

Sexual networking among market women in Benin City, Bendel State, Nigeria



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Abstract

A survey of market women was conducted in Benin City. These women are vulnerable to HIV/AIDS and STD infections since their trading activities involve long-distance travelling away from families and sexual exposure to strangers. The questionnaire included questions on socioeconomic background, sexual and health behaviour. Results indicate that there is a high level of sexual networking, especially extramarital: 26 per cent of the women have sexual intercourse with strangers, and 70 per cent have extramarital sexual relationships. A high proportion of the market women and those in close contact have contracted STDs. It is evident, therefore, that public-health education concerning AIDS and STDs is urgently needed.

Introduction

In the past few years, acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infections have become the most dreaded ailments all over the world. At the initial stage, very little was known about these infections; however, a few studies have attempted to examine and document various aspects of them. Such studies ranged from studying the incidence and prevalence of AIDS and HIV, the causes and epidemiology, to modes of transmitting AIDS and HIV (Pitchenik et al. 1983; Clumack et al. 1984; Piot et al. 1984; Van de Perre et al. 1985; Curran et al. 1985). These studies show that there are variations in the biology, the modes of transmission of HIV infection, the epidemiology and clinical features of AIDS and HIV infection across the world. Such variation is apparent in the case of Africa; studies on African societies show that

the current ratio of female to male HIV infection is 1:1, but varies with the age group. Thus, among cases between 15 and 30 years old, the ratio is 6:1, falling to 0.64:1 for patients over 30 years of age. Similarly, peak incidence rates occur at a younger age in women than men, with mean ages for men and women of 37.4 and 30 years respectively (Piot and Cara'l 1988: 69-70).

In addition, controversies surround the correlation between socioeconomic status and AIDS, geographical areas of prevalence, and the role of prostitutes in the spread of the disease. For example, studies in Africa show that, whereas there is no correlation between socioeconomic status and AIDS in Kinshasa, the attack rate was higher in educated people in Rwanda and Zambia. Moreover, there is a predominantly urban occurrence of the disease in most African countries, with large rural outbreaks in others, such as Uganda (Piot and Cara'l 1988: 70).

The problem in understanding and interpreting AIDS and HIV infection in most African countries is the absence of a significant number of studies on the nature and pattern of the sexual networking of Africans in both the past and the present. Such knowledge is bound to clarify a number of issues such

as the origin and causes of AIDS and HIV infection, their modes of transmission, and the demographic variation in AIDS and HIV infection.

In fact, existing anthropological studies of African societies have failed to give in-depth documentation of the sexual networking of these people (Murdock 1949; Egharevba 1949, 1967; Bradbury 1957; Mair 1974; Radcliffe-Brown 1975). A number of these studies emphasize the importance placed by these societies on female chastity, marriage and reproduction.

On the other hand, a number of sub-Saharan African societies have been found not to regard most sexual relations as sinful or as central to morality and religion. At the most, these societies have fairly easily evaded prohibitions even on female premarital and extramarital sex. Sexual permissiveness among African women has been believed to give women great freedom and responsibility. Young African girls are believed to enjoy lower levels of sexual morality than their brothers. There are, however, variations in the degree of sexual permissiveness (Caldwell, Caldwell and Orubuloye 1989:222-223). The reality of sexual permissiveness and the variations inherent in African societies cannot be ascertained until further studies are carried out.

In an attempt to obtain more data on sexual networking in Nigeria this study examines the nature and pattern of sexual networking of market women in Benin City, Bendel State, Nigeria. At the same time, it is possible to gain more insight into whether women's roles not only place them at a disadvantage in understanding their anatomy but also prevent them from obtaining information on health issues including AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) such as gonorrhoea, trichomoniasis and syphilis.

Objectives

The ultimate objective of this study is to design new health and educational strategies to protect women from being exposed to AIDS and HIV infection. More specifically the immediate objectives are as follows:

- (1) To discover the pattern of sexual networking of market women by the number of sexual partners before and after marriage.
- (2) To determine the frequency of sexual activity by level of education and age.
- (3) To establish the number of sexual partners ever had.
- (4) To determine the age at first sexual relations.
- (5) To establish the extent of sexually transmitted diseases contracted and treatment sought.

Justification for the study

It is urgently important to study the sexual behaviour of market women because of AIDS. In the economy of most African countries there has been an increase in the costs of food, health, education and maintenance. The inability of most homes to cope with such conditions has caused more women to engage in long-distance trading; this used not to be customary for women in Bendel State, but this practice is becoming more common in order to increase the family income in Nigeria's present harsh economic conditions.

Materials and methods

Benin City was chosen for the Bendel State survey, as it is the headquarters of Bendel State and of the administrative, educational and commercial activities controlling other segments of the state. Benin City is a heterogeneous area because of its position as the centre of activities. It contains a complex assortment of languages and ethnic groups, the major ones of which are Bini, Urhobo, Igbo, Esan, Etsako and Isoko; others are Ijaw, Itsekiri, Owan, Yoruba and Hausa. The state is a mixture of cultures, between large Yoruba and Igbo populations to the west and east respectively. Numerous ethnographic works have been written about the several peoples and it is necessary to consult them for a fuller

understanding of the customs and for interpretation of the cultural contexts of which sexual networking is a part (Egharevba 1949; Bradbury 1957, 1973; Okojie 1960; Basden 1966; Ita 1971; Leis 1972).

Traditional and Christian religions are dominant among the Bini, Esan, Ibo and Ijaw villagers, while, owing to the Nupe wars of the last century, Islam is widespread among the Etsakos (Elakhe 1963). Historically and linguistically, the Esan and Etsako are closely related to the Bini. Age grades and age sets of males play an important role in the Bini, Esan and Etsako villages, while work groups are more important among the Ibo (Bradbury 1957; Ita 1971).

A systematic survey was conducted in a major and very busy commercial centre in Benin City: New Benin Market. Pretested questionnaires were administered by trained assistants in the language of the respondents chosen for the study. The respondents selected were women trading in cloth and goods in the market. Such trading activities involved long-distance travelling, days away from spouses and children, and exposure to strangers. These conditions make such women a vulnerable group whose sexual networking may provide the basis for the belief that married women involved in trading are wayward and promiscuous. Thus, most men have resented the participation of their wives in long-distance travelling, from the precolonial era to the post-independent era, before the introduction of Structural Adjustment Policies.

Stalls were selected until a total of 100 women was reached: every stall with an odd number was visited until the desired number of respondents was selected. Women selected were between the ages of 15 and 65 years.

The New Benin market has a relatively good stall-numbering system which facilitated the selection technique adopted. The sensitivity of the issues being investigated necessitated selecting stalls owned by one woman to maintain privacy. However, the investigation met some difficulties. Some of the women felt that it was an attempt to stereotype them and that the information might be used against them in the future; these reservations were reduced by the interviewers who established rapport with the women. However, the majority of the women have some education which makes them literate and able to communicate in English with their trading partners.

The questionnaire was in three main sections: background information, sexual behaviour, and reproductive and health behaviour. The background section seeks information on the social, economic and demographic characteristics of the respondents, such as age, education, marital status, type of union, religion, income, age at marriage and number of living children. The section on sexual behaviour seeks information on age at first sexual union, number of sexual partners before and after marriage, contraceptive use, reasons for sexual partners, values about virginity and sex with strangers, reasons for and attitudes to these latter behaviours. Finally, the last section on health behaviour examines the extent of female circumcision; sexually transmitted disease contracted by respondent or other; modes of treatment; and the extent of education or knowledge of AIDS and STDs.

The questionnaire contained very sensitive and personal questions, which posed difficulties at the onset of the survey. However, explanations and rapport established with the women by the interviewers and principal investigator reduced earlier difficulties and enabled the women to relax and talk freely. Such openness and freedom in interaction were further enhanced by the fact that the women were away from home and in the market where a lot of gossiping is known to occur.

Findings

Background information

The socioeconomic characteristics of the market women are summarized in Table 1. The women are mainly from the Edo-speaking group of Bendel State. A majority of the women are Edo-speaking with a mean age of 40 years. They comprise traditionalists (48%), Christians (35%), Muslims (11%) and no religion (6%). The level of education reflects the fact that a majority of the respondents (65%) had

some education (primary to secondary), while 35 per cent had none. The mean income of the women is 346 naira per month.

Table 1
Socioeconomic characteristics of market women in Benin City

	Respondents (No.=100)
Age (years)	
15 - 25	3
26 - 35	30
36 - 45	36
46 - 55	25
56 - 65	6
Average	40.1
Religion	
Christianity	35
Islam	11
Traditional	48
None	6
Education	
None	35
Some	65
Income (naira per month)	
0 - 200	24
201 - 400	29
401 - 600	27
601 and above	20
Average	346

The above information indicates that most market women in this study are in their childbearing years, and have some form of education which enables them to interact with one another and other women outside the city during trading. The traditional religion reflects the people's adherence to their culture and tradition. Irrespective of their level of education they are literate enough to possess the skills necessary in bargaining and trading. Pidgin English is the *lingua franca* in Bendel State; this allows individuals to interact freely with one another.

However, the mean monthly income of 346 Naira shows that the women are not obtaining enough revenue from their involvement in trading. This low amount reflects poor costing of their economic activities as well as the women's practice of using part of the money from trading for household consumption.

Demographic characteristics**Table 2****Demographic characteristics of market women in Benin City, Bendel State, Nigeria**

	Respondents (No.=100)
No. of living children	
0 - 2	20
3 - 5	45
6 - 8	21
9 - 11	14
Average	4.9
Marital status	
Married	65
Divorced/separated	20
Concubinage	10
Widowed	5
Marriage type	
Monogamous	37
Polygamous	59
Concubinage	4
No. of wives by husband	
0 - 1	29
2 - 3	56
4 and above	15
Average	2.2
Position among wives	
0 - 1	36
2 - 3	47
4 and above	17
Average	2.1
Age at marriage	
12 - 15	11
16 - 19	45
20 - 23	33
24 and above	11
Average age	19.1

The study uses the number of living children to estimate the respondents' fertility because most women in Bendel State do not want to recall the dead. In fact, they hardly want to count children at all, because of their belief that counting children may lead to ill-health or even death amongst them. However, our explanation of the importance of giving accurate figures, coupled with the design and mode of asking the question on number of living children (by referring to children as 'pepper seeds') elicited correct responses from the women. Consequently, from Table 2, the average number of living children is 4.9. A majority of the women (65%) are currently married, 20 per cent are divorced, ten per cent are concubines and five per cent are widowed. Almost 63 per cent are, or were, in polygynous marriages and 37 per cent are, or were, in monogamous relationships.

Average age at marriage is 19.51, the mean number of wives per husband is 2.2 and the average position of the respondents amongst the wives is 2.1.

Premarital sexual relations

Female chastity was traditionally promoted because it attracted higher brideprice or bridewealth, as well as guaranteeing the paternity of the children. The importance placed on female premarital chastity necessitated in-depth probing on whether a woman should be a virgin at marriage, whether the respondents were virgins at marriage, and whether they would like their daughters to be virgins at marriage. The data indicate that there has been a move away from the traditional beliefs and sanctions on maintaining a girl's virginity until marriage. This change is indicated in Table 3 which shows that 84 per cent of the respondents believe that it is not necessary today for a woman to be a virgin at marriage and 78 per cent believe that a woman should not be a virgin at marriage. However, 65 per cent of the women were virgins at their first marriage while 32 per cent want their daughters to be virgins at marriage.

The women on further examination gave the following reasons for being virgins at first marriage: custom 63 per cent; 45 per cent to attract respect from husband and his family; 15 per cent to prevent pregnancy before marriage, eight per cent for good morals, and four per cent to guarantee the paternity of the first child.

Table 3
Importance of female chastity at first marriage

Question	Response	
	Yes	No
1 a. Should a woman be a virgin at marriage?	22	78
b. Does it really matter?	31	69
2. Is it necessary today for a woman to be a virgin at marriage?	16	84
3. Were you a virgin at first marriage?	65	35
4. Do you want your daughter to be a virgin at marriage?	32	68
5. Reasons for being a virgin at marriage:		
custom	63	37
to guarantee paternity of the child	4	96
to attract respect from husband and his family	45	55
to avoid having a child before marriage	15	85
it's morally good to do so	8	92

This new attitude to virginity was supported by the women's explanation that education has exposed their children to issues unknown to many of them at similar age. Such exposure and peer pressure have made most girls wayward so that parents find it hard to protect their daughters in sexual issues. Moreover, most marriages do not occur unless the bride is pregnant, in order to prove her fecundability.

To support the belief that girls today engage in sexual relations at an earlier age than their mothers, a question was asked on age at first sexual relations. Table 4 shows that the mean age at first sexual relations was 17 years. First sexual partners ranged from boy-friend, neighbour, teacher to stranger, but a majority were boyfriends.

Table 4
Age at first sexual relations of respondents

Age range (years)	Female (No.=100)
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0 - 10	3
11 - 15	31
16 - 20	49
21 - 25	12
26 - 30	5
Mean age at first sexual relations	17.2

Networking of sexual partners

Another area examined in the study was the categories of sexual partners. As it is believed that more women today than in the past are openly engaging in extramarital affairs for economic reasons (64.7%, Table 7), it was important to know who their primary sexual partners were. Table 5 shows that 30 per cent of the women had sexual relations with their spouses, 44 per cent with boyfriends and 26 per cent with strangers. These figures show that a significant number (70%) of the respondents were having extramarital sexual relations.

Table 5
Networking of current sexual partner

Partner	No.
Their own spouse	30
Boyfriend	44
Stranger	26

Further information was generated on the number of sexual partners before and after marriage. Table 6 shows that a majority of the respondents (69 per cent) had more than one sexual partner before marriage while 72 per cent had more than one after marriage. However, a significant number, 46 per cent, had only two partners after marriage, 15 per cent had three partners, three per cent had four partners and one per cent had too many to remember. Strikingly, few women, 19 per cent, had two sexual partners before marriage compared to 46 per cent after marriage, and 39 per cent had three sexual partners before marriage compared to 15 per cent after marriage. The fact that 46 per cent of women had nonmarital sexual partners after marriage may be a sign that most marriages are in trouble. Hence, the study examined the reasons for extramarital affairs.

Table 6
Distribution of sexual partners before and after marriage of respondents

No. of regular sexual partners	Before marriage (%)	After marriage (%)
1	31	28
2	19	46
3	39	15
4	8	3
Too many to remember	3	1
Refusal to answer	-	7

Reasons for the most recent extramarital sexual relationship

Women who said they had had extramarital sexual relations were asked their reason for engaging in such affairs (Table 7). A large proportion (38 per cent) did so because of long-term relationships which usually had economic implications, a further 26 per cent obtained gifts and money from the sexual partner; 24 per cent engaged in extramarital sexual relations for enjoyment and fun; seven per cent gave separation or divorce as the reason implying a need for support, and four per cent gave no reason.

Table 7
Reasons for the most recent extramarital sexual relationship

Reason	No.	%
Enjoyment, fun	33	24.3
Long-term relationship, usually with economic implications	52	38.2
Gifts, money	36	26.5
Separated/divorced	10	7.3
No reason given	5	3.7
	136 ^a	100.0

^a Does not add to 100 because of multiple responses

These data needed further clarification to show whether sex for economic reasons arose because of low education and respondents' age.

Frequency of sexual activity

Another area that was examined was the frequency of sexual activity. Table 8 shows data on frequency of sexual activity by age group and level of education: women with some education showed higher frequency. Among those aged 15-25 with some education, three per cent of the women had sexual intercourse more than twice monthly. Of the 26-35 age group, 24 had sex more than twice a month, with the highest number, ten, having three to four sexual unions monthly.

Among women with no education, ten in the 36-45 age group and 15 in the 46-55 group had sexual relations more than twice monthly. Five in the 36 to 45 age group had sex five to six times monthly; of the 46-55 age group, seven had sex 3-4 times, five 5-6 times and three 7-8 times.

Table 8
Frequency of sexual activity by age group and level of education

Monthly sexual activity	No education					Some education				
	15-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56+	15-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56+
1-2							4	4	2	
3-4			1	7	3		9	4	6	
5-6		3	5	5	2	1	6	9	1	
7-8			2	3			4	6	1	
9-10		1	1		1		1	2		
11+			1			2	3			
Total		4	10	15	6	3	27	25	10	

Sexually transmitted disease

There is an alarming amount of sexually transmitted disease (STD) among market women and those in close contact with them (Table 9). Of the 100 respondents, 86 have contracted or know someone who has contracted sexually transmitted disease. Out of this 86, twelve were the respondents themselves, 24 were their relatives and 50 were their friends.

Table 9
Distribution of respondents who ever contracted or know someone who ever contracted sexually transmitted diseases

Categories of those who have ever contracted STDs	Responses (No.=100)
Self	12
Friend	50
Relative	24
None	14

Sources of treatment for sexually transmitted diseases

Respondents were asked where those known to them with sexually transmitted diseases were treated (Table 10). In most of the responses treatment was obtained from more than one source: 47 per cent were treated at private clinics, 44 per cent had traditional treatment, 41 per cent were treated by friends or relatives, 35 per cent obtained treatment from chemist stores, 35 per cent from hospitals and 15 per cent from medicine stores. Thus it is evident that a majority of those who have contracted sexually transmitted disease have not been treated effectively, and it is very likely that some of these patients may be carrying pathogens which may cause secondary infertility in the future.

Table 10
Type of treatment sought for sexually transmitted disease

Treatment source	No.	% of those who had contracted STDs (No.=86) ^a
Hospital	30	35
Chemist	30	35
Medicine store	13	15
Private clinic	40	47
Friend/relative	35	41
Traditional healer	38	44

^a Does not add to 86 because of multiple responses

Summary and conclusion

This study examined the sexual networking of market women in Benin City, Bendel State, Nigeria. It showed that there is a substantial unmet need among these women for information on sexual activities, STDs and treatment for STDs. The level of both premarital and extramarital sexual networking is high, although higher in extramarital relations. This high level of sexual networking becomes problematic in

light of the danger posed by sexually transmitted diseases including AIDS and HIV infection. Moreover, the fact that 26 per cent of the women have sexual intercourse with strangers makes this issue of sexual networking more dangerous to the health of women and the society at large.

The danger lies in the high estimate of the sexually active men and women who will be exposed to contracting sexually transmitted diseases if one of these women gets infected. This high estimate gains more credence from the fact that 63 per cent are in non-monogamous marital unions.

However, it is pertinent that the high level of sexual networking may have arisen mainly from economic reasons, because the average income, 346 Naira, of these women is low. Since a majority of women in polygynous relationships have to bear the major responsibility for caring for their children, their income is inadequate considering their average number of living children: four.

Furthermore, the high level of sexual networking has also shown its effect when the study reveals that 12 per cent of the women themselves have contracted sexually transmitted diseases, 50 per cent of their friends and 24 per cent of their relatives.

Since there is a tendency for Nigerians, on such personal and private issues, to speak in the third person, a higher number of the women may themselves have contracted sexually transmitted diseases. What is worse, effective cures have been sought by only slightly more than half those infected.

It becomes evident that the population is unaware of the dangers of sexual networking and uneducated in the efficiency and adequacy of orthodox treatment from medically approved institutions. It follows therefore that there is great urgency to provide health and public education campaigns about sexual behaviour in order to avoid a major epidemic once AIDS becomes widespread in the population.

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