

Active lust seekers: Sexual pleasure and young women's pre-marital sexual adventures in Africa.

Tsitsi B Masvawure

Postdoctoral Research Fellow, HIV Center for Clinical and Behavioral Studies at New York State Psychiatric Institute and Columbia University, New York, USA

Email: tbm2110@columbia.edu

This is what we know about young women's sexuality and sexual lives in Africa:

- Young women are not having sex
- Young women are having sex because SOMEONE (older men etc) or SOMETHING (poverty, ignorance) is making them.

It is rare to read about young, heterosexual African women's positive and pleasurable pre-marital sexual experiences. Often, the policy and academic literature portrays African women in one of two ways: as sexually passive and unwilling participants in the sexual act, or as sexually 'immoral' and 'loose' if they show any interest in sex at all. None of these portrayals fully capture the totality of young, unmarried African women's lived realities and an unfortunate consequence of this is that most HIV interventions tend to emphasise the adverse effects of sex [15] - such as disease and unintended pregnancies - and rarely acknowledge the many pleasurable aspects of sexual acts that could just as easily expose young women to HIV/STI infection. In other words, the dominant HIV response assumes that HIV transmission only occurs in contexts of danger and violation. And yet, some studies show that women's quest for sexual pleasure [16] affects their willingness to use reproductive and sexual health technologies such as contraceptives and condoms.

This is what we don't know about young African women's sexuality and sexual lives:

Example 1:

*"This first week here, [pointing to a calendar that had been drawn during the interview] I am on him like mad. And the last days before my period. So, like I just visited here [points out on the calendar again]. This was my last period. I did him here again. We did here, up to here [points to the calendar]. Yah, these first five days. As soon as my period finished, I went to his house. We stayed up to day ten. Then day eleven to eighteen I was away, just calling to say hi. Then on day nineteen, I went [to his house again]. They say the 'corpus whatever' has disintegrated."-Female university student*

Example 2:

*"We used to skip class and go to his room to have sex...we did this most afternoons. We would have lunch together at the dining hall and then go at it afterwards. One day he paid the janitor to allow me to spend the night in his room. We did it up to ten times that night! We were crazy!"-Female university student*

This is what sexual pleasure looked like for some of the young women I encountered during research in Zimbabwe. These young women placed a premium on the pursuit of pleasurable sex in and of itself. This was especially evident in the manner that they spoke about their sexual experiences. One student made it clear that she, and not her boyfriend, had initiated many of their sexual encounters, while another student matter-of-factly explained that condoms interfered with her full enjoyment of the sexual act: 'Condoms are too clinical! I know that there isn't much of a difference between sex with a condom and without, but I like to know that it's just me to him, not me to him through some plastic!' She proceeded to tell me some of the strategies she employed to make sex pleasurable for her. These included Kegel exercises to tighten the vagina and "going commando" (i.e. without underwear) to dry out the vagina, both for her pleasure as much as her partners.

Another female student engaged in what I will refer to as 'lust sex' with multiple partners. I had known this particular student for at least a year when she decided to talk about her romantic relationships, mainly because she knew I was conducting research on HIV. Seven of the ten boyfriends she had dated were on average more than fifteen years older than she was and included politicians, business men and company directors. At the time of the interview, she was in concurrent relationships with four men. Lust was the dominant theme in the incidents that this student chose to share with me and it is her own lust, in particular, that she focused on. Furthermore, she did not downplay the fact that she was sexually adventurous and sexually uninhibited; if anything, she played it up

and appeared to thrive on it. The views and experiences of the young women I encountered during fieldwork thus challenged these stereotypical portrayals, and suggest, to me, that in reality sex is not always something that is 'done' to young women. Neither are young women always passive and reluctant participants in sexual encounters. My point in highlighting these particular experiences is clearly not to advocate for forms of sexual practice that may increase the risk of HIV transmission, but rather to encourage a broader and realistic conversation amongst researchers, policy makers and service providers around the varied ways in which young women define their sexuality and what they find sexually pleasurable. If our responses do not resonate with young women's lived realities, they will fail. It is especially worrying that mistrust of African women's sexual pleasure has become the default position in the HIV prevention world. There are few interventions that are designed specifically to address young women's sexuality in a positive and non-judgmental way and which acknowledge that some young women have sex because they find it pleasurable. Indeed, those of us in the HIV prevention world would do well to remember that sex is not always about danger and risk but is also 'a positive and joyous experience' for many people, including young, unmarried African women.

Anthropologist Ralph Bolton wrote a piece in which he lamented the fact that most HIV research had completely ignored 'the joys of sex [17]'. He identified twenty-six ways in which sex is a positive—rather than a negative—experience and these included: sex is play, adventure, transcendence, fun, fantasy, interaction, pleasure, liminality, ecstasy, experience, an expression of emotions and a source of meaning. Play, adventure and experience were particularly strong themes in the narratives of the female students I encountered and yet, as Kenyan feminist scholar Mumbi Machera so poignantly asserted in *Re-thinking sexualities in Africa* [18], very rarely is 'women's sexual desire depicted as an autonomous gesture and as an independent longing for sexual expression, satisfaction and fulfilment' in most of this literature.

Surely, our reluctance and failure to acknowledge that young women are autonomous sexual beings must, at some level, impede our ability to effectively intervene with this population. The continued high rates of HIV infection among young women point to major inadequacies in current responses and these, in turn, can partly be attributed to the fact that many of these responses have been premised on the notion of women's victimhood and lack of sexual agency. Examples include generic messages that are based on the ABC approach—abstain, be faithful and use condoms—which encourage young women to 'say no' to pre-marital sex or which focus on teaching women condom negotiation skills. These do not leave much room for individual choice and preference, and they do not resonate with the lived realities of those young women who prefer to 'say yes' to sex, or who may have successfully negotiated the non-use of condoms with their sexual partners. In fact, US scholars Jennifer Higgins and Jennifer Hirsch note that a few studies [16] have shown that women - rather than men - are sometimes responsible for the non-use of condoms in relationships as they complain that condoms adversely affect their sexual enjoyment.

The limited research on 'the joys of sex' among young African women reflect our general discomfort with young women's sexual desire and sexual freedom more than it does the actual absence of the phenomena. HIV interventions, however, will need to be bolder and seriously take into account young African women's actual sexual experiences and their lived sexual realities, however unsettling these may be for us in the HIV prevention community. As Hillary Clinton and Sheila Tlou pointed out, women have the right to decide when, where and how to have sex. Young women have the same right too.

In conclusion, Carole Vance, poignantly observed [11] that 'danger and pleasure are ever-present realities in many women's lives'. She further argued that focusing wholly on pleasure or danger oversimplifies women's actual sexual experiences, which, in reality, are more complicated and unsettling. Dichotomies, as we very well know, are problematic in that one can only ever be one or the other— never both, and certainly never something else entirely.