# Masculinity and Neighborhood Bullying among Adolescents in Ibadan, Nigeria

## *A Research Note*

Mofeyisara Oluwatoyin Omobowale,
Offiong Esop Akpabio, and Olukemi Kehinde Amodu

**Abstract:** Masculinity, as an identity signifier along gender lines, varies from one society to another. The nature, definition, and expression of masculinity (dominance, oppression, violence, and aggression) through social interactions may breed bullying, as found in the Agbowo community of Ibadan, Nigeria. The data for the study were collected through mixed methods and revealed that patriarchal constructed masculinity allows for hegemonic dominance, aggression, oppression, and violent acts that foster bullying among adolescent males in Agbowo. Hence, to address bullying-related problems among adolescents, an understanding of the societal context in which it is carried out is required.

**Keywords**: adolescents, Agbowo, cultural context, masculinity, neighborhood bullying, patriarchy



Masculinity as a concept denotes a socioculturally constructed gender identity. Its form varies across cultures and spaces and is defined by social, economic, religious, and geographic contexts per time and space. Masculinity refers to ideals and the expected standards of behaviors for the male folk in a society. It defines modes of behavior and expectations of how boys/men should talk, eat, dress, walk, and express emotions and passions. All these are contextually determined across cultures (Amin et al. 2018; Ampofo et al. 2007). Social legitimization of dominance, oppression, aggression, and violence, among other attributes, are important in the definition and expression of masculinity as a form of power relations in a society. Many times, masculinity is hegemonic especially when it is the "dominant form of masculinity in a society and pertains to the relations of cultural domination by men" (Ampofo et al. 2007: 54). The social and cultural legitimization of masculinity defines what comprises an ideal male and how males in such society are socialized. Falling

*Boyhood Studies* 12, no. 1 (Summer 2019): 1-16
doi: 10.3167/bhs.2019.120102

ISSN: 2375-9240 (print) 2375-9267 (online)

below the expected standards of behavior of an ideal male, or the betrayal of masculine values, attracts social punishment like ridicule, name-calling, and belittlement, among other forms of social reactions. All these negative reactions may result in bullying (Birkett and Espelage 2015).

Over the years, many studies have examined masculinity in relation to adolescents, especially in Africa, but many of these have concentrated on gender relations and reproductive health (Izugbara 2008; Santana et al. 2006; Varga 2003). Some of the studies have also considered masculinity in relation with female oppression (Jewkes et al. 2015). There is less attention on how masculinity as a theoretical frame and independent variable has contextually encouraged bullying, especially among male adolescents (Folayan et al) 2015. Meanwhile, understanding masculinity and its relation to bullying in different societies will proffer sustainable solution to bullying related health problems, because "childhood, youth, and adulthood [in Africa] are neither natural nor predetermined but are the outcome of socio-cultural contexts and power relations" (Ungruhe and Esson 2017: 25).

Bullying is a worldwide phenomenon; it is ethno-contextual in nature, and a public health issue. Its occurrence is not limited to a particular space and culture. It occurs in schools, workplaces, and distinct neighborhoods (Onu et al. 2012). Bullying as a form of social relations is multifaceted and usually involves a socially, physically, or psychologically stronger adolescent or group of adolescents who display deliberate and repeated aggressive behavior toward a weaker adolescent or a weaker group. Bullying among adolescents may include kicking, hitting, pushing, name-calling, belittling, teasing, and touching of sexual parts (Omoniyi 2013; Omoteso 2010). It may also be perpetrated verbally via rumors or have sexual or racial undertones. Sometimes, bullying can be carried out via the cyberspace. Additionally, it could physically through damage done to people's property, among others (Olumide et al. 2015). Bullying thrives on the culture of domination and violence; it permits the seemingly powerful to have control and to dominate other adolescents (Omoteso 2010). Although there are multiple definitions of bullying, the term is associated with aggression, the forceful use of physical or psychological powers, threats, persistent or intentional harassment, or the oppression of defenseless adolescents with a tendency to inflict either physical or psychological pain on others (Alika 2012; Olumide et al. 2015; Olweus 2013; Onukwufor 2013; Santrock 2005). However, it should be noted that bullying is a social product of relationships, constructed from everyday behaviors and interactions associated with masculinity. Many studies have considered adolescent bullying in the school environment as a psy-

chological disorder, but it is important to note that bullying transcends the school environment (see Egbochuku 2007; O'Moore 1990). It emanates from and occurs more in neighborhoods. Hence, this study of masculinity in the Yoruba sociocultural context using the Agbowo community of Ibadan, Nigeria, to illustrate how both factors promote bullying among adolescents will serve as a prototype for other similar cultures.

Masculinity among the Yorubas of Southwestern Nigeria is hegemonic in nature. It allows for the dominance of one's masculinity over others forms of masculinity, for instance, in terms of physical strength over the weak or even sexuality (heterosexuality over homosexuality). Masculinity is expected to be expressed by being physically and emotionally tough and strong, domineering, sexually active, powerful, competitive, brave, aggressive, and emotionally stoic (not acting like girls or showing vulnerabilities and dealing with one's problems) (Amin et al. 2018). A real man is expected to possess these attributes; the inability to imbibe these "masculine traits" may result in negative labeling. When the traits that are expected in males are found in a female, such females are tagged *obinrin bi okunrin*, that is, a female who acts like a male; this implies masculinity as a social construct is restricted to the male domain. All attributes of masculinity can be used as elements of bullying in adolescent social relations; this suggests bullying as a social product is ethno-contextual.

Literature has established that bullying is genderized, as boys engage more in direct bullying than girls and may experience indirect bullying in their neighborhoods (Adeosun et al. 2015; Aluede 2011; Egbochuku 2007; Ramya and Kulkarni 2011). The global recognition given to bullying and the prevalence of bullying across cultures vary. In 2008, 25.9 percent bullying was reported within 12 months in Massachusetts, United States (Schneider et. al. 2008). A study in Latin America and the Caribbean revealed a 17 percent to 34 percent adolescent bullying rate (McClanahan et al. 2014). In Thailand, the overall bullying prevalence experienced within 30 days was 27.8 percent (Pengpid and Peltzer 2013), and victimization was said to be higher among homosexual youths. Studies in South Africa have also shown bullying is now prevalent (De Wet 2005; Marais and Meier 2010; Ndebele and Msiza 2014). In Nigeria, a study carried out in Benin indicated four out of five adolescents were being bullied and that boys were the major perpetrators. The severe bullying rate was 5 percent, while moderate bullying was 62 percent (Egbochuku 2007). Likewise, Bonke Omoteso (2010) reported a high percentage of bullying in Osun State—88.1 percent (444 of 504 respondents). In Ondo State, a 28 percent bullying rate was

recorded, which is relatively small when compared to Osun (Owuamanam 2015), while, 82 percent was recorded in Port Harcourt.

As pervasive as it seems, bullying seems to have become an acceptable culture that is not only embedded in the school environment but has also become part of the process of neighborhood socialization in Nigeria. Bullying, just like masculinity, is a learned power dynamic (Hunter et al. 2015). Its social currency is the abuse of power. Bullying is somewhat normal in peer environments, but its reality among male adolescents is quite alarming (Aluede 2011; Egbochuku 2007). Bullying is a social and health stressor in adolescents and can lead to bigger social and health problems in adulthood. In communities like Agbowo, where bullying is hardly reported and seems to be the norm, it is important to ask salient questions such as, how is bullying contextualized? What are the different patterns of bullying in Agbowo community? Therefore, this study examined the normative bullying culture cum masculinity in the Agbowo community of Ibadan.

## Methods

The study was carried out in the Agbowo community in the northern part of Ibadan, Nigeria. Agbowo is adjacent to Nigeria's premier university, the University of Ibadan. As a result, it houses many university students who reside off campus. The community is divided into 14 zones, which all have different housing systems. The houses range from fenced blocks of flats to unfenced blocks of flats, tenement bungalows, and one or two story buildings (large houses). Many residential buildings in Agbowo are improvised as shops and offices. Agbowo largely lacks basic social amenities, including good roads and drainage systems. The houses are overcrowded; facilities are dilapidated, unplanned, and prone to attack. Agbowo exhibits the features of an urban slum (Akinremi and Samuel 2015).

This study seeks to examine the contextual understanding of bullying in Agbowo and to identify different patterns of bullying and the specific locations where bullying occurs in the community. The study population includes adolescents between the ages of 10 and 19 and their parents, who have spent more than six months in Agbowo either as residents or in any other capacity. The study is cross-sectional and uses both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection to access an in-depth understanding of the bullying culture in the Agbowo community. Through multistage sampling procedures, 516 respondents were selected in the community for survey

interviews. Agbowo is clustered into the northwest, southwest, northeast, and southeast regions. A list of the streets within each cluster is drawn, after which, streets were selected from each group using simple random sampling. The number of streets to be chosen per cluster depended on the total number of streets found in each cluster. From selected streets, houses / business outfits on each street were chosen using systematic random sampling. In-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted in the course of the study with both parents and adolescents. Six male adolescents, six female adolescents, and six parents were interviewed. In all, 18 in-depth interviews were conducted across the four clusters. Quantitative data were also analyzed via descriptive statistics, while content analysis was deployed for qualitative data.

## Sociodemographics

The sociodemographic details of the respondents are represented and interpreted in Table 1. Most of the adolescents fall within the ages that bear the brunt of the emotional effects of bullying, as 40 percent of respondents are early adolescents (10–13 years), 35.1 percent are mid-adolescents (14–16 years), and 24.8 percent are late adolescents (17–19 years). From age 10 to 16, many adolescents tend to be easily influenced by their peers; furthermore, they have little sense of danger and can easily be bullied by their mates (Santor et al. 2000). By late adolescence, some of them also become bullies.

Most respondents in this study are males (52.3 percent), so they are socialized in the prevalent patriarchal culture that advances male dominance especially by age. A male child in the Yoruba cultural context is expected to be strong, brave, and intimidating—traits that could inculcate bullying tendencies in adolescent males (Falola and Genova 2006). Regarding academic accomplishment, 53.5 percent of the adolescents have acquired primary education, while 10.1 percent have acquired both primary and secondary education. Most of these adolescents attend public schools, which are epicenters of bullying and adolescent hooliganism in Ibadan (Animasahun 2014). Notwithstanding the respondents' level/s of education, they are exposed to the culture of bullying even in the public schools they attend (Ajuwon et al. 2011).

About 54.3 percent and 45.7 percent of the respondents are Christians and Muslims, respectively. Nigeria's social environment is highly religious, yet it is bedeviled by social vices. Though both Christianity and Islam present normative values against bullying, the counsels of respected religious leaders and adults against bullying are largely unheeded and have had little positive

impact on adolescents' bullying culture. Furthermore, in the Yoruba culture, children from stable homes are expected to be well behaved; they are not expected to engage in bullying. Despite the respondents' (parents) marital status—89 percent of the parents are married and live together—the adolescent respondents are exposed to bullying. In short, their parents' marital status does not provide protection from bullying. Most of the adolescents' parents are traders (53.3 percent) and artisans (22.1 percent); from this clear indication of the lower working-class group, these parents are compelled to work for extended periods because of their low incomes. As a result, little attention is paid to the circles of peers and friends their wards interact with within the neighborhood. Therefore, it is evident that without parental guidance, adolescents either are subject to bullying or become bullies (Ajuwon et al. 2011).

**Table 1:** Sociodemographic Characteristics of Respondents

| Sociodemographis (N = 516) | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| **Age of respondents** | | |
| 10–13 years (early adolescence) | 207 | 40.1 |
| 14–16 years (mid-adolescence) | 181 | 35.1 |
| 17–19 years (late adolescence) | 128 | 24.8 |
| Mean age of respondents | 14.45 ± 2.59 | |
| **Sex** | | |
| Male | 270 | 52.3 |
| Female | 246 | 47.7 |
| **Religion** | | |
| Christianity | 280 | 54.3 |
| Islam | 236 | 45.7 |
| **Highest educational attainment** | | |
| None | 52 | 10.1 |
| Primary | 276 | 53.5 |
| Secondary | 188 | 36.4 |
| **Parents' marital status** | | |
| Married | 464 | 89.9 |
| Single | 29 | 5.6 |
| Divorced | 9 | 1.7 |
| Separated | 14 | 2.7 |
| **Parents' profession** | | |
| Trader | 275 | 53.3 |
| Artisan | 114 | 22.1 |
| Farmer | 14 | 2.7 |
| Civil servant | 93 | 18.0 |
| Health officer | 20 | 3.9 |
| Guardian | 21 | 4.1 |

## Conceptualizing Bullying within the Ambits of Agbowo Community

This section examines the contextual definitions and interpretations of bullying in the respondents' environment, based on their residential dealings in the Agbowo community. Most respondents (70 percent) considered "being grabbed, kicked, pushed, or shoved" as acts of bullying, while 34.3 percent considered sexual jokes as bullying. In addition, 45.2 percent agreed that "being left out of talks between groups of friends" counted as bullying, while 56.6 percent deemed "being called names, being made fun of, or teased" as acts of bullying. Moreover, 57.4 percent of respondents mentioned receiving/sending humiliating social media messages as acts of bullying. Furthermore, 36 percent of respondents claimed spreading gossip and trying to make a person/people dislike another are acts of bullying. Respondents' definitions affirm that all subtle or aggressive actions aimed at causing physical, mental, or social harm are considered bullying in the Agbowo community; specifically, in this modern age, physical and verbal acts of bullying are carried out with social media tools with the aim of causing maximum emotional hurt to victims (Olumide et al. 2015). Bullying in Yoruba parlance is popularly called *ihale* (threat), *ipanilaya* (to make others fearful), and *ogboju li lo* (frightful assault). These reflect the deliberate violence being perpetrated against adolescent victims or groups by males, especially. Complex power relations that reveal forceful show of strengths by "superior" adolescents on vulnerable adolescents are also embedded in these terms. In short, bullying creates exploitative power structures among adolescents such that the victims are controlled in their interactions with these bullies; they are cheated and continually exploited with little or no channels of reprieve, unless they move out of their neighborhood (Agbowo).

To further corroborate this discourse, some of the informants define bullying as a multidimensional process of self-expression and exertion. According to an interviewee:

> There are many ways to define bullying … as it has different dimensions. How I define it is different from another person's because … [people have] different attributes. From my point of view, bullying is a situation whereby one "rides on" or "takes advantage" of someone … to "play smart" … It could be because of differences in age, status, knowledge, and academics [performance]. The person may appear soft; he might even be violent. If it is the latter, such confrontations will result in a brawl. (Male adolescent, Ogunleye Street, 2016)

Another interviewee said, "In my own opinion, bullying is when a 'stronger vessel' tries to intimidate a 'weaker vessel' … if it occurs once or repeatedly, it can be called bullying" (female adolescent, Ojokondo Street, 2016). Another respondent claimed, "Bullying is when someone tries to 'ride' on you because he thinks that he is stronger than you" (male adolescent, Omotara street, 2016). Yet another adolescent said: "Well, in this neighborhood, we have a group of people that even if you do nothing to them, they will start bullying you, for example, telling you that if you walk through a particular path, you will see what they will do to you and so on, and shouting at you. When I hear such, I run back to where I'm coming from, so they do not beat me up; I do not walk down paths where they are gathered" (male adolescent, Adegbite, 2016)

In an ironic twist, while the bullied is seen as the oppressed, bullies are often seen as "being smart" and "manly," that is, being streetwise, especially in Agbowo—a slum-like and violent neighborhood. This also depicts the typical power play among male adolescents in Agbowo. Bullying entails exerting control over others or a group/s by deploying open conflict, violence, assault, and harassment with the intention of boosting one's ego or social status among peers (Olumide et al. 2015). The bullied assumes the position of the weaker adolescent and is always at the mercy of the bully. In a different vein, some parents' understanding of bullying is different from their children's; an adolescent's parent made claimed: "It is a way of 'cheating' someone younger, and trying to show that one is much older; to me, age is a number; to prostrate for a shorter person does not mean you are higher than the person. I consider the unreasonable fights and quarrels as child's play; when they are grown up they will drop it" (respondent's father, Ajetunmobi Street, 2016). Another parent declared: "Ooh … if it is bullying, it happens very well" (Father, , Adewumi, 2016). One mother posited: "It is a language that is common among teenagers. It is either used in a friendly manner or used to antagonize a fellow teenager, and it can be in form of a joke or a criticism. It is not a big deal or problem; they will outgrow it" (mother, Ojokondo Street, 2016).

These responses indicate parents in Agbowo community have taken bullying as a normal and harmless pattern: a normative experience of adolescents (especially male) as they move into adulthood. Bullying is considered a part of the socialization process that will make adolescents wise and responsible adults by these set of parents. Sadly, one adolescent agrees with this view: "Bullying is normal from my point of view; this area is full of 'razz' (uncivilized) people; an elderly person may be smoking, and a young boy

may pass at the same time; the old man will then beckon on the young boy to get him an alcoholic drink with his money. Is this not bullying? And the boy dares not refuse" (female adolescent, Ogunleye, 2016). In short, bullying is considered a part of the socialization process. While adolescents are scared of bullies, some parents view it as normal. Hence, adolescents have little or no channels of reprieve but to accept bullying as an unavoidable socialization process in the journey to adulthood.

## Patterns of Bullying

Bullying culture permeates the Agbowo community, and the acts are not without patterns, including verbal, relational, physical, sexual, cyber, and symbolic (silence, brat behaviour, and third-party bullying). Of the total adolescent population, 63 percent have been bullied verbally, and half the population has bullied others verbally. Relational bullying via name-calling, lies, and the spread of rumors is the most prevalent form (64.1 percent) and has been perpetrated by 27.3 percent of the adolescents. Half (50.2 percent) the respondents reported they had been bullied physically, while the perpetration rate was 40.1 percent. More than 38 percent of respondents claimed they were victims of relational bullying (being left out by friends, being ignored, and property theft/destruction). However, 27.3 percent of respondents said they were perpetrators.

The data revealed relational bullying (lies and the spread of rumors) was the most predominant pattern of bullying among adolescents in Agbowo. Sexual bullying was the least common pattern of bullying, while verbal bullying was the most popular pattern of bullying perpetration, followed by physical bullying. Apart from the aforementioned bullying patterns identified in the survey, the qualitative data revealed other patterns, including symbolic bullying (silent bullying via looks, gesticulations, or use of colors, codes, and signs), brat bullying, and third-party bullying. The concept of brat bullying is well explained via the experience of one of the respondents: "One day, my children came home sad; when I asked what went wrong, I was told by my first child that our neighbors came back from Lagos with his children, and when they went to greet the children, they treated them badly" (Mother, Adewumi, 2016). Another respondent explained the concept of silent bullying: "Bullying is not only when someone beats somebody or harasses them physically; there is a way that someone looks at you and you feel terrified and intimidated" (Father, Adegbite, 2016).

Silent bullying is a social code that is used and understood by people in the Agbowo community. The use of the eyes and gesticulations to communicate to other people within a group is a popular nonverbal linguistic code among the Yorubas. For instance, Yorubas will say *omo oju ni ki se omo enu*, meaning a child can understand nonverbal speeches from mere facial expressions. Such "sharp" children are socially accepted and viewed as wise. Since the community, as it were, is a space where "people acquire the most fundamental and most substantial experience of social life outside the confines of the home" (Cohen 2001:15), learning the common bullying symbols gives an adolescent the capacity to understand the use of silence in everyday socialization.

Another pattern of symbolic bullying is third-party bullying, where local names used to identify bullies are used to instill fear in the victims by others. One respondent mentioned some of these names: "They call bullies *chin chin* [hard to crush], *apola* [club], *jagaban* [leaders of the warriors], and *alteco* [a strong glue]" (male adolescent, Ojokondo Street, 2016). Another respondent said: "Those bigger boys are called serious names—names that will make you quake when you hear them, like *jagaban, apola,* no mercy, and so on. When people tell you that they will report you to any of them, it means you are in trouble" (male adolescent, Major Salawu Street, 2016). The names of popular bullies in Agbowo were names that have significant and symbolic meaning within the Yoruba social context. For instance, *jagaban* is a chieftaincy title among the Hausas of Nigeria. This chieftaincy title was conferred on a popular Yoruba partisan politician. One of the hallmarks of the political *jagaban* is that he is a political warrior that rules other political warriors. Any bully tagged *jagaban* must also have some other bullies he "presides" over. Another significant matter is that the prominent bullies are all male adolescents, which implies hegemonic masculinity and male dominance system have a direct or indirect impact on the bullying culture in Agbowo.



## Gender Differences in Patterns of Bullying of Victims and Perpetrators

The study reveals that of all the respondents, males (39.3 percent) and females (33.7 percent) are bullied more relationally and verbally (males 35.1 percent, females 27.9 percent) than sexually, (17.1 percent males, 10.9 percent females). Of all male respondents, 28.5 percent conceded to bullying others verbally than sexually (16.5 percent). Similarly, females engage more

in bullying others verbally (21.5 percent) than sexually (4.5 percent). This simply infers that in heterosexual relations, the female sex tends to be at a disadvantage and is more vulnerable to rape, inappropriate sexual touch, and unwanted pregnancy, which are all frowned upon by the society. Reports of sexual harassment of males by females are rare. Also, the data reveal bullying is largely perpetrated by males than females in Agbowo, as further corroborated by one of the respondents:

> There are bigger boys on my street who are always bullying their age group. They are mostly boys, and they bully both boys and girls. For instance, I know that some boys use to *koba* [put in trouble] my friend. On this day, they beat him up and collected his money, shoe, and shirt from him. They slapped him and hit him with their fist. (male Adolescent, Olugbodi, 2016)

Another respondent added:

> Girls insult a lot; theirs take on the pattern of ill treatment and misunderstandings between themselves; they often feel they are "big girls," because they wear better clothes than others or because of the boys that they walk with … Some may say, "This girl is below my standard"—they do that to annoy people. Other may say, are we mates? Are we in the same class or gang? All they do is insult people, and that is all, but the boys are worse! (mother , Ojokondo, 2016)

This reiterates the fact that bullying is part of boyhood in Agbowo. It is like a rite of passage to manhood. Being a "big" boy entails being able to oppress and harass other adolescents and even some "adults." It seems to be a popular way of practicing how to "be a man" and how to control and manage social associations.

All forms of bullying discussed so far reflect a pattern of power differences among adolescents in Agbowo. Emerging themes from the findings are the local names given to bullies, which serve as a construct to bully others. Some of the names identified are *jagaban*, *apola*, *chin chin*, and *alteco*. *Jagaban* in the Yoruba context and Nigeria system denotes masculinity, being streetwise, highly connected, and dangerous. This implies bullies are highly revered in Agbowo, and this instills a sense of fear in the neighborhood. *Apola* is a Yoruba word that describes a club, a large, heavy piece of wood with a protruding head that is used as a weapon; this signifies the bullies are dangerous and can cause physical harm to their victims. *Chin chin* is a snack made from flour and butter fried in oil until it becomes crisp and hard. It can only be crushed and ground by the molar, so bullies named *chin chin* are capable of "crushing" their victims. Lastly, *alteco* is a type of adhesive. These local names are used as constructs to bully others.

The elements of bullying behaviors account for the prevalence of bullying (Macklem 2003; Vaillancourt et al. 2008), so adolescents' definitions of bullying are important in assessing bullying acts and behaviors. Therefore, it is imperative that differences in cultural context be considered while studying bullying among adolescents. In this study, a greater percentage (70 percent) of respondents affirmed bullying only occurs when the act is physical. This finding corroborates a similar study in Tanzania whereby hitting, kicking, spitting, pushing, and so on were listed as the most common forms of bullying. On the other hand, sexual bullying is classified as the least preferred form of bullying (34.3 percent), which also corresponds with the findings made in the same Tanzanian study (Ndibalema 2013).

The nature and patterns of bullying vary across spaces even within a society. In the history of Agbowo, bullying is a cycle of masculine violence that flows from one generation to another. It has become a "passage of rite" of socialization that may or may not cease at adulthood (Amin et al. 2018). This norm may have thrived because of the slum-like nature of the community and the permissive culture that gives room for masculine violence (Izugbara et al. 2014). As reflected in the data, many of the parents are traders and artisans, which means a larger number of parents may return late at night, giving their adolescent wards or children freedom to do what seems to them right and pleasurable. Also, many of these parents take their adolescent girls with them to their work place and leave their adolescent boys at home. This is with the notion that females are more vulnerable than males and need to be protected.

## Conclusion

The culture of bullying embedded in masculinity permeates many communities in Nigeria. The act is learned and performed as a process of socialization into manhood. The Agbowo community is an example of one in which bullying is a masculine norm during the transition from childhood to adolescence. Boys are more involved in bullying others; there are also more male victims. The society also promotes the notion that the process of becoming a man requires being tough, domineering, aggressive, oppressive, and violent, and in the process of imbibing these traits, bullying and being bullied becomes inevitable. Therefore, it is important that intervention is carried out in communities like Agbowo to sensitize and educate parents about the dangers of bullying during the period of their children's adolescence.

**Mofeyisara Oluwatoyin Omobowale** is Research Fellow/Lecturer at the Institute of Child Health within the College of Medicine at the University of Ibadan. She earned a PhD in Anthropology from the University of Ibadan with doctoral research on "Space, Sexuality and Power at Bodija Market, Ibadan, Nigeria." She was a recipient of the American Council of Learned Societies African Humanities Programme Doctoral Fellowship (2012–2013) and Postdoctoral Fellowship (2016), as well as the Cadbury Fellowship of the Department of Anthropology and African Studies at Birmingham University (2014). Her research interests cut across sexuality, culture, and health. Email: feyisarat@yahoo.com

**Offiong Akpabio** is a freelance writer with Wellbeing for Women Africa, a charity registered in England and Wales. She earned her Master's in Child and Adolescent Health from the Institute of Child Health at the University of Ibadan. She is the founder of Today's Adolescents and Young People's Initiative, an organization that provides support for adolescent and young people with physical, social, and psychological health challenges. Email: offiong_ea@yahoo.com

**Olukemi K Amodu** is Professor of Genetics/Molecular Biology and Public Health and Specialist Adviser in the Institute of Child Health at the University of Ibadan, where she obtained her Bachelor's, Master's, and PhD. She has been involved in several research studies such as childhood infectious diseases (malaria) relevant to public health research. She has collaborated with experts in Nigeria and in international laboratories in malaria research, including the Malaria Genetic Epidemiology Network and the EU-funded Biology of the Malaria Parasite. She recently developed the curriculum for the pioneering academic Master's program in Public Health Biotechnology. Email:amkemi@hotmail.com



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