivated by economic benefits. Thus, transactional sex among the young females is a dominant practice. Despite this feeling of disembodiment and dissatisfaction within the context of transactional sex, the young women still considered prostitution as the only available option for them to ensure their survival, with little consideration to how their sexual practices influenced their sexual negotiations for pleasure and safety.

Similarly, Bagnol and Chamo (2004) examine some critical factors related to the prevalence of young women's sexual relationships with older men in Africa. Using data obtained from in-depth interviews and FGDs, they found that intergenerational sex was common among young people in Mozambique and that a major factor strongly connected with the pattern of relations was the poor financial circumstances of young women. The study revealed that young women in lower socio-economic families were confronted with high levels of poverty, characterised by socio-economic hardship, poor educational opportunities and limited access to possible sources of information about HIV/AIDS, such as radio, television and newspapers. It was further observed that some older men believed in engaging in sexual relationships with young people as a possible way of achieving sexual pleasure and satisfaction (Bagnol and Chamo, 2004).

A retrospective study in South-western Nigeria found that most young people including young men in this region were confronted with socio-economic circumstances (such as financial needs for schooling, coping with urban lifestyle and sophistication) that rendered them particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation for monetary exchange, which often limited their capacity to negotiate safer sexual practice (World Population, 2003). This experience was also found to be particularly common among young people in South Africa, Uganda, Indonesia, Brazil, Tanzania, Sri Lanka, Kenya and Nigeria, where many found it necessary to live or work on the street for economic survival and where monetary rewards were prioritized above the negotiation of sexual safety (Caldwell et al., 1998; Nkosana and Rosenthal,

2007; Babatunde and Durowaiye, 2014a, 2014b).

Generally, most of the African studies have found the socio-economic condition of women to be an important factor in promoting inequality of power in heterosexual relationships. However, some of the studies in this review lack explanations of how the limited economic resources influenced individual's accounts of sexual negotiation and agency.

Thus one may want to ask about how young people might resist dominant heterosexual and masculine power, and how their experiences have changed over time within their specific contexts. This is addressed in the following section.

### ***Historical specificity and socio-cultural change***

Evidence from the WRAP and MRAP studies suggests that, the perception of heterosexuality as the normal sexual practice particularly disempowered a number of the female respondents of Holland et al. (1998). Although a few of their young women were actively engaged in negotiating their sexual practice and pleasure, they could not effectively and consistently negotiate their sexual agency and safety with their sexual partners. Moreover, despite the effect of unequal power relations and the limited negotiating power in heterosexual relationships, only a few respondents showed any form of resistance to the rejection of the dominant heterosexual practice. Thus, an implication of this study is the imperative need to deconstruct the dominant heteronormativity and patriarchy that place men in control of heterosexual relationships.

While it has been argued that findings of qualitative research must not be over-generalized, as young people's experiences and perceptions may vary across cultural and material environments (Clark et al., 2006). Nevertheless, several studies cited in this review from different cultures are consistent with the finding of Holland et al. (1998) that male dominance in heterosexual practices affects sexual agency and negotiation among young people, especially in the case of women. Interestingly however, other studies have observed that young women are becoming actively engaged in negotiating their sexual desires and made sense of their sexual identities and relationships (Harris et al., 2000; Allen, 2003; Jackson et al., 2003).

Historically, men have been accustomed to being in a position to acquire economic resources in African societies and this enhances men's total control of farmland, property, and positions of authority and leadership (Caldwell et al., 1993). This includes the power to determine the pattern of their sexual practices. As we argued previously (Babatunde and Durowaiye, 2014a, 2014b), economic value is attached to women's capabilities, which men control and trade through marriage

arrangements. Thus, women had little control or power of negotiation over their sexual practices. Moreover, it is culturally accepted in many African cultures that when a man paid the bride wealth for his wife, he now owned the woman (Jeweke et al., 1998). The traditional gender norms observed in these studies were found to be controlling women's sexual practices, meanings and negotiations. The implication of this dominant norm is that despite the socio-cultural changes in most African societies, women still lack the power to negotiate protected sex.

While arguing that the feminist authors 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, the conceptual framework provides a platform from which to further investigate other social contexts that intersect with heterosexual norms or gender power inequalities to shape young people's sexual practices, meanings and capacity for negotiating their sexual safety.

### **Conclusion**

Generally, the studies reviewed above reflect a consensus in research evidence that some dominant norms, beliefs and practices and other social factors (socio-economic class and access to formal education) influence young people's sexuality across different cultures, particularly among heterosexual young people.

Research in western European countries has found a dominant hetero-normative ideology whereby individuals are socialized to see heterosexual identity as natural and normal and women's desire for sexual pleasure and intimacy with men has been identified as a dominant route through which gender imbalance and unequal power relations are reinforced. While research conducted in African countries has also found these to be fundamental, additional factors were found to influence young people's sexual practices, meanings and negotiations, as well as challenging their sexual health. These include class structure and access to economic, educational, social and cultural resources. In addition, there is a lack of adequate knowledge of sexual issues and a contradictory set of values and norms relating to pre-marital sex embedded in African culture. However, while some findings reveal knowledge of HIV/AIDS as influential on young people's sexual practices regarding safer sexual practice, others have found no correlation.

It is our opinion that young people's sexual practices could be positive and healthful, contributing to a meaningful experience. Thus, the present review offers a new approach to investigating young people's sexual relationships, including the contexts in which they construct and practice conventional masculinity, femininity and risky sexual practices.

It also calls for further empirical studies that move beyond the feminist findings on Western or institutionalized gender relations in order to explain how young people understand and experience heterosexual relations, given their different contextual factors, including gender, education, socio-economic forces and the class structures within which they operate. More research with this focus will develop a body of knowledge and generate recommendations that could offer a rethinking and reconstructing of young people's sexualities in a way that would facilitate mutually pleasurable intimate relationships.

### Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interest.

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