

## **Factors Affecting Sexual Behavior among Luo Adolescents in Nairobi**

Each society, depending on its basic and varied social structures and traditional ideologies, evolves practices and norms, as well as supportive religious doctrines, moral codes, laws, social customs and family organization, to maintain desired expectations in behavior, including sexual behavior. Theories of sexuality have often shown sexual behavior of both men and women to be strictly guided and regulated by culturally acceptable values and norms. These, based on anthropological evidence from Eastern Africa, are often enforced through notions of 'respect', 'shame', 'secrecy' and 'sacredness' (Heald, 1995; Chege, 1993; Kisekka, 1973; Ocholla-Ayayo, 1982).

However, this is not to say that these values, attitudes and norms remain unchanged through time. Recent studies in Kenya, as elsewhere in Africa, continue to show that sexuality notions of 'sacredness', 'shame', 'respect' and 'secrecy', among other sets of rules that guide and regulate sexuality, are gradually changing, especially when comparisons of sexual behavior are made on the basis of residence (rural/urban), age and economic status. The value scale changes under different circumstances, given that all cultures are inherently predisposed to change and, at the same time, to resist change (Mwamula-Lubandi, 1978). In other words, there are dynamic processes operating that encourage the acceptance of new things and ideas while there are others that encourage changeless stability. It is likely that social and psychological chaos would result if there were not the conservative forces resisting change. On the whole, there are three general sources of influence or pressure that are responsible for both change and resistance to change: forces at work within a society, contact between societies and changes in the natural environment. These factors that influence change are always examined in a holistic perspective that views human existence to be adequately understood only as a multifaceted whole. Human beliefs and actions must be seen in terms of their interrelatedness with all other aspects of culture, human biology, social interaction, and environmental influences.

The urban environment provides ideal conditions under which a holistic perspective of human existence can be perfectly understood. Rapid rural-urban migration continues to characterize migration patterns in Africa. In Kenya, as is the case in most of Africa, migration to urban areas, especially to the city of Nairobi, is common as rural immigrants search for better economic conditions. While making this transition, migrants experience different conditions from those they experience within their communities in the rural areas. Rural society is generally believed to operate as a union, interacting intimately in an open manner to achieve community cooperation and (informal) control of resources. This society experiences little change in its way of life due to its strict observance of culturally ascribed rules and little tolerance for different behavior. On the other hand, the urban society can be characterized as highly individualistic, interacting on a formal basis to achieve self-interests. Due to its high regard for achievement, the urban society also tends to tolerate rapid change and deviant behavior in order to achieve this.

While the whole population undergoes tremendous transition as it urbanizes, the

adolescents, due to a variety of unique conditions in which they find themselves, are most notably affected. The world today is experiencing an unprecedented increase in the number of young people. Sub-Saharan Africa has got one of the world's youngest population, with statistics showing that at the close of the 20th century, one in every four persons was 10-19 years old, making it the largest group of young people in the region to enter adulthood (UNS, 1999). In addition to this unique situation the youth find themselves faced with challenges in terms of opportunities and risk because during this time, attitudes, values and behaviors that determine a young person's future begin to form and take shape. Young people are likely to adopt and maintain behaviors than older people with well established habits. Adolescence is also a time of risk, as young people have increased exposure to the world and are more likely to succumb to peer pressure and experimentation. The onset of sexual activity has progressively come earlier and at least half of the young people surveyed in studies in sub-Saharan countries had sex before they were 18 years old (PRB, 2001). It is, therefore not surprising that HIV/AIDS prevalence levels are high among young people, where more than half of all new infections occur in young people (UNAIDS, 2000). These, coupled with high levels of teenage birth rates, unintended pregnancies (PRB, 2001), and abortions (WHO, 1998), make adolescents a very vulnerable group that needs special attention in order to improve their quality of life.

Generally, this study sought to establish the link between migration, socioeconomic status, 'sexual cultures' and adolescent sexual behavior. More specifically, the study sought to understand urban adolescents' values and attitudes towards sex and sexuality, and if these, in addition to cultural, historical and/or economic factors contribute to their sexual behavior. By exploring various themes ranging from socialization, parent-child relationships, initiation, religion, to attitudes/values towards sex and sexuality, this paper establishes and discusses forces and processes that interact and drive change and variation in adolescent sexual behavior in urban areas.

This study was carried out in the city of Nairobi, which is a typical class society, with distinct differences in living conditions between the different social classes. As a result, residential areas have been categorized in accordance with the socioeconomic status of the residents on a scale of A to E, with residents in category A being in the highest social class and those in E being in the lowest social class (CBS, 2000) As expected, most residential areas in category E are situated in the slum areas, while those in category A are situated in the up-market areas of the city. Also, the population composition in category A comprises fewer and less interaction of 'sexual cultures' as compared to other categories because category A housing units are physically spread out and physical interaction of residents is relatively low. This is to say that the slum population, due to its high levels of physical interaction, is characterized by a variety of 'sexual cultures', thereby, according to popular theory, very likely to change sexual behavior and exhibit that which is new or adulterated, while the behavior of the population in socially superior residential areas would, in comparison, conform with the rules of their own sexual culture. However, consideration is given to cultural influences through the media and other channels that do not require physical accessibility.

This paper uses data collected from case studies of urban Luo parents and their sexually active adolescent sons/daughters (18-20 yrs), and direct observations. The study was carried out in three locations in Nairobi, selected across social class and level of exposure to other 'sexual cultures', as defined above. Westlands represents the highest social class (A), Donholm is an area that is classified as middle class (C) and Korogocho represents the lowest class (E). A total of 18 respondents were interviewed, with at least one follow-up interview for each, over a period of three months. The aspect of entertainment has proved to be important in determining sexual behavior with the generally held belief that sexual contact is common in areas where entertainment of different forms is rampant. Sexual behavior can be inferred from forms and frequency of social gatherings and entertainment activities. A total of 6 (2 in each site) direct observations were carried out in places where adolescents were believed to interact and socialize.

While, like some studies, this paper cites such change as being influenced by migration, urbanization, unfavorable economic conditions, among others, it also identifies the weakening of social roles and norms, cultural practices as well as beliefs and worldviews, as underlying change in adolescent sexual behavior. That as people migrate, urbanize and adapt to different economic changes, the cultural definition of different aspects, especially sexual conduct, changes. However, while there is variation in sexual behavior in general, it is clear that change across board is modified to suit the environmental (social, socioeconomic, physical and cultural) circumstances, but generally evolves around the fundamental cultural rules and regulations of the people's 'sexual culture' and historical background.

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