



**AFRICA REGIONAL SEXUALITY
RESOURCE CENTRE**

2a

Understanding Human Sexuality Seminar Series

DISCUSSANT

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Comments on

**HUMAN SEXUALITY IN
NIGERIA: A HISTORICAL
PERSPECTIVE**

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Dr Ikpe's paper has presented the historical perspective of human sexuality in Nigeria and in doing so, the author has highlighted both the historical silence on sexuality as well as the silence of sexuality. It is important to understand these two elements of the discourse, as they are both related and interdependent.

In several Nigerian societies even up to the modern time, there exists some reluctance or perhaps difficulty, in directly discussing issues of sexuality particularly between parents and their children. This difficulty or reluctance is probably responsible for the historical silence or paucity of historical materials on sexuality in the country. The moralisation of sexuality has meant that it could only be discussed in the context of marriage and the bringing up of children.

Within that context, a man remains appealing to the other sex if he possesses certain characteristics expected of a man such as bravery, agility, industriousness and some good bucks. A woman on the other hand is expected to be a good cook, of good behaviour and possessing of a rounded figure! A rounded figure in a lady has been historically accepted as an evidence of fertility. This is particularly prominent in the "Fattening Room" culture of the Calabar.

Unfortunately this concept of sexuality promotes a sexual relationship that supports domination by the male sex due to the obvious economic and social advantages of the roles and characteristics allocated culturally to men. On the other hand, women are being expected to be content with having good culinary abilities and to indulge themselves in a degree of gluttony, which will also ensure their continued economic dependence. The gluttony is to ensure a rounded figure so as to be marriageable!

The power relationship between the sexes is further defined by the usual disparities in the ages of men and women in marital unions. The men are often older and, therefore, possess additional cultural leverage over the women as age is to be respected and deferred to.

With increasing westernisation and the incursion of libertarian philosophies, women are gradually coming out of the prescribed historical mould to assert their individuality. It is gradually becoming fashionable to be trim-fit and more and more women are pursuing demanding careers outside the kitchen.

As Dr. Ikpe put it and as is widely acknowledged, men historically were not required to be inexperienced sexually. They were, thus, free and at times encouraged to have pre-marital sexual intercourse. Today, the requirement for women to be virgins is no longer being enforced. In some settings now, it is the women who are virgins that must remain quiet about it. Previously, non-virgins were those who hid their faces in shame.

Dr. Ikpe further illustrated the various cultural differences in the perception and practice of sexuality and I cannot but agree with that. However, female circumcision has been found to have a negative effect on the reproductive health and mental health of many circumcised women. This is the reason why it is regarded as a form of mutilation and cries have been raised against its practice. Perception and practice, naturally, have been the product of a people's collective experience and historical background. Historically, socio-economic re-arrangements within societies have been a major contributor to the re-definition and re-appreciation of human sexuality.