

## Gender Differences in Responsible Sexual Behaviour of In-School Adolescents

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There are indications that gender influences involvement in risky activities including sexually risky behaviour. The present study therefore sought to explore gender differences in responsible sexual behaviour among in-school adolescents. Using a cross-sectional survey design, two hundred and fifty In-School adolescents drawn from Secondary Schools in Ondo State, South West Nigeria participated in the study. Participants were made up of 97 (38.8%) males and 153 (61.2%) females, with ages ranging from 11 to 23 years with a mean of 15.5 and standard deviation of 2.7. A structured questionnaire containing two sections was utilized for data collection. Section A tapped demographical information such as age, sex, an religion while Section B is the sexual behaviour scale developed by Oluwatelure, (2011). The Cronbach alpha of the scale in the present study was .90. T-test of independent means was used to test the hypothesis. Result revealed significant gender difference in responsible sexual behaviour (  $t(246) = -4.08; p < .05$ ). Female adolescents were found to show significantly higher positive disposition to responsible sexual behaviour than male adolescents. It is thus recommended that intervention be put in place to infuse the virtue and values of responsible sexual behaviour in males while effort should be made to sustain and improve on responsible sexual behaviour among females.

**Key words:** Responsible, sexual, behaviour, adolescents, Nigeria

Espousing responsible sexual behaviors (RSBs) in sexual encounters seems to benefit females more than males because it helps in preventing the social adversities that females experience when they engage in sexual intercourse without adequate protection. Available studies on sex and sexual behavior of young people have largely tended to focus attention on adolescent males with little attention paid to their female counterparts. Meanwhile, adolescence is a transitional phase of development, in which the lowered sense of vulnerability increases the likelihood for both sexes to engage in high risk activities including sexual behaviors.

A report by the World Health Organization (WHO, 1993) found that among young people aged 14 and 19 years, 43% of females and 67% of males were

found to be sexually active. O'Donnell, O'Donnell and Stueve, (2001), findings further support this outcome when they reported an increase in unsafe sexual practices among adolescents. The relatively young age at which adolescents begin to experiment with sex has consequences such as increasing their vulnerability to sexually transmitted infections (STIs). This is probably due to lack of adequate experience, knowledge and skills necessary to negotiate safe sex during sexual encounter. In an assessment of the prevalence of sexually-transmitted diseases in the US, it was found that among the adolescent population, the annual infection rate was three million (CDC, 2007). This is a confirmation that more adolescents are engaging in risky sexual behaviors and this

trend calls for attention into this emerging public health challenge.

WHO (1993) attests to the existence of gender disparity in sexual 'activeness' between boys and girls, with a higher percentage of boys engaging in coitus. It could be argued that while boys seem to be eager and in a hurry to experiment with sex, girls take longer time to arrive at a decision whether or not to have sex, with whom and under what conditions. The longer time required before females decide whether or not to engage in sex probably increases the likelihood that they will settle for options that favor safe sexual practice. The implication is that the time lapse needed to make choice on sexual matter may predispose females into developing a favorable attitude towards responsible sexual behaviors in sexual relations.

The attention devoted by policy makers and researchers towards promoting a deeper understanding of the factors that are associated with sexual behavior of young people, derives in part from media reports which indicate sharp rise in sexual activities in the adolescent population, besides its health, psychological and socio-economic consequences. Although both sexes are prone to the effects of sexually indiscriminate behaviors, the attendant consequence is however higher for females than males. The reason is because the outcome of unsafe sex impacts more on females. The unpleasant outcomes of careless sexual encounters, where they occur may jeopardize and truncate the future well-being of in-school adolescent females.

Literature on adolescent sexuality more often than not take a long-term perspective on the future impact of out-of-wedlock teenage pregnancy, because it is considered that teens are anything but ill-prepared for parenting. Support for the futuristic approach derives from findings which indicate that teenagers who become pregnant are exposed to financial hardships and limited employment opportunities (Furstenberg, Levine, & Brooks-Gunn, 1990). Teenagers who engage in unprotected coitus, aside from the likely probability of becoming pregnant, risk contracting sexually transmitted diseases.

The consensus in the psychological literature attests to significant differences in the behavior of men and women, a fact that buttresses suggestions that sexual relations differ by sex. Men and women are believed to respond differently to sexual stimuli and cues in the environment, because of their internal make-up and environmental demands. Miller and Fox (1987), reported that sexual behaviors are influenced by psychological, biological and socio-cultural factors, implying that individuality and the need to express behaviors consistent with gendered role expectations influence attitude towards sexual behaviors.

Cognitive social learning theory (CSLT) proposes that behaviors are learned through observation and imitation (Bandura, 1986; Bussey & Bandura, 1999). It further suggests that gender differences in behavior exist because gender-appropriate behaviors are reinforced while gender-inappropriate behaviors are punished. Bandura posited that through the system of reward and punishment, boys and girls learn what behaviors are appropriate for each gender. Boys and girls internalize these standards as applicable for each gender which then forms the standard which they use for regulating their own behavior in accordance with existing gender norms.

However, in most societies, there seems to exist sexual double standard that influences the sexual behaviors imitated by men and women. The sexual double standard selectively punishes one gender while the other is rewarded for expressing the same sexual behavior. For instance, men are given approval to engage in sexually permissive behaviors (such as having multiple sexual partners and engaging in casual sex), while women are punished for the same behavior (Bogle, 2008; Crawford & Popp, 2003; Kreager & Staff, 2009). Consistent with the propositions of CSLT, the internalized gendered-appropriate sexual behavior provide the framework for regulating behaviors and attitudes in accordance with the sexual double standard. The theory therefore predicts that men are more likely than women to engage in sexually risky behavior.

Although research emanating from western countries confirm a steady rise in risky sexual behavior in the adolescent population, (e.g. CDC, 2007), recent findings indicate that developing countries are not immune from this trend. Report from cities across Nigeria suggests a rise in sexual activity among adolescents. For instance, Morhason-Bello, Oladokun, Enakpene, Fabamwo, Obisesan & Ojengbede, (2008), investigated a sample (n=695) of senior secondary school adolescents in Ibadan and found that a significant percentage had previous sexual exposure, with males constituting a higher proportion of those exposed. In a similar study, this time in the eastern part of Nigeria, a significant number of school-aged adolescents surveyed engaged in unsafe premarital sexual activity (Obiekezie-Ali, 2003).

Factors such as erosion of customs and values (e.g. chastity of virginity), media influence, (Omotoso, 2006; Ugoji, 2008), early exposure to pornography, patriarchal tendency that gives male near-total authority over women even in matters that relate to sexual relations, and absence of strong deterrence against men who engage in permissive sexual behaviors or sexual misconducts, all serve to model for boys sexual attitudes that eventually mould their behavior in sexual relations. Thus, it is obvious that the involvement of a growing number of in-school adolescents in unprotected sex may be linked to absence of strong moral codes and adoption of western cultures that promote permissiveness in sexual behavior among citizens.

Because in-school adolescents may not yet have correct knowledge of sex and sexuality, the onset of sexual debut may be used as an index of sexually responsible behavior for this population. One research that investigated adolescents' sexual debut revealed that males were more likely than females to report that they had engaged in sexual intercourse, indicating that men had liberal attitudes towards premarital sex (Petersen and Hyde, 2010). Furthermore, adolescent males have been shown to be more vulnerable to antisocial pressure (Brown, 1986), implying a reduced

tendency to resist pressure to act anti-socially such as soliciting for and experimenting with sex without adequate safety precaution. Also, the inability to resist peer pressure might make males to have an expectation for sexual intercourse much earlier in a relationship than females. Additional research has demonstrated that males have a more favorable attitude towards sexual coercion (Feltey, Ainslie, & Geib, 1991), such as rape and sexual harassment.

Involvement in sexual offenses such as rape and other forms of sexual coercion can serve as a basis for exploring adolescents' attitudes towards responsible sexual behavior. The reason is because the rapist, who typically is in a hurry to assault his victim, either completely disregards or pays little attention to personal risks associated with the act. In an assessment of adolescents' involvement in rape, Ingrassia, Annin, Biddle & Miller (1993) found that more adolescent males were arrested as offenders. A study by Crime of Rape (1985), further illuminates the role of gender in sexual misconduct when it was found that high school-aged adolescent males accounted for 17% of single-offender rape cases.

Research conducted around the turn of the century (e.g. Kaestle, Morisky and Wiley, 2002) indicated that age difference was positively related to involvement in early sexual encounters. Their finding implied that adolescent females in heterosexual relationship with older males were likely to have coitus earlier than females with same aged partner. Thus, age gap is a factor that influences relationship dynamics in such a manner that exposes the female to increased risks for the consequences of early and unprotected sexual encounter. Relying on the results obtained in their study regarding the relationship between age difference and sexual behavior and encounter, Leitenberg & Saltzman (2000) concluded that the adverse effects of partner age difference (which may include unprotected sex, and inability to negotiate sex on one's own term) may lessen as females advance in age.

Teva, Paz and Buela-Casal (2009) explored gender differences in permissive sexual behavior as measured by multiple sexual partners using a sample of Spanish participants, and found that females tended to have lesser number of sexual partners than males. Also, the authors reported that even when they engage in coitus, females were likely to use condom most of the time than males. This particular outcome suggests that adolescent females were more sexually responsible than males. Additionally, Fantasia, Sutherland & Kelly-Weeder, (2012) report suggest that aggressive tendency may influence high risk behaviors such that because girls are less aggressive than boys, they were also less likely to engage in risky sexual behavior.

On the basis of the literature reviewed, it was hypothesized that in-school adolescent females will report higher responsible sexual behavior than male adolescents

## Method

### Research Design

This is a cross-sectional survey that investigated gender differences in adolescents' disposition to engage in responsible sexual behaviour.

### Participants

Two hundred and fifty In-Schools adolescents drawn from two communities in Ondo State, South West Nigeria participated in the study. The convenience sampling technique was used in selecting the participants made up of 97 (38.8%) males and 153 (61.2%) females, with ages ranging from 11 to 23 years with a mean of 15.5 and standard deviation of 2.7. Christians were 150 (60%) while Muslims were 100 (40%).

### Instrument

Data was collected using a structured questionnaire with two sections. Section A elicited the demographic information of the participants, the information included age, sex, religion etc. Section B is sexual behaviour scale by Oluwatelure (2011), a 25-item scale in the Likert format and 5 points response options ranging from

strongly agree (1), to strongly disagree, (5) and Cronbach alpha of .90.

### Procedure

Approval was sought from the authorities of the different High Schools where data was collected, it was granted after explanation as to the purpose of the study and assurance of strict adherence to all necessary ethical principles. Four hundred and thirty questionnaires were distributed using the convenience sampling method, respondents were urged to be truthful in their responses and that there were no right or wrong answers. Also, they were informed that participation was entirely voluntary and they reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any stage they feel like doing so. Respondents were again assured of the absolute confidentiality of their responses and their identities. Questionnaires were administered and retrieved same day in some instances while in other instances they were dropped to be picked up at later dates. Data collection was done over a four week period. Of the 430 questionnaires given out, only 250 were used in the final analysis due to the fact that some questionnaires were not returned, some were not correctly filled while some others were badly mutilated and could not be used.

### Statistical Analysis

The t-test of independent means was used for the data analysis to determine gender differences in responsible sexual behaviour.

## Results

Table 1: Summary of t-test of independent means showing the difference in males and females scores on the responsible sexual behaviour scale.

	Variable	N	Mean	SD	df	t	p
Responsible Sexual Behaviour	Male	81	77.94	18.29	246	-4.08	<.05
	Female	167	87.65	16.04			

The result shows that there exist a significant difference in the responsible sexual behaviour disposition of male and female adolescents  $t(246) = -4.08; p < .05$ . Female adolescents show significantly higher positive disposition to responsible sexual behaviour (Mean = 87.65) than male adolescents (Mean = 77.94).

### Discussion

The study examined gender differences in responsible sexual behavior among in-school adolescents in Ondo State, Nigeria. As hypothesized there was significant gender difference in responsible sexual behavior, such that adolescent females were higher on responsible sexual behaviors compared to males. The finding is supported by past studies (e.g. Feltey, Ainslie, & Geib, 1991; Teva, Paz & Buela-Casal, 2009) which reported higher incidence of risky sexual behavior among adolescent males. A possible explanation for the current finding in this study is obviously the Nigerian culture and societal norms

The socialization of the Nigerian child forbids females from behaving in a manner that suggests sexual expressiveness as well as to avoid sexually permissive tendencies. Because doing otherwise might attract labeling and name-calling, (Bogle, 2008; Crawford & Popp, 2003; Kreager & Staff, 2009), to avoid been ostracized and stigmatized by the society, females might have learnt to be circumspect in expressing themselves sexually. Whereas males are portrayed as having uncontrollable powerful sexual urges, females are believed to be choosy and have control over coital relationship. As a result, they may be able to negotiate for safe sex with a partner than males do.

In addition to this, the view that projects males as needing multiple sexual

partners may serve to encourage sexual promiscuity among men. Rightly or wrong, adolescent males learn the society's expectation that a 'true' man has multiple sexual partners and pattern their sexual behavior to conform to this expectation. Related to the aforementioned is the influence of peer characteristics on sexual behavior of adolescents. Adolescents that have peers who hold permissive values about sex such as non-use of male condoms during vaginal intercourse are likely to be influenced into internalizing and exhibiting these attributes in similar situations

Also, the finding in this study indicating that girls exhibited positive attitudes in sexual behaviors can be explained from the perspective of parent-child dynamics. Extant studies have demonstrated that teens who reported satisfaction with mother-child relationship were less sexually active (Advocates for Youth, 1997). Similarly, the quality of parent-child communication might influence attitude towards safe sex during the formative years of life such as the teen years. Poor and ineffective communication patterns on issues that pertain to sex education (methods of ensuring safe sexual practices) between parent and child was found to significantly predict hazardous sexual behaviors among adolescents (Frazer, 1997). Consequently, attitude towards responsible sexual behavior might

be explained on the platform of parent-child relationship quality.

From the perspective of patriarchal societies, the socialization of the child emphasizes different roles and expectations for both sexes. For example, child-rearing practices in Nigeria and many other African countries model behaviors, attitudes and cues that promote closer emotional ties between the girl-child and the mother. The reason may be because the girl-child is more likely to spend longer time at home after school, assist with domestic chores and run errands for her parents. The relative availability and close attachment of the girl-child strengthens the bond that exists between them (parent-child) as parents might seize the opportunity to discuss issues that are related to sex and safe sexual behaviors, a condition that makes it less likely for the teenager to cave-in to peer pressure to experiment with sex.

### Conclusion

The finding of the study has demonstrated that gender is an important contributor to sexual behavior of adolescents. In particular, the study found that in-school female adolescents were higher on responsible sexual behaviors relative to males. Interventions that are aimed at assisting female in-school adolescents to sustain this positive sexual attitude, which should span through the entire school system is recommended.

On the strength of the documented benefits of responsible sexual behavior as found in this study, it is recommended that public health education for adolescent population should include elements that enhance entrenchment of safe sexual behaviors/practices in adolescent females. To achieve this objective would require input from stakeholders who interact with young people, particularly females, in different settings such as educational, religious organizations, NGOs (e.g. girls' guild) and health institutions. This would ensure the development of sex education programs that not only appeal to them, but also can stimulate action in the desired direction among the target population. In addition, it may be necessary to understand the dynamics of social and psychological factors in the etiology of responsible sexual

behavior of young females. The outcome of such exercise can be used to cognitively train females in asserting themselves in sexual relationships. Also, health education programs for parents with in-school adolescents might focus on enhancing parents' capacity and skills to communicate effectively with their daughters. Finally, efforts at changing attitudes of adolescent males to a more sexually responsible one should also be encouraged..

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