

Gender and female reproductive communication in Ugep, Nigeria

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Abstract

Gender affects the communication of female reproductive matters in Ugep. Biological and cultural determinism of gender stratification theories help explain this sex-based interaction. The functionalists suggest that families are organized along instrumental-expressive lines, with men specializing in instrumental tasks and women in expressive ones. Accordingly, the study reveals that mothers play a greater role in the communication of female sexual and reproductive health matters. They are evaluated better communicators, more frequent communicators and with less negative styles of communication. This finding shows a gendered communication structure where there exist very little discussions among fathers and daughters. Rather than sexuality communication, fathers' conversation is focused on education, career aspiration, child discipline and material provision. Mothers were thus identified as playing the major expressive role in female communication. Gender-role attitude is therefore significantly associated with reproductive communication in the family.

Key Words: Communication, Reproductive Health, Gender, Adolescents Girls, Roles

Introduction

The construction of female sexuality is derived from parental communication in the family. It is a gender-based interaction where mothers and fathers have different levels of commitment in discussing sexual and reproductive matters with adolescent daughters. This communication is vital because of the concern over adolescent reproductive health outcomes. The apprehension stems from the fact that young people, especially girls, are the most vulnerable segment of the population with challenging reproductive health issues. They are exposed to unintended pregnancy, clandestine and unsafe abortions, multiple sexual partners, maternal mortality and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS. Adolescents are sexually active and with a high prevalence of reproductive health diseases because they lack information and adequate access to reproductive health services. Worldwide, they are described as facing social, economic and health challenges that were unimaginable decades ago. Although their educational prospects are improving, and marriage and childbearing are occurring at later, more mature stages, there still remain areas of reproductive concerns.

Against this background, adolescent girls remain a critical group in Nigeria. Educating and exposing them to the right information is essential to reducing child and maternal morbidity and mortality, HIV/AIDS, among others. While some authors have argued that adolescence is "an artificial phase thrust upon us by an industrial society"

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(Apter, 1990: 24), others view it as a purely transient phase in human development whose accompanying crises will disappear with time. There is need to investigate the complex demands society makes on this cohort through existing communication and social control.

In spite of this debate, the interest in female sexuality has not been accompanied by a corresponding level of knowledge on patterns of parent-daughter communication. Ordinarily, girls' access to sexuality information in the family is curtailed, although effort is now made to intensify sexuality communication to maximize personal goals. The contribution of fathers in this communication remains questionable but the key difference lies in the relative theoretical emphasis placed on either biological determinism or the autonomy of culture. The paper explains how gender affects the communication processes implied in female sexuality.

Theories of Gender Stratification

Men and women differ in their access to privilege, prestige, and power due to the stratification of gender. The problem of who does what, when, and how has traditionally been answered in favour of males. All societies use anatomical differences to assign gender roles but gender identities are the conceptions people have of themselves as being male or female. Theories of the sex hierarchy help explain the origins and consequences of women's status in society. Two notable theories in this regard are biological and cultural determinism. Gender is a means of explaining the hierarchical positions and power that underlie inequality. It manifests as differential possessions, prerogatives, freedom as well as honour, status and prestige. These differential privileges relate to mothers in semi-urban societies.

Summarizing the various perspectives of gender inequality, Hughes *et al* (2002) state the position of different theorists. The Functionalists suggest that families are organized along instrumental-expressive lines, with men specializing in instrumental tasks and women in expressive ones. Conflict theorists contend that a sexual division of labor is a social vehicle devised by men to ensure themselves of privilege, prestige, and power in their relationships with women. The Interactionists argue that gender inequality persists because of the way men and women are defined. Feminists argue that women are disadvantaged because society is patriarchal. Gender roles can thus be seen as arising from biological development or cultural contributions.

Women are biologically different from men. Some of their roles also differ, leading to disagreement about the exact nature and consequences of this difference. Some sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists argue that it is sufficient to explain the basic sexual division of labour in all societies. With the rise of Women's Liberation Movement, the reason for a sex-based division of labour and women's role has been debated. The first group maintains that sexual division of labour is determined by biologically or genetically based differences between men and women.

The nature of this determinism has been characterized by Tiger and Fox (1971) as the human *biogrammar*. According to them, women are programmed by their biogrammar to reproduce and care for children because "nature intended mother and child to be together". This explains their close emotional bond as a genetically based predisposition which is particularly important for the welfare of the child. In a cross-cultural study, Peter Murdock in Haralambos and Holborne (2004) found hunting, lumbering and mining as predominantly male roles, while domestication was largely female's. The woman is tied to home-based activities because of her physique and biological function of childbearing and nursing.

Parsons characterizes the woman's role in the family as expressive, one that talks more often and provides warmth, security and emotional support. This attribute is viewed essential for effective socialization of the young. However, the inability of the biological

determinant to completely answer the gender role question and its complete neglect of the autonomy of culture brought about the consideration of the cultural factor.

The autonomy of culture is the antithesis of biological determinism. The cultural approach attempts to locate sexual differences within the framework of cultures. Oakley in Haralambos and Holborne (2004) argue that culture, not biology, determines the behaviour of sexes. Her observation of the Mbuti pygmies of the Congo rain forest revealed that both sexes took hunting and caring of children as a shared activity and responsibility of husband and wife. Although Aken'Ova (2004) believes in sociobiology, he notes that culture makes it possible to 'counter' the dictates of genes. Humans are able to do so because of their biological sense of awareness. Cultural factors thus vary among societies and are influenced by changes in the society.

Methodology

The study was conducted through the survey method and complemented with focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs). The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods permitted the extraction of descriptive, narrative, analytic and observational information concerning the study problem. These research methods are used to gain deeper understanding of reproductive communication processes. Qualitative methods enabled the explanation of certain behavioural patterns of men and women as well as the communication that corresponds to it.

The survey targeted women aged 35 years and above and girls aged 10-19 years in Ugep, Cross River State. The age of mothers enabled the extraction of information from women who already have adolescent girls at the time of research. Questionnaires were administered to 446 mothers and 447 daughters, giving a total of 893 respondents. For in-depth understanding of the phenomena, 15 in-depth interviews (IDIs) of men, women, and adolescent girls were conducted. 6 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) of adolescent girls and women provided further clarification on the nature of sexuality communication in the family.

Qualitative modes of data analysis provided ways of discerning, examining, comparing, and interpreting meaningful patterns. The mass of words generated by interviews and focus group discussions were described and summarized, relating ideas to biological characteristics of respondents. Descriptive method of analysis was used to determine the role of gender in communication. Quantitative data were analyzed with the statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS) and data presented in numerical form, Qualitative data complemented survey findings. Data are presented in words, describing how individuals and groups view and understand the world and construct meaning out of their experiences.

Results

The research sample comprised 893 respondents. The ages of sampled daughters are grouped into preteens (10 –12 years) or 11.1 percent of the sample; early teens (13 –15 years) or 30.2 percent; and late teens (16 –19 years) or 58.6 percent. The proportion of late teens is higher and significant as they comprise girls that have passed through the different phases of adolescence and could provide insightful information on sexuality communication based on their experiences. They provided the adolescent “point of view” information on the communication processes that occur in the family, especially with mothers and fathers. The ages of mothers were quinquennially grouped with the highest representations being mothers aged 34-39 years (24 percent) and 40-45 years (22.4 percent). The least represented are mothers aged 55-59 years (9.8 percent).

Gender Roles in Female Sexuality

Mothers play the greater role in female sexuality. They achieve this through female to female communication which enables the patterning of girls' sexual behaviour. Comparing the roles of mothers with fathers, respondents attributed the moulding of daughters' sexuality image to mothers. This communication results in shaping, safeguarding and determining girls' sexuality. Accordingly, 77.4 percent of respondents indicated that mothers determine girls' sexuality, 90.1 percent added that mothers safeguard female sexuality, while 87.7 stated that mothers shape daughters' sexuality (Table 1). Only 2.9 percent and 11.6 percent of fathers respectively safeguard and shape girls' sexual and reproductive health outcomes.

Table 1: Gender roles and female sexuality communication

Variables	Daughter		Mother		Total	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Who determines daughter's sexual behaviour						
Father	113	26	77	17.5	190	21.7
Mother	318	73.1	359	81.6	677	77.4
Others	4	0.9	4	0.9	8	0.9
	N=435	100	N=440	100	N=875	100
Who safeguards daughter's reproductive health						
Father	53	12.4	27	6.1	80	9.2
Mother	375	87.4	409	92.7	784	90.1
Others	1	0.2	5	1.1	6	0.7
	N=429	100	N=441	100	N=870	100
Who shapes daughter's reproductive life						
Father	62	15.1	35	8.2	97	11.6
Mother	345	83.9	391	91.4	736	87.7
Others	4	1.0	2	0.5	6	0.7
	N=411	100	N=428	100	N=839	100

This may be related to cultural construction where specific responsibilities in the home are directed to certain individuals based on their gender. These sex-related duties are passed down from generation to generation through socialization processes in the family. Hence, consciously and unconsciously, intentional and unintentional, verbally and nonverbally, parents constantly discuss the appropriate ways of behaviour with children. For example, while most boys are socialized to be in control (with toy guns), girls are exposed to house chores and caring for siblings (with dolls).

Gender and Female Reproductive Communication

Reproductive communication is important to point females to appropriate ways of behaviour. Through it, parents inform, educate, persuade and discuss health and social

issues with girls. Mothers relative to fathers engage daughters in sexuality communication. Table 2 reveals that 95 percent of mothers frequently discuss sexuality with daughters relative to 4 percent of fathers. The effort to equip, maintain and sustain girls with sexual and reproductive health knowledge is thus handled by mothers but effectiveness in communication is to a large extent depends on the level of freedom enjoyed by communicators. Adolescents should be encouraged to freely state their views, ask questions and express themselves without condemnation from parents. This is important since the sexuality aspirations of most secondary school students are influenced by the media (Obono and Obono, 2009).

Table 2: Gender and reproductive communication with daughters

Variables	Daughter		Mother		Total	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Who frequently discusses reproductive matters with daughter:	N=437	100	N=438	100	N=875	100
Father	24	5.5	11	2.5	35	4.0
Mother	410	93.8	424	96.8	834	95.3
Others	3	0.7	3	0.7	6	0.7
Who is girl free with during reproductive communication	N=432	100	N=440	100	N=872	100
Father	22	5.1	8	1.8	30	3.4
Mother	393	91.0	425	96.6	818	93.8
Others	17	3.9	7	1.6	24	2.8
Who daughter mostly rely on for reproductive advice	N=426	100	N=440	100	N=866	100
Father	33	7.7	13	3.0	46	5.3
Mother	375	88.0	421	95.7	796	91.9
Others	18	4.2	6	1.4	24	2.8
Who girl confides in during reproductive problems.	N=431	100	N=441	100	N=872	100
Father	17	3.9	6	1.4	23	2.6
Mother	389	90.3	417	94.6	806	92.4
Others	25	5.8	18	4.1	43	4.9

Mothers were also identified as encouraging participatory communication. About 94 percent of females noted that girls are freer with mothers during reproductive communication than fathers. This freedom brings about reliance on mothers for reproductive advice (92 percent). Daughters also confide in mothers most times they are confronted with reproductive health challenges. Only 2.6 percent confide in fathers because reproductive communication with fathers is low.

The results portray a gender-based socialization process in which there is little communication between girls and their fathers. This shows that traditional gender constructions and social norms hinder discussions of sexual and reproductive health issues among adolescent females and their fathers. Gender-role attitude is significantly associated with reproductive health communication. This implies that, gender-role attitudes matter for discussing sexual matters with specific members of the family.

Qualitative research corroborates this finding. Girls in IDIs noted the non holistic attitude of fathers in communicating with them. Their interaction is usually limited to some issues, overlooking sexuality. Their discussions are focused on education and career aspirations. Fathers rarely discuss sexuality because they are more interested in daughters' education; material provision, discipline and provision for the family. Hence, they have limited time to discuss sexuality with daughters. Although this is the opinion of girls, this attitude is questionable since fathers have enough time discussing other issues.

Reasons adduced to the role of mothers in female sexuality include the fact that daughters are closer to their mothers by nature and nurture, mothers are more at home to identify and attend to daughters' sexuality needs and the belief that the society has designed it so. According to a woman:

It is difficult for a man to discuss sexuality with his daughters. There are very few men that have this kind of time. All the work is done by the mother because daughters are closer to their mothers. The society looks up to the woman to bring up her daughter in the right way to bring respect and honour to the family. We tell them as early as possible how to behave... We take this seriously because when the girl becomes bad, people will blame the mother, not the father, for the child's behaviour.

Although this view is held by most mothers, others noted that some fathers sometimes discuss with their daughters because they are duty-bound to do so. They easily contribute when they find their wives talking to girls. According to females, some fathers are not totally complacent but believe that the task to discuss sexuality with daughters is to a large extent the mother's. In the words of a young mother:

Some fathers do not speak sexuality with their daughters because they are not very close to them. It is women that mostly do so but when the father hears the mother talking to the daughter on some delicate issues, he then adds his own opinion. Even when fathers talk, they use fewer words to capture many issues.

Another woman added:

Fathers will say "it is the duty of the mother to talk to the daughter because it is not my concern". They would say "If I have to do this, I will beat her and kill her and people will come and carry her dead body". Fathers are not so eager because they see this as a woman's business. They feel the mother has more and better knowledge of what goes on with the girl as well as the happenings in the town. She has to tell her daughter how to behave and also inform her that as she is maturing, she may be pregnant or get sickness if she sleeps around with men.

Views about fathers' communicative behaviour are not only held by mothers as daughters in FGDs stated that fathers hardly spoke to them about sexuality. According to them, fathers spend less time at home to understand their sexuality needs and challenges. This contributes to their passivity and inability to fully identify with daughters' sexuality communication.

Addressing the issues from a holistic viewpoint devoid of systemic error, bias and unfair judgment, IDIs of fathers were conducted. They examined men's views on girls' sexuality including the place of fathers in communication. This information was used to complement data obtained from females concerning the role of fathers in female

sexuality. The findings clarified and further enriched understanding of the phenomenon. They reveal that fathers discuss with daughters but not in similar manner and magnitude as mothers.

Although all fathers noted dissatisfaction with the sexual activities of young girls, some confirmed to having little or nothing to do with daughters' sexuality. In their view, since it is mothers that are more often with daughters, they should as well bear the greater responsibility of pointing girls to socially acceptable ways of behaviour. Some fathers complained about girls' unchanging reproductive behaviour even after such interactions.

The interviewed men claimed that they discuss sexuality with their daughters but noted that most men in the community do not. They indicated that mothers should bear the greater responsibility in this training due to their biological similarities. Identical make up would promote understanding and freedom of sexuality discussions. Some men highlighted:

Father A: It is every man's responsibility to ensure the sexual training of his daughter but some men are not doing anything to help their daughters to live sexually responsible. I communicate with my daughters but I can't say the same about other men. I do so not in a quarrelsome manner but my daughters are always very uninterested.

Father B: I can't see any way in which the men are helping their daughters to live responsible sexual lives. If they were doing anything to help, there would have been a difference... I can only speak for myself. I communicate with my daughters and it has been an old time practice and my daughters do not see anything wrong with my discussions with them.

Father C: I can't say if men actually engage daughters in sexuality communication. I can not generalize the efforts men are putting into the female sexuality. Some men are serious about it but others are not.

The discussions with fathers point to the fact that they do not exhibit the same level of commitment and enthusiasm as mothers. The pattern of communication matters. Why are daughters "always very uninterested"? What is the response of fathers to this attitude? Do fathers have alternative strategies that ensure successful communication with daughters or do they simply give up and allow daughters to behave as they like? These and many more questions could be asked regarding female sexuality communication by fathers. Refraining has become the easiest way out for fathers concerning female reproductive communication.

Discussions with mothers, daughters and fathers show that fathers are often impatient with their daughters and this discourages communication. Mothers on the other hand are consistent, persistent and persevere with young girls despite challenges. Some men clarified that they become impatient and refrain from discussing with their daughters when they do not observe changes in their conduct. Certain communication approaches discourage father-daughter interaction. According to fathers, men communicate through various methods; "some men often go about it in an irrational and angry manner therefore making daughters mute and incapable of asking questions and expressing themselves". This attitude affects father-daughter reproductive communication.

Although most men initially noted that "both fathers and mothers have equal responsibility on sexuality education of the girl-child", they concluded by stating that mothers bear the greater task. In other words, the biological determinism factor was highlighted as a contributory factor. This is expressed in the utterances of fathers who

believe that mothers and daughters have the same sexual features, which automatically make it easier for both to understand themselves. Summarizing, a father observed:

Both father and mother determine daughter's sexuality behaviour but mothers should discuss more frequently because both of them are females and would understand each other easily. Mothers should communicate more because they have the same biology. Generally, mothers are doing their best to help their daughters move in the right direction. I feel mothers should educate daughters more on sexuality because of their identical anatomy.

Based on biological and sociocultural expectation, girls' sexual outcomes are usually attributed to mothers. Accordingly, a father stated that changes in daughters' sexual behaviour are a result of "the carelessness of parents especially the mothers to train up their girls". Some of the mothers in FGDs blamed fathers for their inability to correct their daughters because they too are guilty of sexual impropriety with young girls. Men in this category are unable to communicate sexuality with their daughters as they have no moral justification for doing so.

Discussion

The discourse of reproductive communication among parents and daughters has been a long standing one. This is because of the identification that adolescents' sexual and reproductive health is a challenge as well as an opportunity. Adolescents are a key cohort that lack accurate reproductive health information, skills in negotiating sexual relationships, and access to affordable confidential reproductive health services. Many adolescents were uncomfortable discussing sexuality with parents or adults. Likewise, parents, health care workers, and educators were unwilling or unable to provide complete, age-appropriate reproductive health information to young people. This is attributed to their discomfort about the subject matter or the false belief that providing this information would increase adolescent sexual activity. Poor sexuality knowledge and lack of sexual health information and services have placed young girls at risks of pregnancy, abortion, STIs, and HIV/AIDS (Casey, 2001; Isiugo-Abanihe et al, 2002).

Despite widespread agreement that parents should play a large role in the sexuality education of their children, both parents and teenagers find communication about sex and sexuality difficult. The limited discussions around sex and sexuality are not shared equally by fathers and mothers. Sexuality communication styles of mothers were described as more positive than those of fathers. Specifically, mothers were evaluated as better sexuality communicators, as more frequent communicators and as having less negative styles of communication than fathers. Hence, both culturally and in the view of daughters, mothers have an important role to play in family life education of adolescent girls.

The role women perform is biologically and culturally determined. Gender roles arise from biological development or cultural contributions. The biological aspects of gender consist of the physical differences between men and women, but the role biology plays in producing behavioural differences is shrouded in controversy. Gender roles probably represent the earliest division of labor among humans but various societies have specific social definitions of appropriate behaviour for males and females.

A sex-based division of labour exposes women to decisive step in constructing female sexuality. Their role in contemporary social structure is not only expressive but constructive. They are instrumental for the production and reproduction of female sexuality. In their dual responsibilities, women perform active roles in the industrial, managerial and ministerial sectors of the economy in addition to family duties. Globally,

women's roles have transcended subordination to development partners. They encounter challenging tasks in the society and at family level.

Gender power relations within marriage, particularly the degree of dominance and asymmetry have determined the role of each spouse in the management of households. What is clear from a gender perspective is that there are important differences between men and women and such differences are not expected to be exploitative but complementary. However, men's roles as husbands and fathers in many societies continue to follow the traditional patriarchal order. The father perpetuates the values that he grew up with, influencing attitudes towards the construction of female sexuality.

There remain opportunities for changing value systems and norms that define the core of society because change is a constant aspect of human existence. Giddens' (1984) approach to social action is that of praxis, regular patterns of enacted conduct by active actors who interact with each other in situations of habitual, reflexive, reflective, and more conscious ways. His structures and systems also appear to be more dynamic and less closed, so that they can accommodate many different forms of power and social change. This reflects the true nature of change and the positive attitude of mothers and daughters to interact and reflect on strategies toward reproductive development, contradicting previous assumptions of the taboo status of sexuality in most African settings.

Mother-daughter communication may support other processes, including non-communicative, evolutionarily adaptive processes for survival and reproduction. Communication is expected to develop self-organizing systems, given certain assumptions. Women and men have individual functions to perform that will contribute to the operation of the society. There is need for continuous modification of the state of individuals and groups to accommodate social change.

The multiple roles of the mother as a home keeper, care giver and wage worker has diverse implications. Children could easily be exposed to 'foreign' worldviews or affected by friends and media. Diffusion of reproductive innovations through social interaction can however accelerate change. Informal social interaction is gendered and promotes the spread of reproductive innovations through learning and social influence. It offers a powerful mechanism for coping with uncertainty and ambivalence of urban life. This interaction further provides channels for the exchange and assessment of often contradictory reproductive messages. Hence, informal mother-daughter discussions complement formal channels. Exchanges on relative benefits and disadvantages occur almost exclusively within the circuits of informal communication networks.

Gender communication is not limited to fathers, mothers and daughters. Warren (2001) observes that mothers communicate sexuality more with daughters than with sons. From a very early age, males and females are taught different linguistic practices. Communicative behaviors that are acceptable for boys, for example, may be considered completely inappropriate for girls. According to Mulvaney (2005), communicative practices not only reflect notions about gender, but also create cultural concepts of gender. Message sources privileged by society as legitimate knowledge generators create a web of socially compelling discourses. Mothers' attitudes toward daughters should be that of care and trust to encourage freedom of speech, since adolescents feel intense need for privacy and confidentiality.

Studies by the International Center for Research on Women (1996) illustrate the critical role of gender and sexuality in influencing sexual interactions and people's ability to practice safe behaviours. They highlighted the importance of increasing women's access to information and education, skills, services and social support to reduce their vulnerability to HIV/AIDS and improve their reproductive health outcomes. As primary socializing agents, mothers occupy a significant place in the discourse of female reproductive communication.

Conclusion

Women are identified as playing key roles in constructing female sexuality at a period of social change. This function is performed and maintained through positive reproductive communication patterns. The role women perform is biologically and culturally determined through a sex-based division of labour. Gender differences and inequities limit daughters from adequately gaining from fathers in the area of sexual and reproductive communication.

Once parents recognize the importance of their own role in the education process, programmes can focus on providing information and helping parents develop approaches for communicating with their children. This would expose parents to tackling the sexual and reproductive challenges of adolescents through the utilization of appropriate communication structures. Because unintended pregnancy, maternal mortality and STDs, including HIV/AIDS are much higher among adolescents, there is need to reach them with reproductive health information as part of efforts for their development as well as the resolution of reproductive health problems through family level communication. Hence, the family has a great responsibility in training up its young to avert sexual and reproductive health hazards.

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