

Review Article

Ethical Reflections on Sexuality and Sexual Education in Contemporary Society

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Abstract: Sexuality remains a concept that cannot be dissociated from human existence. Various interpretations and expressions of sexuality in the contemporary societies leave questions on the natural purpose for human sexuality as beings. This paper is an ethical reflection on human sexuality and sexual education in the contemporary society particularly in African context. Having clarified the main terms and with a literal approach to sexuality and sexual education, the paper discussed brief historical and general understanding of sexuality, biblical foundation of sexuality and African perspectives to sexuality and sexual education. While the traditional African mode of sexuality and its education begins with communicating gender roles to the children and avoidance of exposures to sexual organs because of the sacredness attached, the contemporary society opens the need for formal sexual education at earlier childhood due to the influences of industrialization, modernization, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) advancements and the media. The various societal institutions of family, schools, religious (church) and communities led by parents, teachers, religious leaders such as church pastors and the government respectively are to complement efforts to curb abuse and immoral uses of sexuality from the society through the various intra and inter institutional opportunities available for learning on sexuality.

Keywords: Education, Ethical, Reflection, Sexuality, Sexual, Society.

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INTRODUCTION

The terms, Sexuality and Sexual are both from the guide word, Sex which generally is a word of complex interpretations and understanding in many cultures globally. Whether spoken of in terms of generic distinction, human relationships, procreation or any other activities of humankind, it remains a powerful force connected to life and being. Sexuality makes a distinction between the dual but opposite appearances of living things, animal or plant with vivid attractions beyond the physical gender identities. In the human, sexuality found expressions in the involvement of all sense organs connoting that the mental, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of the humankind get woven together and identified in sexuality.

Sexuality is a powerful force dictated by life. Historical records revealed that the understanding to sexuality continues to metamorphose from one generation to another. It was simply connoted in terms of gender roles at some time to becoming a tool of power. Thus while it is seen as sacred it is also seen as

common, as private or personal versus general, individual versus collective/communal. Irrespective of the modern views about sex or human sexuality, the veneration of sexuality in the traditional understanding remains as it is respected, honoured and appreciated.

Definitions of Terms

The term, sexuality and its variants; sexual and sex is a common word in day to day expressions and communicative languages which may be taken for granted in definition. It is therefore important to state clearly what the terms as used in this paper connote.

Sexuality

Describes the gender identity of individuals and also the personality in terms of behaviours and attitude in some cultures. It is not only a gender expression of the physiological make up of a being, it is also relevant in terms of the psychological and sociological interface of persons. In the definition of the World Health Organization, sexuality is considered as a “central aspect of being human throughout life and

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encompasses sex, gender identities, and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproductive” [1]. According to Okafor, sexuality is a natural part of life which deals with how humankind is made or created in terms of being male or female. It depicts the essence of humanity not only in terms of gender identity as male or female, but also describes an expression of feelings for procreation and roles in the society [2]. Thus, sexuality is defined in this paper as the being of belonging to a particular gender of either male or female and exhibiting traits of such in behavior and conduct such as in the interaction of the reproductive organs.

Sexual Education

This is concerned with education on issues related to biological, emotional and socio-cultural practices on sexuality. The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) defines sexual education as the process of seeking “to equip the young people with the knowledge, skills, attitude and values they need to determine and enjoy their sexuality- physically, emotionally, individually and in relationships” [3]. Thus sexual education involves teachings, studies and learning on concerns of sexuality.

Ethical Reflections

Sexuality is a basic motive of life and an essential factor for health and well-being. Thus, the society dictates and exerts great deal of influence on the rightness or wrongness of conducts and how humankind expresses their sexuality. As a social being, humankind has the duty of relating and getting involved with other people from within their environment and cultural contexts. Therefore, inter-personal relationships with regards to sexuality are judged by agreeable ethical standards and norms of the society as applied within the given context. As a result, it is required that environmental exposure for learning and knowledge acquisitions of various social elements including value systems, culture, and other aspects are adequately discharged by the supposed custodians of such within the given environment one live in. God, the creator of all things including sexuality has all answers to every question as regards to human sexuality.

The risk of a misuse and abuse of human sexuality which constitute to immorality increases when the standards of the Creator and Source of sexuality are not upheld. God is the Creator and Source of human

sexuality, the word of God is therefore the best guide to ethical understanding and moral applications to sexuality. This paper will therefore examine the historical and general understanding of human sexuality, biblical foundation of human sexuality, the traditional African views of sexuality and sexual education, and an ethical reflection on contemporary views of the human sexuality and sexual education.

Historical and General Understanding on Sexuality

The various perceptions to human sexuality in the history of the church sprang from philosophical, biblical-theological and scientific. Ancient philosophers divided human beings into two parts: soul and body teaching that soul was separate from and superior to the body [4]. The negative perspective of physical side of life in soul and body dualism sees the spiritual as definite and good element in human composition. The Hellenistic Gnostics believed that the material body was imprisoned or confined in the house of the soul. Early philosophers view human sexuality as primarily important for procreation. What this implied to them was that procreation will help in the survival of tribes and sustainability of community populations.

The Asceticism viewed that the physical or material are innately evil and therefore must be subjected to self-discipline or mortification. This kind of life was expressed by the Stoics, Jewish ascetic and Christian monastics. For them the road to getting nearer to God was to mutilate practically eliminate all distractions which are considered as temporal even to the point of mutilations of the body including detachment from all things material, and avoidance of all things attributed to pleasure especially sexual desires. This view of sex tends to render sexuality as an evil to be suppressed or avoided [5]. This also was influential upon early Christianity resulting into exalting virginity and acceptance of celibacy.

Furthermore, Augustine set restrictions of Christian sexual ethics, for many centuries when he defines the purpose of sexual union as procreation. Marriage, the context of legitimate sex has three purposes; 1. for children (*proles*), 2. fidelity and the avoidance of fornication(*fides*), and 3. the indissoluble and sacramental bond of Christian partners (*sacramentum*) [6]. This in a way remained a major charge read at every Church service for solemnization of marriage vows even in the contemporary modern society.

¹ About IPPF accessed from <https://www.ippf.org/> on 02/02/23

² Okafor, S. O. (2018) “The Indigenous Concept of Sexuality in Africa Tradition and Globalization.” in *Global Journal of Reproductive Medicine*, 6(1), 555676. DOI: 10.19080/GJ ORM.2018.06.55575.

³ Council of Europe, “Sexuality” in Gender Matters. Accessed from <https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/sexuality> on 07/01/2023

⁴James, F. C. (1986) “Platonic Ethics”, *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (ed.) Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, p476ff.

⁵Joel, E. T. (1997) *Walking in the Way: An Introduction to Christian Ethics*. Nashville, Tennessee: Broadmann & Holman Publishers, p159.

⁶ Ibid.

Right from Protestant Reformation, there are changes in sexual traditions and grounded in the meaning of sexuality in biblical teachings, the belief that the purpose of sexual intercourse continue along with a certain ambivalence regarding sexual desire, But the contemporary Christian ethics has given more emphasis to the “norm of love” and less to procreation although marriage continues to be the normal context of sex. The reflection of this is that Christian thinkers view sexuality more in relation to personality and identity seeing sexual desire as a positive good and avenue for love and commitment. So there is increase in sexual debates that is not only philosophical but religious and cultural; with interpretations shifting from Judeo-Christian foundations to secularism.

Since the modern era, there are several efforts to present understanding of sexuality beyond the supposed captivity or “old school” syndrome to the liberation avenue with emphasis on quality sexuality expressions to “free sex” world and a general secularization of sexuality. Scientifically, it is recognized as a biological implied syndrome to which no one could dictate or make personal choice of. For instance, it is not in human ability to choose to be a male or female, just as it is not in human capacity to make sexual organs and systems to develop or not to.

The Darwanian Theory of Sexual Selection explains the irresistible control of nature over human sexuality. Sexual selection is a natural sexual process whereby members of a biological sex choose sex mates of the opposite sex and compete with members of the same sex for access to those of the opposite sex. The tendency for sexual selection is believed to be highest among humans, which has been discovered as the most fastidious mate selector of all living creature [7]. For instance, in lower animals, male frogs croak, while female frogs select the male with the deepest croaks. The tails of male peacocks and antlers of male deer attract female ones which make their selections based on the most beautiful and of more tentacles respectively. In higher animals or mammals, the manes of male lions are sexual selection factors for the lioness.

While suggesting that the elaborate tails of the peacocks exists because females prefer to mate with males that had longer, brighter or more beautiful tail, the application in human remained unraveled. It is arguably suggested that aesthetic displays in human focus on the face, breasts, buttocks, the pelvis and the clitoris. Such tendencies obviously do not apply equally to all human races and tribes. Similarly, Jerry Bergman postulated that because men also desire certain traits in the women they marry, they look for such physical appearance such as body figure, of certain proportions,

⁷ Reed, E. (1975). *Woman's Evolution: From Matriachal Clan to Patriachal Family*, (NY: Pathfinder Press, 1975).

breast size, body hair distribution, eye color, feet size and other traits as desired. Thus, when males compete for quantity of females, the female tend to compete for quality of males.

The emotional feelings of sexuality and influence of sexual urges not necessarily intended for reproduction remained debatable. Obviously, apart from physiological attractions to expressions of sexuality, human sexuality continues to display behavioral traits which produce sexual drives relative to the human social and intellectual compatibility [8]. While historical sexual morality insists on purposeful sexual union especially for procreation, the contemporary view sees this as double standard in favor of a gender above the other. In the new understanding, women were now liberated to join men in promiscuity, all sexual restrains were rejected and a new era of gratification of sex and sexual expressions became recognized by laws and codes of ethics by many nations of the world.

Biblical Foundation of Human Sexuality

The Genesis account of creation clearly revealed God as the Creator of sexuality. Every dimension to sexuality; gender difference, procreation, sexual union, or functional role differences originates from God. When humankind was created in the image of God, they were created as male and female (Gen.1:27). The human, created in the image of God depicts sharing in some attributes and character of God. For instance, one of the attribute of God is Love. God is love and expresses His love, (Agape) in many ways by His generosity, benevolence, caring and being concerned about human negative situations. In the same way, human sexuality allows for expression of love (Eros, Philio, and Agape) in seeking for and giving to physical attractions, emotional intimacy, social caring, being concerned about others as appropriate.

For the purpose of appropriate sexual intimacy, God made the woman from the man so he could have a companion; for God said it was not good for the man to be alone (Gen. 2:18-23). The dimension of sexual union is shown in the man and the woman uniting to become one flesh, and not ashamed of being naked (Gen. 2:24 &25). Sexual intercourse or coitus is an expression of love within the ordinance of marriage [9]. Although this physical and emotional expression of love forms a significant dimension to human sexuality, it is only appropriate when it remains within the

⁸Bergman, Jerry. *Problems in Sexual Selection Theory and Neo-Darwinism*, (https://creation.com/images/pdfs/tj/j18_112-119.pdf), 117. Accessed on 12/10/16

⁹ Emiola, N., Aderonke, O., & Kayode, O. (2017) “Christian Sexuality: A Youth Discipleship Handbook on Sex Education” (Ogbomoso, Nigeria: Kingdom Impact Publishing and Media Limited.), 17.

boundaries of marriage. As the colorful icing on the wedding cake, sexual intercourse is to be accepted as a wedding gift of God to the newly married man and woman [10]. Sex is not what a man and a woman should engage in when they have not been pronounced as husband and wife by any legally constituted authority.

Improper use of human sexuality constitutes disobedience to biblical injunctions. The human body belongs to God, every part of the body including the sex organs is God's. It is expected that all parts of the body be applied in all obedience, fidelity, and sacredness as against immorality of rebellion, unfaithfulness or the profane [11]. Deviation from God's set standard in the use of God's gift of sexuality is sin and immoral. The Bible enjoins the people of God to live responsible life of chastity, sanctity and fidelity. Christians are to avoid all forms of sexual perversions as enumerated in Leviticus Chapter 18 which include incest; as it is considered as wickedness (18:17), adultery or fornication; for it brings defilement (Vs 18), homosexuality; it is detestable (vs22), bestiality; it is a perversion (vs 23). Violations of these instructions amount to incurring the wrath of God not only on the transgressor but also on entire family or household and community.

African Traditional Perspective of Sexuality and its Education

African cultural values and norms regarding sexuality are diverse. Perceptions of human sexuality vary within given cultural contexts. The African traditional sexual ethics is confronted with several challenges by the different views on sexual education prevailing in the contemporary society. There are taboos as well as sacredness attached to sexuality. Children are kept aloof when adults must discuss sexual issues in their presence. Sexual acts or union are abruptly forbidden from taking place in their presence such as kissing, tight hugging, caressing or sexual intercourse. Among the Yoruba, young adults get engaged for marriage through *Alarina*, meaning "in-between" or march-maker. Parents of the bride to be must be notified of this intention by other persons rather than their Bride to be daughter. The daughter would wait until the set time the parents called her to discuss the matter if they would eventually consent to the proposal. This cultural practice enabled the couple to be to maintain chastity with the fact that the Bride must remain a virgin until the first night of her marriage.

¹⁰GoodFriday, A. (2019). "African Christian Concept of Human Sexuality and Its Consummation" in *International Journal of Innovative Social Sciences & Humanities Research*, 7(3), 73-78.

¹¹Matthews A. O. (2005). "Religion and Sexuality: Individuality, Choice and Sexual Rights in Nigerian Christianity" in *Africa Regional Sexuality Resource Centre (ARSRC)*.

The African do not see sexuality as personal issue, therefore in sexual education, gender roles are emphasized from tender age of children to promote the collective good of community beginning from the extended family. In the contemporary African context however, sexuality is experienced and expressed in thought fantasies, desire, belief, attitudes, values, behaviors, practices, role and relationship [12]. In spite of the many changes affecting indigenous cultural dispositions of communities generally, sexual expressions in African societies continued to resist stern controls which exert pressure on sexual relationships that do not meet with traditional standards and norms. For instance, among the Yoruba of Nigeria, couples who have been having children outside of dowry payments to the family of the woman are not accorded the respect due to married couples.

In the traditional African view, human sexuality is highly respected. The importance and respect accorded to human sexuality and sexual union are expressed in cultural practices through songs, folktales, dances, oral traditions, clothing and even diet; in quantity and quality of food intake. For instance, among the Yoruba and Igbo of Nigeria, when a fowl is slaughtered within a household, certain parts are reserved for the man, sons and then the girls and the women. The quantity of food served for the male; father and sons also outweighs that for the girls and woman. The ideas are that the male perform more tedious duties and require more food for growth than the females.

There are certain things in the make-up of human sexuality that are on the extreme side of avoidance in the value system of the African. This idea and belief tend to create a sense of caution in its use. For instance, it is considered obscene to speak of sexual organs or sexual union loudly or in the public. Among the Kikuyu in Kenya and the Yoruba for instance, sexual organs particularly of the female are not mentioned in the open. Sometimes this sacred object considered a taboo when mentioned categorically, is being eroded with changes in cultural elements including language, clothing, religion and other social values as a result of globalization.

In spite of the noticeably free sex world we are due to modernization, certain words associated with sexuality are still considered offensive to public hearing; such as "f**k you" or by raising the middle finger as symbol. Ironically, however, while the Western world continued to maintain that human sexuality and sexual union be accorded respect by the feelings of disdain at the raising of the forefinger, many cultures in Africa who had high esteem for human sexuality no longer do so. How many Yoruba youths

¹²World Health Organization. *Defining Sexual Health: Report of a Technical Consultation on Sexual Health.* (nd)

understand what it means when someone scattered the fingers at them? It is saying; *Iya Re or Yio ba'ya Re* in Yoruba and a symbol of defaming the sexuality of one's mother among the Yoruba in Nigeria. It seems such values are eroding from the African society. That resulted to the increase high level of moral degradation that is encroaching into society and causing a lot of damage with a lot of consequences.

Ethical Reflections on Sexuality and Sexual Education

The contemporary society is influenced in various ways by industrialization, modernization, globalization, and more recently, by Information and Communication Technology which has bred the Jet Age. Traditional value systems are either eroding or absolutely extinct in some cases. The impacts of the different developmental phenomena have produced several mixed value systems that are controlled by individual instincts rather than communal dispositions. Globalization and ICT for instance allow for domination of some cultures over another. Through the use of technology, and the internet, prevailing trends of fashion or any sexuality expressions in the West are seen barely few seconds after posting on social media and this gets copied within a short period. Ironically too, trends that come from the Western world are considered better and preferred because of many factors.

Sexuality orientation in the contemporary society has diversity of sexual expressions. There are expressions of homosexuality, heterosexuality and bisexuality. There are those who do not appear to demonstrate sexual union feelings, described as asexual, and transsexual describing a condition of being born in a wrong body, such as having the opposite of gender physical appearance to behavioral or emotional/psychological sexual feelings. While these situations have become the "new normal" (post COVID-19) in the West, they are becoming more pronounced in our local communities and around us too in Nigeria.

Major ethical issue with sexual education is the delivery process and relevance to given cultural contexts. Questions like who should teach what, and to what extent should what be taught, when or at what age should what, be taught, and how should what be taught? remain controversial for an only God knows when in Africa, particularly in the contemporary society. The skill of what knowledge to be imparted on the child/student is a challenge to the contemporary society since many of the supposed student or learner appear more knowledgeable and experienced in what the supposed teacher was not aware of at doubled the age of the student.

The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), a global body on sexual education,

identified seven components as essential to human sexuality and education; gender, sexual reproductive health, rights, citizenship, pleasure, violence, diversity and relationship [13]. It is expected that a wholistic sexual education should impress on the learner a vivid understanding of their gender identity as male or female and to remain as that. But there are arguments about some human who feel belonging in a "wrong" biological body. This means that such persons claim they are the opposite gender of their physiological appearance. On the IPPF definition of sexual education, skill development is a factor. What kind of skills would be needed for impartation on the learner then? For instance how does a Biology teacher teach Reproductive System with an outcome of having developed skills in the students without practical demonstrations of sexual union or expressions? These are issues associated with sexual education and how to handle them morally.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is obvious that the contemporary understanding and applications to human sexuality is flawed as seen in various amoral sexual conducts and practices prevalent in our societies. No society is venerated from the current immoral practices of abuse or misuse of the God-given gift of sexuality. However, rather than pointing accusing fingers or shifting the blames for moral failures and ethical degeneration prevalent in the society on sexuality or its education, everyone or institution; parent/family, pastor/church, teacher/school, and government/society, need arise to the duty of rejuvenation of ethos and standards originally accorded to human sexuality from the creation.

It is quite evident that everyone in the society; children, the youth, young adults, senior citizens and the aged needs sexual education. It is no longer true that only the girl child needs to preserve her virginity until marriage, the boy child too must be educated to avoid becoming a rapist. While the girl child needs education on how to handle her monthly menstrual flow, the boy child needs to learn how to control his erections accompanied with nocturnal/early morning wetness. While the young woman is being educated to respond to the man to whom she has given her vows to honour with her body, the man also needs education to control his emotions with understanding to not over drive his wife nor commit adultery. Also, the aging women need sexual education on menopausal symptoms while the aged men must have education on natural hormonal fluctuations associated with their age.

¹³ IPPF accessed from <https://www.ippf.org/> on 28/01/23

Family

Proper sexual education must involve all institutions in every society. Beginning with the family, parents and entire family have huge responsibilities to impart the right, biblically founded and morally acceptable knowledge and practices to the young ones. While it is okay to let children know the right names of sexual organs and the proper usage of them per time and age, the value system of the family must be maintained. Parents must avoid absolutely the acts of sexual union to the watch of the children or anyone for that matter. Sex is expected to be private even between married couples.

School Institution

The school institution is another important avenue to inculcate morally sound education on sexuality to pupils. Teachers are expected to be people of integrity who will instil discipline on pupils beyond that which their parents can give. It was the fear of being caught by the teachers that made pupils to write those abusive or immoral slogans in hidden places such as latrines walls, street corners and in the night when everywhere is dark. Moral disciplines have to return to the schools, as against immoralities by some male teachers who impregnate young girls in secondary schools or lecturers in higher institutions who have girlfriends among their female students for the sake of passing their courses without necessary studies.

The Church

The church is the first institution for godly and morally sound education after the family. Christian Education ought to be wholistic and all encompassing. Christian educators and pastors must live exemplary moral lives so the young believers could be thoroughly disciplined in the way of the Lord. Sexual education should not remain a taboo under the guise of religion. The irony of it is that everyone who needed education has the tools to access information beyond what was needed and which may result into more grievous immoral practices. Lack of or inadequate sexual education may leave the younger generation in the dark causing them to dwell on myths, misconceptions and superstitions. A female friend shared with me how she lost her virginity as a teenager because she was told that having sexual intercourse was the antidote to the painful experience of her monthly flow. It was when the pains continued even after she had ignorantly given herself for sex she realized it was mere myth and deceit.

Community

This is the largest institution in which the other ones are part of. Communities owe every member the duty of maintaining ethical standards by passing the right education to upcoming generations. Particularly in

Africa, the traditional way of raising the younger ones collectively must be put to practice. Community members as neighbours, relatives, friends and colleagues are to take sexual education to the younger ones as collective responsibilities.

All the social institutions; family, schools, church and communities need to work together through the institutional leaders; parents, teachers, pastors and religious leaders and the government to re-establish the and to rebuild the devastating imagery of human sexuality. The older generation should not continually fold the hands and watch human lose the dignity and honour accorded to sexuality at creation.

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