

*Full Length Research Paper*

## Perspectives of sexuality and aging in the African culture: Eastern Uganda

Edith M. Okiria

Department of women and gender studies, Makerere University, P.O Box 7062, Kampala, Uganda, Uganda.

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Ugandan people still regard sexuality for older people as taboo. While a good sexual relationship is seen as important to quality of life for the majority of older adults, the quantity of interpersonal relationships is even more important. Cultural biases have tended to stereotype older people as asexual, devoid of feelings or emotion. This is because a woman's sexuality is often linked to the ability to bear children, and for women, their concept of themselves as sexual beings may also be tied to their ability to reproduce, which she loses after menopause. However, men's sexuality is not expected to change in a life time. This study focused on the experiences and perceptions of sexuality and ageing of Eastern Ugandan women and men, and how they affect gender relations within households and communities. An exploratory study design was employed and to examine the gendered perceptions and experiences of older men and women, and data were collected using a mixed-methods approach, where qualitative and quantitative techniques including survey, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were used. The study found that older women and men do not perceive their sexuality in the same way. Women largely relate their sexuality to their reproduction. Men feel that women should give up sexual activity earlier than them, because it is shameful for ageing women to be sexually active. Women themselves feel that beyond the age of 40-45 years, when they start experiencing body changes including menopause, sexual activity should be ruled out. Men and women reported going through a period of reduced desire which often results in poor gender relations. Despite the assumption that culturally, African women are not supposed to discuss their sexuality, the women were very open about sharing their experiences. There is a need for social networks, to enable ageing people to understand and discuss matters of sexuality openly so that they can relate the changes brought about to aging.

**Key words:** Gender relations, sexuality, ageing, stereotypes

### INTRODUCTION

Human sexuality and gender relations are closely interrelated and together affect the ability of women and men to achieve and maintain sexual and reproductive health. Ortner et al. (1981) and later on Masters and

Johnson (1983) documented the importance of sexuality throughout life. They found that sexual activity declines gradually over time for both women and men, and that sexual interest declines with time but more slowly than

E-mail: [eokiria@ss.mak.ac.ug](mailto:eokiria@ss.mak.ac.ug)

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sexual activity. In most of the cultures in Uganda, sexuality is not supposed to be discussed in public or at least not with anyone except intimate friends. Gender relations structure the entire life cycle from birth to old age, influencing access to resources and opportunities and shaping life choices at every stage. The relevance of gender is both ongoing and cumulative; the differences that shape the lives of men and women in old age are the outcome of the many different opportunities, challenges and constraints that they have gone through life.

In feminist writing sexuality refers to an aspect of personal and social life that has erotic desires, practices and identities but also the discourses and social patterns which construct erotic possibilities (Jackson and Scot, 1996) Essentialists and biological determinists argue that women's sexual (that is, biological) differences from men is the main cause of women's oppression (Rubin 1998). However, feminist constructionists counter argue that it is not the biology but oppression that produces sexual difference. The study was based on the constructionist argument where as a social construction; it is reproduced historically and varies cross-culturally.

Sexuality is a site that shapes, reproduces, articulates and transforms gender relations. The issue of sexuality therefore, is integral in the whole spectrum of power relations between men and women. Gender relations reveal not only the division of labor and resources between men and women but also ideas and representations (attitudes, desires, behavior patterns, personality traits etc) Gender relations are constituted by and help constitute these practices and ideologies in interaction with other structures of social hierarchy such as age, class, race caste etc.

Although sexuality is a fundamental need across the life span, society typically ignores the sexual needs and concerns of older adults. Aging brings with it many challenges similar to those faced in childhood or adolescence. Sexuality, sexual behavior, intimacy, and relationships are fundamental human needs, whether we are 14 or 100 years old.

Cultural attitudes that revere reproduction and youthful good looks may contribute to the expectation that older people are, or ought to be, asexual (Deacon et al., 1995). A wide variety of negative attitudes exist within society concerning sexual behavior and older people which has influenced the thinking of older people themselves (Spence, 1992). Gerontological research is frequently conducted within a reductionist and biomedical model which assumes that decline is the inevitable result of individual biological ageing ignoring the social conditions, which the study addressed.

Society in Africa has generally been viewed as restricting the sexuality of older adults, and therefore the study attempted to examine gendered dimension of sexuality and aging in Eastern Uganda, Pallisa District, Butebo-County. Examining gender relations in order to understand how both men and women experience aging. It was not about old age as a woman's or man's issue, instead

it was about how women's and men's experiences and perceptions of aging shape the gender relations. The study explored women's and men's perceptions, practices, coping mechanisms and the gendered attributes therein.

In the paper, aging has been defined as an accumulation of changes over time. It is viewed as a multidimensional process of physical, psychological and social change. Individual and community expectations and perceptions of how people should act and behave as they grow older are the main focus. In early 1940s sociologists saw aging as the problem of old men (loss of work), In 1970s feminists identified the problem of old women in relation to poverty, bereavement and disability. In 1990s there emerged men's health movement critique (lethal aspects of male role). By 2000 there were calls for rebalanced approach to gender within a political economy of well-being.

This paper is based on the heterosexual experiences and perceptions of sexuality and aging.

## METHODOLOGY

An exploratory study design was employed to examine the perceptions and experiences of men and women regarding gender relations in their sexuality and ageing.

Data was collected using qualitative techniques that was the most appropriate. Using Purposive Sampling of 80 rural men and women between age of 40-80 years were targeted. Surveys using a questionnaire (50), In-depth interviews (7), Focus group Discussions (2) and Life Histories (1) were used for collecting relevant information.

## RESULTS

Men and women had different perceptions of aging, depending on the socio-economic status. Women perceived sexuality and aging to be in relation to numbers of children and grand children, time spent in marriage, body changes, interest in sexual activity and general feelings in the body (health status). Men on the other hand associated sexuality and aging with economic and social accomplishments, social behavior, graying. A wealthy man is expected to stay young all the time and can marry several young women, no matter how many children he has. There is even a saying that "*It is older men who know how to take care of younger women*"

It is assumed that men do not grow old because they don't change their sexual behaviors with age. However, as time progresses men realize that they have to respect themselves in society by changing their behavior.

In both men and women, it was strongly felt that it is necessary to stay sexually active within the limits of marriage institution. Women and men go through the period of reduced sexual desire although men do not easily accept it. This finding is similar Masters and Johnson's findings.

Aging women are said to be complicated, sensitive,

quarrelsome and sometimes selfish. They are less valued in society and therefore feel unwanted. This corresponds with Hunt (1994) argument that ageing in women more than in men are still viewed as unattractive and unnecessary members of society. It is similar to the Western cultural stereotypes of women that equate sexual interest and activity with youth and deny the sexuality of older women.

Women reported that aging is an issue in their sexuality. The sexual desire declines (*fire goes out*), which affects gender relations especially for married couples. Widows for instance, have to show that they are respectable in society and conduct themselves well to avoid being victims of rape and sexual assault. If a widow does not respect herself, by keeping society's norms, she will lose respect and be demonized. On the other hand, widowers are encouraged to remarry as soon as possible because it is believed that a man cannot live alone without a woman. As Foucault (Butler, 1990:103) maintains, sexuality must not be seen as a drive which is alien and natural, but as especially dense transfer of point for relations of power.

An aging woman who gets into a relationship with a younger man is usually blamed for her behavior while for a man it may be seen as normal. However, an older man who goes out with or marries a girl fit to be his grand child is not respected in society. One of the respondents pointed out that: *"..... a retired headmaster, in his 60s defiled and married a school girl of 15 years. He bribed his way through the local council system and the case was not taken to police"* Such cases may be many in society but because legal action against defilement and rape is weak many go scot-free.

A woman who stays sexually active into old age is regarded a disgrace to womanhood, other women do not give her respect. It is even worse if she goes out with a younger man, it clearly shows how women's sexuality is more controlled especially as they grow older. It is regarded as unbecoming sexual behavior for aging women while it is okay for the men to have relationships with younger women.

### Practices

As a woman grows older she reaches menopause followed by loss of sexual desires. There is also loss of interest in some of the things one once loved like dancing, and listening to music etc men do not have the same experiences. Men are expected to stay strong and active until they are very old (80+).

Tradition demands that a widow gets inherited, a practice being discouraged now due to HIV and AIDS is normal in rural-set-up. However, if a woman is beyond reproductive age, no one will be interested in inheriting her except for properties that the late husband left. She is no longer called by her name but called "widow" as her

identity. Widowers of whatever age are normally under pressure to remarry, because they need a helper in the household (cooking, cleaning, washing etc). The gender roles are supposed to be maintained, for man's masculine identity. Widowers also become very lonely due to the limited social networks compared to women. An aging widow is therefore less likely to receive support and expected to have no relationships with men.

In the past older men used to invite younger men into their homes to work for them, but also unofficially give sexual satisfaction to their younger wives. This practice ensured that there was food security and harmony in the home.

On the other hand, if the woman is aging and the man feels he needs a younger woman, there is tendency to desert the older wife. In such a situation there will be poor gender relations and limited support to the aging woman and her children.

If a woman is economically and socially empowered, the effects of aging will be mild compared to one who is not. As this retired civil servant commented:

*"At the age of 62 years, I am approached by some men who do not even believe that I am that age. They tell me that I am still attractive, but this is because I have lived well as a civil servant and retired teacher"*

In cases of sexual dysfunction, women tend to assume that their husbands must be having extra-marital affairs while men think that they are bewitched by their wives. This may result into conflicts and mistrust in gender relations.

As the women grow older they tend to neglect their physical appearance, they do not think that they are attractive any more. It is partly because they become too busy with gender roles and do not have enough time to take care of themselves. In some instances gender relations improve as men and women grow older, they become very good friends and enjoy each other's company. This finding is in line with Caldwell and Caldwell (1987) argument that African sexuality is not as plain as it is sometimes claimed. Different social contexts involve different rules and taboos associated with sexual practice.

It is a common practice for a couple to separate beds as they grow older. It was reported that as a woman goes through menopause, experience of hot flashes is embarrassing. The night sweats make it uncomfortable to share a bed with someone else.

There is a widespread but unsubstantiated assumption about old age which includes the belief that most old people are sick, unhappy, cognitively impaired and isolated. However, aging and barren women face far more challenges than men or other women, because the older they grow the more difficult life becomes. Society does not even recognize them as useful members of the community because they do not have any off-spring as

the life history of one respondent revealed.

### Coping mechanisms

Both men and women go through reduced sexual desire as they age however, it strains relationships. The men may become aggressive or over drink as a defense mechanism while women may become more quarrelsome in the household. Through their social networks, they are able to share what they are going through with their peers. Both men and women sometimes use herbal medicines to boost their sexual desires. Younger women talk to older women for advice. The challenge is that men do not easily seek help for fear of not wanting to be seen as a failure. In a polygamous relationship, older women will be deserted.

### Conclusion

Gender organizes every aspect of our lives, it intersects with other hierarchies of age, class, ethnicity sexuality etc. Aging people share the realities of aging bodies and society's expectations depending on several factors whether literate or illiterate, and the different cultures. Experiences of sexuality and aging are diverse however, age distinguishes acceptable sexual behavior for men and women. Cultural norms define how society defines what is considered appropriate by age. The way individuals feel and express their sexuality varies across societies and social status over time. All societies prescribe and codify sexual activity and in this way legitimize some sexual practices and not others (polygamy). This is an area feminist discourse has not adequately examined. Marriage has continued to be seen as the appropriate location for containing and controlling sexual feelings. In a rural set-up where society believes that a "good woman" must get married till death, women

are forced to sometimes stay in abusive relationships. It is not only hard for them to remarry, but also society's expectations for them to be asexual at a certain age.

Bodies are key sites for judgment about age, so bodies are very important in our identities throughout the life span and presentation of self. Given the patriarchal nature of societies where the importance of appearance for women is paramount, it is not surprising that much of the discourse on the body so far has concerned women's bodies. Self identities are increasingly bound to how we look and how our bodies perform.

### Conflict of Interests

The author(s) have not declared any conflict of interests.

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