



AFRICA REGIONAL SEXUALITY
RESOURCE CENTRE

Understanding Human Sexuality Seminar Series 2

DISCUSSANT

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Comments on

Patriarchal Ideology and Discourses of Sexuality in Nigeria

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December 2, 2004

Lagos, Nigeria

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Introduction

The position of women in society in relation to men and the subordination, oppression and marginalisation of women has attracted the attention of scholars, activists, feminists and development workers for a very long time. The issues relating to what has come to be known as the women question or why women are oppressed has become very prominent in the last few decades. This discussion will look at the relationship between men's socialization, gender and sexuality discourse bringing out how and to what extent sexuality discourse and morals are related to the ideology of manhood/womanhood. Our discussion will also examine how the lead author used various discourses such as religious, cultural, state as well as others to establish the relationship between patriarchal ideology and sexuality in Nigeria.

Dr Izugbara identifies factors such as early involvement in sexual activity, unsafe sexual practice, same-sex sexual relations and cultural inhibition against open discussion of sexual matters as central issues in the discourse of sexuality presently in Nigeria. We need to note specifically here that the prevalence of same-sex sexual relations among young Nigerians can be found amongst colleges which are either strictly boys only or girls only, especially when the boys or girls are in boarding facilities. Cultural inhibitions that frown at open discussion of sexual matters make it almost impossible for parents to provide their teenagers sex education. This could be responsible for their ignorance on this subject and a positive relationship with Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) and HIV infection.

Patriarchy, Religion and Sexuality

The author in a most logical and interesting manner uses prevalent discourses around culture, religion, and the state as the bases for describing how patriarchal ideology affects sexuality in Nigeria. For instance, using cultural discourses, Izugbara shows how the different traditional societies within the country place emphasis, and thus, how the boy-child is socialized differently from the girl-child. In the author's words,

These socialization experiences inscribe superiority into maleness and masculinity, and inferiority into femaleness and femininity. The agenda of cultural socialization is to be that of locating men and women in specific places in (hetero) sexuality and endorsing the belief that the natural order of things is for men to control women.

Quoting copiously from the Holy Koran and the Bible, the author demonstrates how religions propagate the idea that God destined man to be in charge and women to be governed by men. Religious narratives according to him depict man as 'God's first born'. He is created to dominate the earth. Woman was created the Bible suggests, only as a second thought, to provide comfort to the domineering active man. The conclusion of the author in this regard suggests that the core of Christian narratives of sexuality is the belief that heterosexuality

and patriarchy are divinely instituted. The author also notes that the Islamic discourse on sexuality is no more different from the Christian narrative. He cites the instance where a Muslim woman who is accused of adultery or becomes pregnant outside wedlock, is at risk of amputation or of being stoned to death. As notes, nobody attempts to track down the man with whom this woman had sexual intercourse.

Male Control

The establishment of state bureaucratic structures and modernization through rise in employment opportunities for women and the appointment of women into leadership positions on the surface appears to have solved the gender question. But alas, the author notes that official activities continue to associate men with leadership and women with followership. Men control the political landscape and often co-opt women primarily as entertainers or praise-singers. He cites how, many bureaucratic practices provide cover for the official assertion of the superiority of the males over the females in Nigeria. He cites the example whereby the police deny women the right to surety an application for bail although the legal provisions, which regulate bail practices, stipulate that 'any fit and proper persons' can stand.

One can also cite instances where women have been physically assaulted by their husbands in a domestic dispute and on going to the police have been told that it is a family affair which the police cannot interfere.

The author concluded that the official Nigerian discourse on sexuality frames men as dominant, in charge, sexually-potent, survivalist and violent. It also encourages the socialization of males as heads, lords, and masters of women in all spheres.

HIV/AIDS

The implication of these patriarchal ideologies in the development crisis and HIV/AIDS pandemic in Sub-Saharan Africa was also observed by the author citing studies that show that patriarchal ideologies and an prevalent views encourage sexual risk-taking and irresponsibility among men and prevent women from challenging men's sexual conduct and behaviour.

Some Observations

There is no doubt that this paper is targeted at a sophisticated audience, or else the problem of comprehension would have been a problem. The author could have made the job easier by clarifying some of the concepts he made use of in the paper. Regardless of this fact, I would like to share my own understanding of the concepts of gender, gender relations and patriarchy.

Gender

It is important to note the difference between sex and gender. Sex refers to the biological differences between male and female. Gender is the socially and

culturally constructed roles for men and women. For instance, gender roles of men as owners of property, decision makers and heads of household are socially, historically and culturally constructed and have nothing to do with biological differences. Gender roles differ from place to place and change with time. But sex roles are naturally fixed.

Gender Relations

Gender relations are part of social relations, referring to the ways in which the social categories of men and women, male and female, relate over the whole range of social organization, not just to interactions between individual men and women in the sphere of personal relationships, or in terms of biological reproduction. In all aspects of social activity, including access to resources for production, rewards or remuneration for work, distribution of consumption, income or goods, exercise of authority and power, and participation in cultural, political and religious activity. Gender relations describe the social meaning of being male and female, and thus what is considered appropriate behaviour or activity for men and women.

Patriarchy

Patriarchy is a set of social relations, which has a material base and in which there are hierarchical relations between men and solidarity among them, which enable them in turn to dominate women. The material base of patriarchy is men's control over women's labour power. That control is maintained by excluding women from access to necessary economically productive resources and by restricting women's sexuality. Men exercise their control in receiving personal service from women, in not having to do housework or rear children, in having access to women's bodies for sex, and in feeling powerful and being powerful.

We expect that since this paper dwelt so much on the social relations between men and women, it should have been situated within a gender theory rather than limit the discussion to patriarchy. In a world where women's rights has taken the centre stage, the need to challenge patriarchy has become imperative.

Challenges of Patriarchy in the 21st century

Izugbo (2004) in a recent presentation on a similar subject identified six programmatic sites through which patriarchy can be challenged. The sites are domestic productions, paid employment, culture and religion, sexuality, male violence and the state. He recommends that the work at the six sites have to be at the local, national and international levels. Each of these sites raises a number of questions, which address women rights.

a. Domestic productions

- Challenging patriarchal division of labour in the home
- Advocating for equitable distribution of housework
- Promoting male responsibility for fatherhood and
- Inclusion of domestic work in the computation of GDP

b. Paid employment

- Challenging stereotypes in paid employment
- Fighting discrimination against women in paid employment
- Promoting the entry of women into male “dominated or reserved” professions

c. Culture and Religion

- Combating cultural practices that oppress women e.g. widowhood practices, wife inheritance, female genital mutilation etc.
- Challenging cultural taboos that subordinate women
- Challenging practices that promote son preference
- Challenging cultural practices that predispose women to malnutrition and restrict access to food.
- Challenging stereotypes in upbringing of the boy and the girl child
- Promoting education of the girl child
- Challenging gender stereotypes in the media
- Promoting radical and women sensitive interpretation of religion

d. Sexuality

- Empowering girls and women to have control over their sexuality
- Challenging practices that predispose women to infections such as STIs and HIV/AIDS
- Promoting women’s sexual and reproductive rights

e. Male violence

- Combating violence against women
- Interrogating masculinity and femininity and promoting new conceptualisations of a transformed man and woman

f. State

- Challenging the patriarchal arrangement of the State and violence in the State
- Promoting women’s participation in governance
- Promoting women-friendly constitutions and legal frameworks
- Promoting redistribution of national budgets in favour of women
- Supporting affirmative action for women and other marginalized groups