Morality, Structural Inequalities and HIV in Nigeria

Daniel Jordan Smith
New book: *AIDS Doesn’t Show Its Face*

Reversing the usual optic in which ideas about Africa (aberrant sexuality, patriarchy, “traditions”) explain AIDS

Instead, tracing AIDS in the public’s moral imagination to explain Nigerians’ anxieties about and behavioral responses to inequality and social change more generally
Nigeria’s Epidemic

- 160+ million population
- 4.1% HIV positive
- 3.5 million people living with HIV (most don’t yet have AIDS and don’t know they are positive)
- 217,000 annual deaths

The “imagined epidemic” is, in many ways, as consequential as the “real epidemic”
AIDS, Gender & Morality: Evidence from 2 Projects in Nigeria

- Young Rural-to-Urban Migrants & AIDS
- Love, Marriage & HIV
Young Migrants
Knowledge about HIV/AIDS

- 99% have heard of it
- 87% know it can be transmitted through sexual intercourse
- 96% know what a condom is
Sexual Experience, Risk Perceptions & Condom Use

- 85% think AIDS is a “very big” or “big” problem in Nigeria
- 68% think their own risk of contracting HIV is little or none
- 73% have had sexual intercourse
- Less than 40% use condoms consistently in their sexual relationships
Premarital Sex, “Modern” Identity, and Morality

- Lots of economic, cultural and peer pressure to be in premarital sexual relationships
- Also powerful moralities that portray premarital sex negatively, as a symptom of problematic social changes
- Young people navigate the risk of HIV in a context of ambivalence about sex
- Risk assessment comes to be associated with the perceived morality of persons and relationships, but also of objects like condoms
Sex is worth waiting for

ZIP UP

Delay sex now, unwanted baby or HIV/AIDS fits spoil your life.
ABSTAIN
FROM EARLY SEX

...it has no side effect
AVOID CASUAL SEX

* Abstinence is the best choice a teenager can make.
* Abstinence gives 100% Guarantee for birth Control and HIV/AIDS Prevention.
* Be faithful to your partner.

Advice

PROMOTE GOOD CONDUCT AND NOT GOOD CONDOM

* Spread the message of HIV/AIDS Prevention.
* Save your life and enjoy your future dreams.
* Prevention is better than cure.

HIV/AIDS IS A SILENT KILLER

COURTESY OF HIV/AIDS UNIT MINISTRY OF EDUCATION Owerri - IMO STATE, NIGERIA.
Morality & Sexual Behaviour during Nigeria’s AIDS Epidemic

“...If I meet a girl and we just do it, you know, I always use a condom. You have to be careful. I mean such girls who do it anyhow could easily give you something. It’s only when you know a girl’s character that you can be sure you are safe.”

—Emeka, a 20-year-old migrant in Kano
If a girl keeps a condom in her room you will feel somehow, you know, like she is a professional.

— Onyebuchi, a 24-year-old apprentice learning to repair electrical generators in Kano
Morality & Sexual Behaviour during Nigeria’s AIDS Epidemic

“You have to be careful now. You cannot just sleep around anyhow. It is important to know your partner and be able to trust him. You have to be sure that he’s not the kind of guy who goes about here and there. Men are difficult to trust. You have to find one who loves you.... When I started with my boyfriend we always used condoms, but we don’t use them now every time because I can trust him.”

—Gloria, a 22-year-old in Aba
AIDS, Gendered Morality, & Premarital Sex

- It is concerns about being normal/moral more than sexual promiscuity that explains much risky behavior.

- The moral logics that underlie young people’s sexual behavior are in many ways responses to and implicit critiques of a collective sense that many social changes associated with urbanization are threatening valued forms of sociality.

- AIDS is seen as representing – and to a large extent as being caused by (and in some versions as a punishment for) these problematic changes.
Policy Implications

- Messages that reinforce the idea that premarital sex is immoral are counterproductive; young people reconstruct their own relationships as moral.
- Morality around premarital sex is highly gendered.
- Condom use must be reconfigured as moral practice.
Love, Marriage and HIV

Project Team

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Research Aims

• To compare across five developing country sites (Papua New Guinea, Mexico, Vietnam, Nigeria, Uganda)
  • a) ideas and practices associated with modern marriage
  • b) actual marital and extramarital relationships and their implications for the risk of HIV infection
Love, sex and marriage are conspicuous themes in every form of popular media.
TO AVOID AIDS, NO EXTRA-MARITAL SEX.

Na me and my PARTNER ONLY OO!!

MY PARTNER IS OKAY!!

ISSUED BY:
ENUGU STATE AIDS COORDINATING AGENCY (ENSACA)
Courtesy of
DFID Nigeria
Morality, Extramarital Sex, and HIV Risk

Men vis-à-vis their wives: most men who cheated on their wives believed that as long as they provided for their wives and children and kept their infidelity discreet they were behaving morally, and even that they truly loved their wives.

Men vis-à-vis their girlfriends: relationships were made moral by providing gifts, acting like a good patron, caring (reducing the likelihood of condom use).

Women vis-à-vis their husbands: particularly in modern “love” marriages, accusations of infidelity can boomerang back on women and undermine their moral leverage.
AIDS, Gendered Morality, & Marriage

- The risk of women’s infection with HIV is driven by complicated social changes in marriage (the rise of love marriage, but still embedded in kinship relations)

- Also driven by changing – and often contradictory gender dynamics that intersect with class aspirations and inequalities (“promiscuous” girls, good wives and cheating husbands)

- Masculinity requires at least as much “gendered study” as femininity
Public Health Implications

- Address structural underpinnings of economic and gender inequality that facilitate some forms of extramarital sex
- Reverse some of the patterns of association of HIV risk with immorality (irony that it is obsession with morality that produces secrets and silences that put married people at risk)
- Take advantage of positive aspects of masculinity (provisioning, etc.) to encourage responsibility for reducing risk
Thank you