

**YOUTHS AT CROSSROADS: LATE TEENS IN THE SEXUAL REPRESSIVENESS-
PERMISSIVENESS CONFUSION: THE CASE OF HARARE.**

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ABSTRACT

Late teens in Harare contend with institutional attempts to restrict and control their sexual activities, yet they paradoxically enjoy considerable sexual freedom, as powerful social actors. There are efforts to instill sexual discipline and impart sexual education into the teens via institutions, such as the family, media, religion, and education. Mechanisms sexually controlling the teens are themselves, muddled by contradictions which leave most youths sometimes eluded, unaware of 'proper' sexual expectations, and at the mercy of their own discretions and judgments of how to sexually behave. The sexual permissiveness-repressiveness gamut is mediated by gender, in which the male and female teens are skewed in the permissiveness and repressiveness sides, respectively. The study utilized a qualitative research methodology where in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were the major tools for collecting data. The linchpin of this project is on ensconcing that despite the institutional "childrenisation" and "asexualisation" of unmarried late teens, the reality is that they can be or are sexually active beings.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Sexual permissiveness is conceptualized as sexual tolerance or a liberty enjoyed by people, whether wittingly or unwittingly granted and ‘sexual repressiveness’ as sexual control or surveillance to which they are subjected. Late teens confront a sexual permissiveness-repressiveness simultaneity which poses a dilemma of what is sexually expected of them. Aschwanden (1989) noted that among the “traditional” Karanga of Zimbabwe, there are taboos to prohibit incest, endogamy, pre-marital sex, and the shaming of premarital pregnancy. Sexual restriction among the ‘traditional’ Kisii of Kenya coexists with considerable levels of permissiveness in which Kisii sexual adolescents are allowed to have non-penetrative sex, such as thigh sex (Silberschmidt, 1999). Sexual tutelage delivered through rites of passage regulated sexualities of pubescent girls and boys in ‘traditional’ African societies. However, there are waning and/or reconfigurations of these rituals with the adoption of “modern” cultural practices. Among the Karanga of Zimbabwe, initiation would signal one’s marriageability and this meant that all initiated late teens were marriageable adults (Aschwanden, 1982). The initiation ceremony is a device by which the community passed on knowledge and symbolic metaphors to the young about the meanings and practical implications of sex and marriage (Ntukula, 1994). Tamale (2005) identified the existence of *Ssenga*, a female sexual initiation institution among the Baganda of Uganda, whose role is to educate young girls in a range of sexual matters, including pre-menarche practices, pre-marriage preparation, erotic instruction, and reproduction. In stressing the importance of initiation, Tumbo-Masambo (1998) notes that among the Wagogo and Wayao of Tanzania, sexual intercourse before circumcision is taboo and Yao girls are severely punished if it is known that they have engaged in sexual intercourse before puberty. The waning of initiation rites with the espousal of urbanity entails that teenagers get more information about sexual matters from the peer group than from elders. Teenagers can, therefore, gather information from the streets and are more likely to be misinformed, and this can influence their decisions on sexual matters.

Despite societal attempts to repress teenage sexuality via institutions, such as the family, religion, and education, urban teenagers enjoy considerable sexual permissiveness. Most late teenagers live with parental figures that take them as children and purport to take custody of their sexual purity and innocence (Weeks, 1981). Foucault (1998) argues that parents, families, educators, and doctors would have to take charge, in a continuous way, of children and adolescents’ perilous, precarious, dangerous,

and endangered sexual potential. Contrary to Caldwell and Caldwell's (1987) assertion that African societies are sexually permissive, Heald (1995) argues that most African societies restrict sexual activity by placing value on virginity, chastity, and condemning adultery. He maintains that, in Africa, sex is generally regarded as sacred, as advocated by the religious ethos. In Zimbabwe the dominant religions are Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR), all of which publicly discourages premarital sexual activity (Weinrich, 1982; Schmidt, 1992). Marriage constitutes the institutionalisation of sexual activity, and having sex outside marriage is viewed as disdainful (Weinrich, 1982); hence, unmarried late teenagers are viewed as ineligible to have sex. While late teens are physiologically sexually mature and, therefore, marriageable, the ideal is that those who would be pursuing formal education are sexually refrained under the pretext that they should first pursue their educational careers for them to improve their chances for formal employment (Bourdillon, 1986). Schmidt (1992) notes that the Christian missionary educational endeavour demanded obedience to authority and discipline, virtues which are essential in the governance of teenage sexualities.

While premarital teenage sexual activity is usually condemned among Zimbabwean, modernity and urbanity presents a challenge. In Zimbabwean 'traditional' Shona and Ndebele societies, girls were respected for being virgins (Hungwe, 2006; Nyathi, 2001). However, Bourdillon (1993) noted the waning of treasuring such status in contemporary Zimbabwe where there is reduced control of urban girls' and boys' mobility and consequently of their sexualities, because they spend more time at school, out of their homes and the control of elders.

Zimbabwean urban teenagers contend with socio-economic pressures that compel them into exploitative sexual activities in which sex is coerced or transacted for "modern" goods and services (Holland *et al*, 2002; Ortner and Whitehead, 1988). Therefore, teenagers face a sexual permissiveness-repressiveness predicament in which their sexual dispositions and experiences are a product of their positions in the socio-economic matrix.

The sexual experiences and perceptions of teenagers are mediated by prevailing situational circumstances. Socio-economic change associated with modernity and urbanity has granted a variety of sexual-related freedoms to teens. There are increased exposures of Zimbabwean teens to western education and to local and international media (Bourdillon, 1993); these exposures can result in the teens

embracing Western sexual mores, some of which are abhorred by stakeholders like parents, who accrue honour by taking custody of teenagers' sexualities (Pitt-Rivers in Goddard, 1987). Zimbabwean late teens, by virtue of attaining the age of eighteen, are legally entitled to make independent decisions and to enjoy freedoms associated with such entitlements as provided by the Legal Age of Majority Act (LAMA) of 1982 (Bourdillon, 1993). LAMA undermines parental control of eighteen year olds whom parents can treat as children but who are legally treated as adults with sexual entitlements. James and Prout (1990) conceptualise childhood as a 'social construct' which is context-specific. Some Western societies pin down the concept of a child to include only those aged below sixteen or eighteen years. LAMA is informed by this western definition of a child, yet in Zimbabwean societies a child is not merely defined in terms of age but also, if not mainly, in terms of responsibilities and obligations (Bourdillon, 2000); hence, one can be an adult in terms of chronological age, but socially regarded as a child. Late teens are, therefore, confronted by a children-adults duality, in which the state legally grants them sexual freedoms as adults, while the family and religion regard them as children and rebuke their sexual activities.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The coming in of "modernity" has ruptured the "tradition" creating cultural syncretism and divergences which can have equivocal influences on teenagers' sexual expectations. The arena of teenage sexual interaction is muddled by linguistic repression which generates communication problems. Late teens in Harare are not spared by these inconsistencies as they grapple with the incongruence between the institutionalised governance of their sexualities and their endowment with capabilities and capacities to explore sexual options. It is against the backdrop of teenage infection with STIs and the prevalence of teenage pregnancies that late teens should be legitimately recognised as sexual citizens.

Objectives of Study

- To explore the teens' accounts of their experiences and perceptions of institutionalised sexual restraint.
- To examine the gendered aspects of sexual repressiveness and permissiveness as experienced and perceived by the teens.
- To evaluate the teenagers' perceptions of how the sexual repressive-permissiveness paradox impacts their sexual decisions making.

Research Methodology

The methods used in this exploratory research were predominantly a qualitative methodology in which in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were used. In the in-depth interviews, a semi-structured interview guide was used and this mainly collected the individual narratives on their sexual behaviours. This data was ground truthed by a series of focus group discussions, which were used to validate data collected from individual interviews. The collected data was qualitatively analysed to produce a descriptive account.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Ambiguities and Inconsistencies of Institutions Controlling Teenager Sexuality

The institutional mechanisms directed towards instilling particular sexual dispositions into teenagers are rocked by internal and external synergistic discrepancies. The family is constituted of stakeholders with conflicting influences on teenagers' sexual perceptions and behaviours, which shows intra-institutional synergistic discrepancies. Whereas parents generally rebuke teenagers' sexual activities, older siblings do not necessarily seem to compliment their efforts. In fact, these older siblings were encouraging their younger ones to seek sexual exploits. For example brothers provided venues for their younger brothers to host their sexual partners and sisters also encourage their younger sisters to date men sometimes for transacting sex for "modern" goods and services. This kind of interaction is usually not good, as most of such activities resemble commercial sex and usually expose them to the deadly HIV and AIDS virus because those facilitating these relationships are only interested in material things. Thus, the family, just like the school and religion, is a contradictory unit with equivocal impacts on the sexual dispositions of the teens.

Poor inter-institutional synergies rocking the socialisation of youth on matters of sex are explicit in the research findings. The system constituted the socialising institutions which are undermined by mal-functionalism, which can generate 'sexual normlessness'. For instance, while the family, church, and school officially condemn teenage sexual activity, cultural practices, such as Kitchen Parties and Bachelors' Parties, do not outrightly condemn premarital teenage sexual activity but are good events that create environments that are conducive for sexual activities; this poses problems of inter-institutional coordination. The participants indicated that they are invited to attend such functions where

they are tutored on erotic skills, the focus being on ‘bedroom etiquette’. The participants admitted that such kind of education could arouse sexual desire and encourages experimentation among them. In handling the incongruous sexual education which are delivered to them, teenagers therefore have to partly (if not fully) depend on their own judgments and discretions which are sometimes based on misinformation.

The adornment of the body was depicted as essential in the restriction of female teens’ sexualities. Female teens’ deportment reflects on their sexual dispositions; hence, the stereotyping of certain dress codes as reflecting on their sexual decency or slackness (Jenkins, 1992). It was highlighted that for parents, ministers of religion, and other people interested in restricting young girls’ sexual activities, the censorship of the girls’ dress codes and deportment is considered important. In some families the wearing of tight fitting trousers and miniskirts by girls is prohibited. Following Schutz (in Wallace and Wolf, 1991), it can be maintained that there is a stock of knowledge which typifies and categorises some dress codes, deportments, gaits, manners, and styles as sexually suggestive and, thus, as antisocial.

The participants spelt out the targeting of the body for sexual censorship of female teens by making reference to the practice of virginity testing which they claimed to be prevalent among the local *Chewa* people; this only excluded boys from virginity testing and highlights the contradictions of the coexistence of sexual constraint for female teens with sexual permissiveness for male teens.

Teens’ and the Great Fear

The participants highlighted that their quest to indulge in sexual adventures is constrained by the fear of HIV and AIDS. This was shown by many boys who expressed skepticism about having unprotected sex. It is because of this fear that the boys (just like other men in mainstream society) stereotyped commercial sex workers as carriers of HIV and AIDS. The fear of HIV and AIDS is deeply entrenched in the cosmology of both the boys and girls, who all claimed to have seen the impacts of the “scourge” as it disfigures and kills people. The prevalence of HIV and AIDS in Zimbabwe, which at some time peaked 25%, had left nearly every family being affected or infected by the deadly pandemic and this had given these teenagers some insights on the impacts of the deadly disease.

HIV and AIDS can be viewed as taking the form of a social institution which regulates human behavior.

They argued that social institutions are pervasive and self-imposing, and so are HIV and AIDS. It is, therefore, a refraining factor on the sexual behaviours of young people because it compels them to abstain, to limit the number of their sexual partners, to be faithful to one partner, and to use condoms. Thus, even if the teens may enjoy sexual freedoms, most are continually constrained by the fear of HIV and AIDS.

Deployment of Alliance versus Deployment of Sexuality

Teenagers are possessors of power to make sexual decisions. Even if institutions of alliance, such as the family, religion, the school, and the media are bent on impounding teens' sexual behaviours, they are the final masters of their own sexual destinies. Foucault (1998) argues that 'in the deployment of alliance', the participants express that they could conform to the doctrine of sexual abstinence which is institutionally imposed on them. It is in light of this that some of the girls have their virginity and claimed to be seeking to preserve it until they get married. This was shown by some girls who claimed to be striving to demonstrate social responsibility by being sexually reserved, despite the presence of opportunities to engage in sexual escapades, especially when their parents are away.

The fact that teenagers are malleable to the demands of the cultural arbitrary (as reflected by their conformity) does not mean that they are structurally confined to positions of passive receivers of sexually constraining pedagogy. It is in light of Foucault's (1998) notion of 'deployment of sexuality' that some teenagers were resorting to sexual indulgence in defiance of authority or as an assertion of personal freedom. The participants acknowledged their subjection to sexual surveillance but said that's all futile as it merely depends on their willful conformity. This is in line with the view that human beings are knowledgeable and powerful agents; hence, teenagers possess knowledge and power to determine their sexual destinies, despite being constrained (Giddens, 1984). The very structures that seek to sexually constrain the teens are also enabling. This is exemplified by the case of the church, where the teens are taught sexual abstinence, yet the very church presents opportunities for them to embark on sexual escapades while hiding under the banner of attending all night prayers or night praise and worship sessions. Some female respondents highlighted that they can have sex with a man whom they love as a way of attempting to secure his allegiance and increase the chances of getting married to him. This deployment of sexuality is not always safe and does not always yield the required outcome as some males can practice "*hit and run*" in which they have sex with them and then later dump them.

The Masculinities-Femininities Ambivalences

Teenage sexuality, as an arena of competition among and between the sexes, is very central in acquiring symbolic capital. Symbolic capital is the teens' prestige and honour acquired by displaying sexual prowess or sexual discipline as mediated by gender and peer cultures. The boys showed that when among their peers, they are always at pains to demonstrate sexual prowess by parading their sexual exploits, whether real or imagined. Sexuality is conceptualised as a field where there are struggles and manoeuvres among and between the boys and girls (Bourdieu, 1977). The boyhood status is seen by outmaneuvering a girl and tricking her into having sex with him and boasting about it as a way of displaying that they have developed into man. They are, therefore, able to command honour among their peers by virtue of that.

For the girls, honour could be accrued by displaying sexual chastity and purporting to keep one's virginity. They argued that their boyfriends could respect them for this. This shows the ambiguities surrounding the teens' perceptions of female virginity, which ambiguities are exposed when the boys at once claim that it is no longer important; however, none of them were willing to marry girl who had been deflowered. The chastity of a girl is treasured, and is accordingly the defining capital of her sexual field. Girls who are perceived to be promiscuous are labeled as *zviloose* (meaning girls of loose sexual morals). Being feminine is associated with being chaste, honest, and, thus, constituting marriageable material.

There are inconsistencies that were spelt out within the sexual permissiveness-repressiveness continuum; the expectations for the boys are skewed on the permissiveness side, while those for the girls are skewed on the repressiveness side. In this case, there are contradictions in the defining capitals of the sexual field as reflected by the fact that there are conflicting sexual expectations for the boys and girls. For the girls, it is unfair to be expected to be virgins when the likelihood of them marrying a man who is not a virgin is high given that the sexual indulgence of the boys is condoned and even celebrated. This corresponds to Wood and Jewkes' (2002) findings in their studies of adolescent sexual relations in a South African township, in which it is normal for the boys to sustain double standards, taking multiple sex partners for themselves, while disallowing their regular girlfriends from even speaking to other boys and/or men.

The Denigration of the Female Sex and Male Sexual Prowess

There are gender-based differences in the teenagers' sexual dispositions (Lovell, 2000). It can be argued that there is the existence of a masculine and feminine sexual habitus; the former being constituted of liberated sexual dispositions and the latter of introverted ones. In light of this, male participants reflected that they take the female sex as one that should be conquered through heterosexual coitus. Some of the male respondents highlighted that having sex with a girl can be taken as a way of reducing her pride as they say familiarity breeds contempt. Such denigration can take place if a boy manages to have sex with a proud girl and then brags about it among his peers and, thus, undermining the girl and boosting his social- and self-esteem. It is because of preoccupation with the display of manhood that male teenage peers tell stories of sexual conquest that objectify women. The boys' bragging about their sexual exploits reflect on their preoccupation with differentiating themselves and discounting other boys perceived to be failing to live up to sexual expectations. On the other hand, the girls are expected to demonstrate feminine virtues of sexual purity and chastity if they are to be respected as decent personalities. Therefore, some public manifestations of male teens' sexual activities are regarded as normal and worth celebrating, while those of female teens' sexual activities are conceptualised as taboo.

The Honor-Shame Analogy in the Control of Female and Male Sexuality

Men, in their capacities as brothers and fathers, are seriously concerned with the promotion of the sexual purity and innocence of their sisters and daughters, respectively, through either out right force or the exercise of symbolic violence. The females complained about subjection to direct sexual surveillance by their brothers and fathers who monitor their movements. The exercise of symbolic violence is characterised by the use of indirect sanctions on them and this is done in the name of protecting their honor, which is usually based on sexual purity. Honor is not only the value of a person in his/her own eyes, but in the eyes of society (Pitt-Rivers in Goddard, 1987:167).

Female sexual activity can be viewed as having negative connotations because it can defile family names and with them the social standing of men (Ortner and Whitehead, 1988). For instance, if a girl is labelled a *slut*, the reputation of her family, i.e. her father and brothers' image is tainted. In light of this, women's sexuality represents an active and threatening power to men and that male reputation depends on female sexual conduct is well founded. A man's honor, his reputation as a brother and father, is

severely affected if he cannot make his sister or daughter stay away from men perceived to be bent on merely pouncing on her as a sexual object.

While it gives social value to men to be in control of their daughters and sisters, it also gives social value to the daughters and sisters to submit to sexual control. Based on the value placed on chastity and virginity by the female respondents, it is worth noting that they have a system if not of honoring such societal values. This is a result of their own judgments which take presidency over others (Silberschmidt, 1999).

The Linguistic Market and Teenagers Sexual Repression

There is a linguistic market, which determines what should be said in front of particular audience. The censorship of language relating to sexual matters explains why the teenagers themselves devise words and phrases that they use amongst themselves to refer to sex. For instance, the teens use colloquial language, such as *kurova sele* (a sexually suggestive dance), *kusvusvura* (having a meal), and *kupunza hari* (dropping her down). Hence, those who seek to restrict the sexual activities of these teens on the conventional linguistic market are sometimes circumvented via this language. It can, therefore, become easy for the teenagers to communicate sexual matters among themselves without easily attracting the wrath of those seeking to control them. This is because the kind of language, the symbols and signs, are not common to the elders, teachers, and parents who seek to fetter the teens' sexualities.

Sexual restraint on the linguistic market can undermine the teenagers' communication of their sexual needs to their partners. The boys and girls showed that they are not very open and use indirect means to communicate their sexual needs to their partners. This emanates from the restriction of the use of conventional language to communicate sexual intentions to partners.

Sexual Censorship as both Constraining and Enabling

Even under the strictest of measures aimed at constraining teens' sexual activities, they have ways of coping with such constraints or of circumventing them. The teens can embrace non-heterosexual or non-penetrative options to satisfy their sexual needs. The boys highlighted that they can resort to masturbation or virtual sex via the watching of pornographic videos or pictures. Some female respondents noted that homosexuality is sometimes an option in fulfilling the sexual needs in an

environment where heterosexual relationships are heavily censored. They highlighted that some girls indulge in illicit lesbian activities as an alternative to heterosexual activity because there is less suspicion if they befriend another girl, unlike in a situation where they befriend males.

The intricate aspects of the sexual constraint–permissiveness conundrum faced by teenagers can be configured as a paradox of sexual identity. In this case, as the multifariousness of the teenagers' sexualities reflects, the teens can oscillate from a display of sexual activity to a display of abstinence and from a display of vaginal-penile heterosexuality to an espousal of alternative sexualities as per the dictates of the prevailing circumstances and situations.

Impression Management and the Teenagers' Accounts of Their Sexual Activities

Most of the boys are or want to appear to be sexually active while the girls generally celebrate or claim adherence to abstinence. Indulging in sex is, for the boys, associated with expressions of manhood, they claimed that they would normally seize opportunities for sexual indulgence. On the other hand, the girls generally showed skepticism over premarital sex. Boys feel that they are expected to be man and to do so they have engage in sex and, thus, had to put up 'faces' that fulfill peer expectations (Goffman, 1969). The girls could also be suspected of putting up 'faces' denoting abstinence from sex as a way of managing impression by expressing their adherence to the feminine virtues of chastity during personal interviews. All the responses are, therefore, suspect on the basis that there is a difference between what is said and what is actually done. All of the boys who participated in the study claimed to have had sex at least once.

CONCLUSION

Youths in Harare are faced with problems of institutional teachings that seem not to converge on several issues. These divergences are mainly because of gender, thrust of institution, and in some cases a result of new developments that are taking place where new thinking on sex and sexualities are emerging. The gender differences are that girls are still controlled by the need to femininity virtues, such as chastity and preservation of their virginity, is the most cherished thing among most girls and they do not do this for their own benefit only but it also gives credibility to their families, which will be seen as institutions that had done its job. On the other hand, boys do not see the importance of abstinence and their peer strongly influence theme to indulge in sexual activities as a sign of manhood. Sleeping with a lady is seen as a

big accomplishment and a break-through into manhood. They do not value their virginity but it was also established that these boys do not want a girl who has been deflowered as a wife. This shows the double standards of these boys because they go around sleeping with girls but when they want to marry they want a virgin. The big question will be where all those deflowered girls will go. These are most of the girls who are frustrated and are becoming girls of the night and in these days of HIV and AIDS they are at risk of not only contracting deadly diseases, but being dangerous members of the society who are carriers of the deadly virus.

In some cases, girls suffer a lot of repression on their sexual activities where they are not allowed by their family members, especially the parents and brothers. They are not allowed to go about sleeping around with boys even when they are grown up adults who had attained the age of majority. Their choice to indulge in sexual activities remains controlled by them with very little room to maneuver. On the other hand, no such strict surveillance is done on boys regardless of their ages. Their virginity is of no importance and their abstinence is of no societal value. Given such treatments, there is likelihood that these boys who are given such autonomy in terms of making sexual decisions are going to be the principal agents for spreading HIV and AIDS and do not recognize the girl child as equal member of the family. When other youths of the opposite sex are granted sexual autonomy by the same institutions that deny the other sex the same autonomy then the teachings of such institutions run the risk of losing its credibility because they will not be fair in their teachings.

The nexus between tradition and modernity is putting a lot of pressure on youths in terms of the contradiction they give to them. While in the modern world, issues of virginity are not taken seriously and issues of sleeping around are not condoned; traditional thinking values these things very much. So youths faces a big dilemma where in their families their parents demand that they keep their virginity, especially girls, but where they spend most of their time they learn that this is no longer an issue. Their peers, activities (kitchen parties and bachelor's parties) and the media are promoting sexual activities. Given such developments it, therefore, puts the youth at the horns of dilemma, especially to choose the right way. They need their friends; at the same time they need their parents. So which teachings to follow becomes a gambling game and this usually leads to disastrous consequences, especially in these days of HIV and AIDS, where most of these youths are at risk of contracting this deadly disease.

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