Marriage, Masculinity and HIV Risk in Southeastern Nigeria

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Introduction

This article examines the social context of HIV infection in marriage in Nigeria. Based on an intensive ethnographic study in the southeastern region, it traces the relationship between modern marriage, patterns of gender inequality, extramarital sexual behavior, and popular understandings and responses to the HIV epidemic. While common representations of AIDS in Africa frequently link risk to promiscuous sexual conduct and detrimental traditional practices, the findings from this study suggest that it is Nigerians' aspirations for modern lifestyles in economic circumstances of continued poverty and inequality, combined with powerful anxieties about sexual morality, that contribute to the risk of contracting HIV.

In order to unravel and address the complex behavioral dynamics driving the HIV epidemic in Nigeria and in sub-Saharan Africa more generally, it is necessary to concentrate less on the relationship between tradition, sexuality and immorality and more on the connections between modernity, sexuality and morality. Risk of HIV in Nigeria, including among married people, is shaped by contradictory pressures. Poverty and inequality create contexts that motivate certain kinds of sexual relationships, while also producing collective concern about sexual morality, with widespread popular perceptions of rampant sexual immorality serving as a symbol of people's frustrations regarding unfulfilled expectations for better lives. Nigerians' efforts to maintain social reputations and appearances of sexual morality, even as economic hardships and aspirations give rise to potentially risky sexual relationships, produce secrets and silences with regard to actual sexual behavior that can be life-threatening in the era of AIDS.

The effects of the nexus of inequality, sexuality, and morality operate across the social spectrum, but in this study the focus is on the risk of contracting HIV in marriage, and specifically on married women's risk of contracting HIV from their husbands. Data from around

the world, including in Nigeria, suggest that married women's greatest risk of contracting HIV is through having sex with their husbands.[1] The implication is that men are acquiring HIV outside marriage and infecting their wives. The study of married women's risk of HIV therefore requires an investigation of the phenomenon of men's extramarital sexual behavior. This entails understanding gender as a central dimension of the intersection between inequality, sexuality and morality.

At first glance, modern marriage in Nigeria would seem to offer women greater autonomy and equality, and perhaps protection from HIV. The growing prevalence of monogamy, declining fertility, a trend toward neolocal residence and nuclear household organization, women's increasing education and participation in the formal workforce as more people migrate to cities, and the rise of love as an important rationale in the selection of a spouse all suggest the possibility of growing gender equality in marriage. But the findings presented here show that gender inequality persists in powerful ways, manifest perhaps most obviously, and certainly most dangerously with regard to the risk of HIV infection, in a pronounced double standard with regard to extramarital sexuality. In short, in contemporary Nigeria, married men are much likely than married women to engage in extramarital sex, and it is more acceptable for them to do so.[2] The continuing prevalence of men's participation in extramarital sex, and the fact that it is, nonetheless, primarily women's sexuality that is the subject of popular discourse about sexual immorality, attests to the persistence of gender inequality.[3] Furthermore, so-called traditional systems of marriage offered women more protections than one might imagine, and modern marriage, despite its appearances of greater equality, places many women in positions where they cannot easily confront their husband's infidelity or protect themselves from possible HIV infection.

But the study findings go further than simply attributing the marital transmission of HIV to men's bad behavior. Men's extramarital sexual practices are situated in economic, social and moral contexts, showing how the social organization of extramarital sexuality is itself located at the intersection of economic inequality, aspirations for modern lifestyles, gender disparities, and commanding and contradictory moralities. The findings of this study argue against notions of African traditions, promiscuous women, and pervasive immorality as the causes of Nigeria's and Africa's AIDS epidemic. They also demonstrate that married men's risky sexual behavior and their wives' inability to protect themselves can be understood and explained without resorting to blaming the victims. Nevertheless, an explanation of the risks of marital transmission of HIV in Nigeria is not complete without recognizing the extent to which Nigerians' anxieties about sexual morality contribute to risks produced primarily by poverty and inequality.

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa, with more than 130 million people. With the current adult HIV sero-prevalence estimated at five percent, some 3.5 million people are infected.[4] Worst case scenarios suggest that in the next decade infection rates could escalate to 20 percent, producing more than 10 million new cases.[5] More moderate forecasts, such as the Nigerian government's estimates, acknowledge that by 2015, some 8 million Nigerians will have died from AIDS-related causes.[6] With the country's testing and antiretroviral therapy programs still reaching on a fraction of the target population, effective prevention efforts remain a crucial strategy. But perhaps not surprisingly, in a context where both popular and political representations of the disease continue to emphasize sexual immorality as a primary risk factor, little appetite exists for focusing on the risks of marital transmission. Even as -- and surely largely because -- marriage remains the single most important marker of moral adulthood in

Nigeria, both policymakers and ordinary citizens remain resistant to the idea that marriage must be understood as a risk factor for HIV infection.

Study Setting and Research Design

The study was undertaken in two communities in Igbo-speaking southeastern Nigeria, where the author has worked and conducted research since 1989. The project areas included the semi-rural community of Ubakala in Abia State and the city of Owerri in Imo State. Ubakala is made up of eleven villages and has a total resident population of approximately 24,000 people. Most households rely economically on a combination of farming, trading, employment and remittances from migrants. The community is about six miles from the town of Umuahia, and everyday life is increasingly affected by the close orbit with an urban center. Further, the vast majority of adults in Ubakala have lived at least a year or more in one of Nigeria's many cities, and at any given time more than half the people who consider Ubakala their "home" are living outside the community, mostly in Nigeria's far-flung cities and towns. With very few exceptions, the entire population is Christian, and most people are regular participants in the activities of the many churches present in the area. A majority of both men and women below the age of 50 has completed at least primary school and is literate, and nearly all parents aspire to have their children achieve higher education. Despite significant changes over the past several decades that have placed strains on traditional systems of social organization, ties of kinship and community remain powerful among both Ubakala residents and their migrant brethren.

Owerri is the capital of Imo State and has a population of approximately 350,000 people. Many of the city's residents work as civil servants for the state government, but there are also large commercial and service sectors. The bulk of the population is made up of rural-urban migrants, most of whom retain close ties to their places of origin. As in Ubakala and in the entire

southeastern region, Christianity is nearly ubiquitous. In addition, Owerri is the home of four colleges and universities and has a student population of close to 100,000. Partly because of the concentration of tertiary institutions, the city has a reputation throughout southern Nigeria as a hub for extramarital sexual relationships. Owerri was selected as a second site in order to explore rural-urban differences in perceptions and practices in modern marriage and in men's extramarital sexual behavior, and because of its supposed status as a breeding ground for infidelity.

The author spent June-December 2004 in Nigeria, living in Ubakala and making weekly visits to Owerri. Four local research assistants were hired to assist with marital case study interviews in both sites, and to contribute to participant observation in Owerri. Two female research assistants conducted the marital case study interviews with women in Ubakala, while the author conducted the interviews with men. In Owerri, male and female assistants conducted the marital case study interviews with men and women, respectively, and also undertook participant observation. The author conducted participant observation in both settings, and was also responsible for key informant interviews in each venue. Key informants included community leaders, religious leaders, government and non-government medical and public health officials, commercial sex workers, and people living with HIV/AIDS. The author also collected popular cultural and archival materials related to marriage, sexuality and Nigeria's HIV epidemic.

The marital case study interviews and participant observation were the core methods and the results reported below emerge from the analysis of this data. Marital case studies were conducted with 20 couples, 14 residing in Ubakala and six residing in Owerri. The couples were selected opportunistically with the objective of sampling marriages of different generations and

duration, couples with a range of socioeconomic and educational profiles, and, of course, in both rural and urban settings. A breakdown of the marital case study sample is provided in Table 1. Interviews were conducted in three parts, generally in three sessions, each approximately 1-1.5 hours in duration. Husbands and wives were interviewed separately. All respondents agreed to participation after being presented with protocols for informed consent approved by institutional review boards in both the U.S. and Nigeria. The first interview concentrated primarily on premarital experiences, courtship, and the early stages of marriage. The second interview examined in greater depth the overall experience of marriage, including issues such as marital communication, decision-making, child-rearing, resolution of disputes, relations with family, and changes in the marital relationship over time. The final interview focused on marital sexuality, extramarital sexual relationships, and understandings and experiences regarding HIV/AIDS. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed, and the interviews were coded using the ethnographic software Atlas.ti.

[Table 1 here]

Participant observation focused on venues and social contexts related to marriage and family on the one hand, and extramarital sexuality on the other hand. Throughout the research, the author lived in a household in Ubakala that included a married woman, several children, and a migrant husband, and in Owerri with a young newlywed couple. In both Ubakala and Owerri the author conducted intensive participant observation with couples in the marital case studies, and with several additional families, spending time with these families throughout daily activities. The author also attended wedding ceremonies, Christian marital counseling sessions, local community and court cases to resolve marital disputes, meetings of community men's and women's associations, child naming ceremonies, funerals, and a range of other social events in

which marriage, family, and gender feature importantly. To study the social organization of extramarital sex the author spent time with men in both all-male social settings where men tend to talk about extramarital sex and at establishments where men meet or entertain their girlfriends. The author joined and participated in men's social and sports clubs, accompanied men to bars, hotels, and restaurants known to be conducive for meeting women, and observed the public spaces at local brothels where clients meet and negotiate with commercial sex workers. While the details of participant observation are too many to describe here, they provide the contextual background within which the marital case study material is analyzed. A summary of the activities and venues for participant observation is presented in Table 2.

[Table 2 here]

The Challenges and Contradictions of Modern Marriage in Southeastern Nigeria

Scholars of West African society have long recognized the pronounced social importance of marriage and fertility in the region.[7] While there is no doubt that marriage serves fundamental social purposes in every society, polygyny and high fertility have been considered hallmarks of West African social organization -- logical demographic strategies in a horticultural economy where labor rather than land was traditionally the scarce resource. Historically, in Igbo society, men married women with the idea that they would provide labor and produce children. Some of the older men in the marital case studies conceptualized their marriages and their choice of spouses in these terms. For example, a 71-year-old man who has been married to one wife for 40 years, and who has lived almost all of his adult life in Ubakala, explained: "A man marries a woman for two main reasons, the work she can do and the children she will bear." He added that he was attracted to and courted his wife because: "I saw how she was strong in farm work, running inside the bush, carrying firewood, and so on. I developed an interest in her because she

was a strong girl." His wife continues to be an able farmer and the eight children she gave birth to contribute to this man's assessment that he has a very good marriage.

Over the past several decades, Igbo society has changed dramatically, and with these changes the institution of marriage has also been transformed. The extent of social change is too spectacular to summarize here, but the intertwining factors that have contributed to the transformation of marriage include: economic diversification and labor migration, urbanization, education, religious conversion, and globalization. Contemporary economic strategies hinge on rural-urban migration and a strong emphasis on the importance of education for children. Schools are only one arena where young Nigerians are creating and absorbing new values regarding sex, gender, marriage and family. Modern media -- especially music, videos films and television -- provide young Nigerians with daily opportunities to observe and contemplate alternative futures, albeit futures often not realistically within their grasp. As larger numbers of families move to the city in search of better education, employment, and other economic opportunities, family structure is changing. Modifications in family organization induced by economic and demographic transformation have been complemented by moral, ideological, and religious trends that also affect the institution of marriage.

On its face, marriage in southeastern Nigeria seems to be changing in ways that make it increasingly similar to marriage in Western societies. Describing the differences between her marriage and her parents' marriage, a 30-year-old woman in Ubakala married for three years said: "My father had three wives and 14 children. Often it was every woman for herself. My husband and I have a partnership. We decide things. There is love between us." The modern marriages of young couples in southeastern Nigeria are clearly different from their parents. The vast majority of young people choose their own spouse – the notion of "arranged" marriage is

anathema to most youth and the conjugal relationship is privileged relative to other kinship ties. Perhaps the most concise way to contrast modern Igbo marriages with the past is to note that young couples see their marriages as life-project in which they as a couple are the primary actors, whereas their parents' marriages were more obviously embedded in the structures of the extended family. The differences are most pronounced in narratives about courtship, in the way husbands and wives describe how they resolve marital quarrels, in the way they make decisions about and contribute to their children's education, and, in some cases, in the allusions to Christianity as the basis for conjugal dynamics. In each of these arenas people in more modern marriages tend to emphasize the primacy of the individual couple, often in conscious opposition to the constraints imposed by ties to kinship and community. For example, a 43-year-old teacher in Ubakala reported: "For me and my wife our marriage is our business, whereas in my parents' time everything was scrutinized by the extended family. If they had any little problem everyone might become involved. We try to keep things within the married house. If we have any problem we handle it ourselves and maybe pray over it, but we don't go running to the elders broadcasting our problems here and there." Table 3 summarizes the predominant characteristics of modern marriage in southeastern Nigeria.

[Table 3 here]

But it is important not to exaggerate these trends. Even in the most modern marriages, ties to kin and community remain important, and the project of marriage and child-rearing remains a social project, strongly embedded the relationships and values of the extended family system. Indeed, the continued importance of ties to family and community and ongoing concerns about the collective expectations of wider social networks permeate people's stories of modern courtship, the resolution of marital disputes, and decisions about child-rearing. The choice of a

future spouse based on love is, in almost all cases, still subjected to the advice and consent of families. Describing the process after he informed his family of his intention to marry his wife, a 32-year-old barber in Ubakala recounted: "My people did investigations. They sent a delegation to her place to find out about the family. In our place we always like to know the character of the family from which we marry." His parents assented to the marriage, but he acknowledged that their objections would have led him to rethink his choice.

In many ways, modern marriage in southeastern Nigeria remains a resolutely social endeavor, creating contradictions for younger couples. Recognizing and examining the challenges faced by married couples in contemporary Nigeria is crucial in understanding the social context of HIV infection in marriage, and particularly the dynamics at work in marriages in response to men's extramarital sexual relationships.

Gender and the Social Organization of Extramarital Sex

The prevalence of married men's participation in extramarital sex in Nigeria is well documented.[8] But existing scholarly understandings and explanations for the phenomenon are not particularly persuasive because they tend to reproduce common stereotypes, they often ignore the diversity and complexity of these relationships, and they overlook the ambivalence that sometimes accompanies this behavior. As in many societies, people in southeastern Nigeria commonly attribute men's more frequent participation in extramarital sexual relationships to some sort of innate male predisposition, and this perspective is well represented in the literature.[9] Some men and women interviewed in the marital case studies articulated this view. In response to a question why married men seek extramarital lovers, a 54-year-old civil engineer in Owerri repeated a Pidgin English phrase heard frequently among Nigerian men: "Man no be wood. It's something men need, especially African men. You know we have a polygamous culture. This

practice of marrying only one wife is the influence of Christianity. But men still have that desire for more than one woman." Only a piece of wood, he implies, lacks an outward-looking sexual appetite.

While it is important note that many Nigerian men and women share a conceptualization of male sexual desire that includes a notion that men naturally need or want multiple sexual partners, not everyone sees it this way, Further, explaining male extramarital sexual behavior in these terms is insufficient because sexual desires do not emerge or operate in a social and cultural vacuum. From interviews with men about their extramarital relationships, from listening to men's conversations among themselves pertaining to these relationships, and from observations of men interacting with their extramarital partners in various public or semi-public settings, a number of patterns in the social organization of extramarital sex become apparent. Three sociological factors are particularly important for explaining the opportunity structures that facilitate men's participation in extramarital sexual relationships: work-related migration, socioeconomic status, and involvement in predominately male peer-groups that encourage or reward extramarital sexual relations. These factors are elaborated in Table 4 and examined in detail below.

[Table 4 here]

Mobility and Migration

Of the 20 men interviewed in the marital case studies, 14 reported having extramarital sex at some point during their marriages, and of the six who said they have not engaged in extramarital sex, four have been married less than five years. Approximately half of all the cases of extramarital relationships described in the interviews occurred in situations where work-related mobility was a factor.[10] It appears that men whose work takes them away from their wives and

families are more likely to have extramarital relationships, and men frequently attribute their behavior to the opportunities and hardships produced by these absences. A forty-seven-year-old civil servant whose postings frequently took him away from his family explained a relatively long-term relationship with a woman in one of the places he was transferred: "I stayed a long time without my wife. But eventually this woman befriended me. She was a widow and a very nice woman. She cooked for me and provided companionship. Later, I was transferred back home, and it was over. It was like that."

Extramarital relationships in the context of work-related migration can be more easily hidden from wives, family, and neighbors. Every man in the sample who admitted to having extramarital sex expressed the importance of keeping such relationships secret from their wives, but also from their extended families and their local communities. Men's motivations for keeping extramarital relationships hidden included not only a desire to maintain peace and uphold the appearance of fidelity for their wives, but also a clear concern over their own social reputation. The same man who described his relationship above explained: "I am a matured man with responsibilities in my community – in the church, in various associations. I hold offices in these organizations. I can't be seen to be running here and there chasing after women. My own son is almost a man now. How can I advise him if I am known for doing this and that?" To the degree that male infidelity is socially acceptable, it is even more strongly expected that outside affairs should not threaten a marriage, and this mandates discretion. Many men were ambivalent about their extramarital sexual behavior, but in most cases men viewed it as acceptable given an appropriate degree of prudence so as not to disgrace one's spouse, one's self, and one's family.

In men's narratives about their extramarital relationships where work-related migration featured as a significant factor, the idiom of hardship appeared even more prominently than the

idiom of opportunity. Men whose work or businesses took them away from home for extended periods spoke of the deprivations created by these absences – sometimes specifically with regard to sexual access, but even more frequently in terms of domestic services, such as cooking and washing clothes, and in terms of companionship. Men who had extramarital partners during absences from their wives often explained these relationships in terms of a constellation of comforts that a woman provides a man, sex being only one of them. Indeed, in some men's accounts, attributing their motives to needs greater than just sex seemed to assuage a degree of moral ambivalence that permeated some of these stories.

Masculinity and Socioeconomic Status

In the vast majority of cases described in the interviews, issues of socioeconomic status, and specifically the intersection of economic and gender inequality, featured in men's accounts of their extramarital relationships. Most often, a man's relationship to his female lover included an expectation that the man provide certain kinds of economic support. Men frequently view extramarital relationships as arenas for the expression of status – economic status and masculine status. Indeed, it is necessary to understand the intertwining of masculinity and wealth, and gender and economics more generally, to make sense of the most common forms of extramarital sexual relationships in southeastern Nigeria.

In popular discourse, the most common form of economically driven extramarital relationships are said to be so-called "sugar daddy" relationships, wherein married men of means engage in sexual relationships with much younger women with the expectation that the men will provide various forms of economic support in exchange for sex. While many Nigerians, including many of the participants in these relationships, view sugar daddy relationships in fairly stark economic terms – exemplified by a common expression among secondary school and

university girls that there is "no romance without finance" – a closer look at these relationships suggests that they are much more complicated than portrayed in the stereotypical image of rich men exchanging money for sex with impoverished girls.[11] Young women frequently have motives other than the alleviation of poverty. Indeed, typical female participants in these sugar daddy relationships are not the truly poor, but rather young women who are in urban secondary schools or universities, and who seek and represent a kind of modern femininity. They are frequently relatively educated, almost always highly fashionable, and while their motivations for having a sugar daddy may be largely economic, they are usually looking for more than money to feed themselves. For married men, the pretty, urban, educated young women who are the most desirable girlfriends provide not only sex, but the opportunity, or at least the fantasy, of having more exciting, stylish, and modern sex than what they have with their wives. At a sports club in Owerri where the author spent many evenings during fieldwork, and where men frequently discuss their extramarital experiences, a 52-year-old business man described a recent encounter with a young university student to the delight of his mates: "Sometimes you think you are going to teach these girls something, but, hey, this girl was teaching me."

Male Peer Groups

Married men who have younger girlfriends assert a brand of masculinity wherein sexual prowess, economic capability, and modern sensibility are intertwined. Masculinity is created and expressed both in men's relationships to women and in their relationships with other men.[12] In male-dominated social settings such as social clubs, sports clubs, sections of the marketplace, and particular bars and eateries, Igbo men commonly talk about their girlfriends, and sometimes show them off. Male-peer groups are a significant factor in many men's motivations for and behaviors in extramarital relationships.

While it is not uncommon to hear men boast about their sexual exploits to their peers – frequently alluding to styles and practices that are considered simultaneously "wild" and "modern," another strand of discourse emerges when men explain their motivations. Many men reported that they enjoyed the feeling of taking care of another woman, of being able to provide her with material and social comforts and luxuries. In a candid discussion with several men over beers about men's motives for extramarital lovers, a 46-year-old man known among his peers as "One Man Show" for his penchant for keeping multiple young woman, explained: "It's not only about the sex. I like to buy them things, take them nice places, give them good meals, and make them feel they are being taken care of. I like the feeling of satisfaction that comes taking care of women, providing for them." Masculinity proven by provisioning a girlfriend parallels the way men talk about taking care of their wives and families. It foregrounds the connections between masculinity and money and between gender and economics more generally.

While there is no doubt that the desire to forge and present a modern masculine identity combines issues of economics and gender, not all men's extramarital relationships can be easily explained in these terms. Although nearly all men noted the importance of keeping affairs secret from their wives, in the marital case study interviews many men emphasized discretion much more broadly. They hide their extramarital relationships not only from their wives, but from virtually everyone. In such cases it is not easy to attribute men's motives to their desires to appear masculine and economically potent to their fellow men, although men's more private relationships may still be internalized expressions of masculinity and status.

Some men had occasional extramarital sexual liaisons that appeared to be about little more than sex. In a few cases men seemed genuinely unhappy in their marriages, and in rare instances men fell in love with their extramarital partners. But by and large, men tended to see

their extramarital relationships as independent of quality of their marriages, and in their minds extramarital relationships posed no threat to a marriage so long as they were kept secret from wives, and so long as men did not waste so many resources on girlfriends that they neglected their obligations to their wives and families.

Sex, Secrecy and the Risk of HIV

Unraveling the issue of secrecy in relation to men's extramarital sex is crucial for understanding some of the contradictory dynamics at work, dynamics that contribute directly to the ways that men's extramarital sexual relationships translate into married women's risk of contracting HIV from their husbands. On the one hand, nearly all men want to keep their extramarital relationships secret from their wives, though on rare occasions a man in a troubled relationship where there is no longer much pretense of harmony will openly flaunt his infidelity. On the other hand, for a significant proportion of men – in this sample about half of all men who admitted having extramarital sex, it is apparent that there would be much less benefit to having extramarital affairs without the opportunity display masculine sexual and economic prowess to peers. But even among men who like to show off their girlfriends to their male peers, there is a general tendency to try to hide these relationships not only from their wives, but from their extended families and their communities, especially in the village setting. In part, this is a means of protecting their wives and children from harmful gossip, but it is also a means to protect their own reputations. In their church congregations, their village associations, and their extended families men live up to very different expectations than in some of their more urban-influenced peer groups.

The correlation between concerns about social reputation and secrecy regarding extramarital sex also strongly influences the approach of most women to their husbands'

infidelity. In effect, women have multiple reasons to remain silent about suspicions or evidence of their husbands' extramarital affairs. In more modern marriages, where couples conceive of their marriage as their own choice, where romantic love is frequently an important reason for marrying, and where the conjugal unit is viewed as the primary locus of family decision-making, women risk undermining whatever leverage they have with their husbands by openly confronting infidelity. Further, in modern marriages women are less willing to call on their kin and in-laws for support in such cases, not only because these marriages are more independent from extended families, but because of the ideology that in such marriages a man's happiness (and his proclivity to seek outside women) is directly related to the capacity of his wife to please him. As in many cultural contexts of gender inequality, female behavior, and particularly female sexuality, becomes an arena where larger social anxieties are morally expressed.

What this means for many Igbo wives is that they risk not only losing their husbands support if they confront his cheating, but also possibly bearing the blame in the eyes of their community (including their female peers) for allowing (or even pushing) their husbands to stray. Most women in the marital interviews were more comfortable talking about other people's experiences with husbands' infidelity than their own, but many women described a common dilemma. A 38-year-old married mother of four living in Ubakala said: "In this our society, when a man cheats on his wife, it is often the wife who will be blamed. People will say it is because she did not feed him well, she refused him in bed, or she is quarrelsome. And it is often our fellow women who are most likely to blame the wife." As a result, while almost all women acknowledge that many men cheat, very few will say openly that they think their own husbands are cheating.

It is important not to exaggerate this point. The fact that most men want to keep their affairs secret from their wives is partly the result of the fact that husbands know there will be consequences if wives find out – consequences that the women themselves can impose. Several men and women in the study recounted the ways that women punished and curtailed men's infidelities, including withholding food, withdrawing financial support, preventing sexual access, and, on much rarer occasions, publicly humiliating him, or even retaliating with her an affair of her own. Women are by no means powerless pawns in these modern Igbo marriages, but they do have good reason to keep secret or stay silent about their husbands' extramarital sexual behavior.

Condoms and Perceptions of Sexual Morality

Paradoxically, the impediments to condom use in marriage and in extramarital relationships are heightened by popular perceptions about HIV/AIDS. Even prior to widespread public awareness about HIV in Nigeria, many factors contributed to relatively low utilization of condoms. Levels of awareness, availability and affordability remain issues for the poorest and least educated segments of the population. In addition, even among people who know about condoms, widely circulating rumors suggest that they are sometimes ineffective and potentially threatening to health. Further, a common perception exists that condoms symbolize impersonal or promiscuous sex. Together, such factors inhibit condom use in many premarital and extramarital relationships, despite the fact that neither party usually wants a pregnancy. In addition, in many extramarital relationships, economic, gender and generational inequalities make it difficult for women to negotiate condom use with their typically older and wealthier male partners.[13] Condom use in marriage is even more problematic because, in addition to the above reasons, reproduction is so highly valued. Ironically, the HIV epidemic has further complicated possibilities for condom use because, in a context where risk of HIV is popularly associated with sexual immorality,

suggesting a condom is tantamount to asserting that one's partner is risky and, hence, guilty of sexual impropriety.

For women who suspect their husbands of infidelity, suggesting condom use for marital sex poses multiple problems. Asking for a condom may imply she does not want to become pregnant, which itself can create tension. Perhaps worse, her request may be interpreted as indicating that she suspects not only that her husband is cheating, but that the type of extramarital sex he is having is risky, and by implication, debauched. What is more, the meaning of her request may be inverted by her spouse and turned against her with an accusation that it is she who is being unfaithful. Responding to a question about whether his wife had ever asked him to use a condom, a 34-year-old father of three exclaimed: "How can she? Is she crazy? A woman asking her husband to use a condom is putting herself in the position of a whore. What does she need a condom with her man for, unless she is flirting around outside the married house?" All of these possibilities have become more highly charged in the era of HIV/AIDS, when sexual immorality is associated with a deadly disease. The ultimate irony is that for women in the most modern marriages, where the conjugal relationship is primary and romantic love is often an explicit foundation of the relationship, the possibility of confronting a man's infidelity or insisting on condom use may be even more difficult. In such marriages a woman challenging her husband's extramarital behavior or asking for a condom may be undermining the very basis for the marriage, and threatening whatever leverage she has with her husband by implying that the relationship itself has been broken. In southeastern Nigeria, where it remains socially imperative to be married, women cannot easily confront, challenge or control their husbands' extramarital sexual behavior. The secrets and silences that result can exacerbate married women's risk of HIV infection.

Conclusion

The reasons that men in southeastern Nigeria engage in extramarital sex cannot be reduced to a simple formula that privileges uniquely innate male needs and appetites, even if Nigerian men and women sometimes reproduce this all too common explanation. Indeed, among men who have extramarital partners, not all kinds of relationships are the same. Some men clearly show off their girlfriends to male peers and enjoy the social status that accrues in certain types of predominantly male social settings, while others keep their affairs secret from their peers. Many men see the separations caused by work-related mobility and migration as creating need and opportunity, and providing a justification for extramarital sex; others have partners in closer proximity to their married homes. Some men develop long-term relationships with their lovers, providing them with (and being provided) emotional as well as material support, while others prefer the relative brevity and anonymity offered by commercial sex workers. In some cases, it really does seem to be about just sex, while in other instances extramarital relationships are as much about the performance of masculinity or social class, as about sex itself.

Although it is impossible to pigeonhole the variety of men's extramarital sexual relationships in southeastern Nigeria into one mould, several intertwining issues link an otherwise diverse ensemble of behavior. Specifically, understanding the social organization of men's extramarital sex requires connecting gender, economics, and morality. For most Nigerian men, masculinity is closely tied to economic capacity. In the context of contemporary southeastern Nigeria, the paramount test of masculinity for adult men is getting married and having children. With the high cost of bridewealth and the growing expenses of educating children, these tasks alone are a challenge for the majority of men.[14] For men who eschew extramarital sexual relationships, it is often the moral imperative of provisioning for their

families that is the greatest guide for their conduct. Wealthier men are more likely to have extramarital sex not only because they are more attractive to potential partners, and not only because they can display both masculinity and social status through their girlfriends, but because they can have affairs without the risk of failing to provide for their families. Indeed, although it is widely known that many men cheat on their wives, those who do so at the expense of providing for their wives and children are most likely to face opprobrium from their peers. Very few men leave their wives for their lovers, and men are under strong social pressure to take care of their families.

With the changes in marriage in southeastern Nigeria occurring over the past few decades, it is important to understand how women in modern marriages deal with their husbands' infidelities, and, more specifically, why they appear to be so tolerant. From this study, it was clear that while almost all women wish for and try to encourage their husbands' fidelity, many women choose to ignore their suspicions. Further, among those who cannot ignore them, very few women think a man's extramarital affair is grounds to end a marriage. The reasons for this include not only intense social pressure to stay married, reinforced to various degrees of women's economic and social dependence on men (including, for example, Igbos' patrilineal system of kinship, which assigns "ownership" of children to the father), but also by the knowledge that men's extramarital affairs do not, in fact, threaten marriage – at least not in formal terms. In other words, women, as well as men, recognize the primacy of marriage and they know that their husbands will not likely leave them for another woman.

Although one might imagine that the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Nigeria would create a new urgency for addressing the possible health consequences of prevailing patterns of extramarital sexuality, the popular association of the disease with sexual immorality has, if anything,

contributed to the complex web of silences and secrets that surround extramarital sex. While the author heard some men talk about the necessity of condom use during extramarital sex because of the fear of HIV, many other men denied or ignored these risks. The fact that a significant proportion of extramarital sex in southeastern Nigeria involves relationships that have emotional and moral dimensions – they are not just about sex – means that men imagine these relationships, their partners, and themselves in ways that are quite distanced from the prevailing local model that the greatest risk for HIV/AIDS comes from "immoral" sex. Further, it is clear from this study that most married women have good reasons to remain silent and keep secret their husbands' extramarital affairs. Ironically, the risk HIV/AIDS only adds to the secrets and silences. For most men and women in southeastern Nigeria maintaining a cordial conjugal relationship, as well as keeping up the appearance of a healthy and peaceful marriage, is a more important concern than addressing the specter of illness and death from a disease that remains socially distant because it is so highly stigmatized and stigmatizing.

The implications of these findings for designing appropriate public health interventions to reduce the marital transmission of HIV are complex. In the longer term, the structural underpinnings of economic and gender inequality that undergird a significant proportion of extramarital relationships require social and economic transformations beyond the scope of conventional public health programs. Clearly, many of the female partners of married men would not participate in these relationships in contexts of less poverty and greater economic and gender equality. International donors and governments such as Nigeria's must recognize that public health goals are inextricably intertwined with larger processes of social and economic development. To pretend that Nigeria's and Africa's AIDS epidemic can be adequately addressed without also reducing poverty and inequality is unrealistic. But this should not be

interpreted by public health practitioners to mean that the root of the problem lies outside the purview of public health. To the contrary, such findings suggest all the more strongly the need for advocates of public health to emphasize the connections between inequality and ill health, and to participate in larger processes of political and social transformation.

Despite the scale of the problem, the findings here suggest other measures that can be implemented in the shorter term, interventions that take into account the changes associated with modern marriage, the social organization of extramarital sex, and the centrality of powerful and often contradictory moralities in people's assessments of marriage, extramarital sex, and HIV/AIDS. Perhaps the most important step is to design interventions that help reduce the popular association of HIV risk with immoral sexual behavior. The tragic consequence of this stereotype is that few people take steps to reduce their own risk because no one likes to imagine his or her behavior as immoral. Given how important Christianity is in southeastern Nigeria, efforts to work with churches to promote a message that reduces the association of HIV with immorality, thereby minimizing the stigma of the disease, would be an important step in getting ordinary men and women to think more clearly about their own risks.

But reducing the moral stigma of HIV/AIDS must go hand in hand with taking advantage of powerful moralities that guide people's conduct. Given how entrenched extramarital sex is in larger structures of inequality, and in the social construction of gender, it seems impractical – and perhaps even counterproductive – to suggest that short-term public health interventions should focus on curtailing men's extramarital behavior. Even more unrealistic is the idea that women should be encouraged to use condoms with their husbands. But it does appear that men's peer groups offer a logical locus for intervention. If undertaken in combination with wider efforts to reduce the association HIV/AIDS with immoral behavior, efforts to reach men with messages

that capitalize on their sense of moral responsibility for the families (and for their extramarital partners) could be effective. Specifically, men could be encouraged – and peer group pressure could be created – to treat their duty to prevent the transmission of HIV with the same obligatory imperative that they see in taking care of their dependents. In short, condom use in extramarital sexual relationships must be associated with demonstrating masculinity.

In southeastern Nigeria marriage is sacred, and yet men's infidelity is common. It seems unlikely that anybody – men or women – will be receptive to the idea that wives should leave their cheating husbands, or that they should insist on using condoms with their philandering spouses. Much more realistic is building on men's existing sense of responsibility to their families, a sense of responsibility that already limits infidelity for many men, and motivates most men to be very discreet. Encouraging this sense of responsibility takes advantage of men's concern with their masculinity rather than undermining it. Women's interests will be best served by creating more responsible men, while larger long-term social and economic transformations are needed to make it less likely that women enter into sexual relationships with men because of poverty, inequality and gender double standards. But none of these strategies is likely to be effective in reducing the risk of HIV until the disease itself is less stigmatized. Clearly, social inequalities of various dimensions drive the epidemic, but it is often anxieties about morality and reputation that prevent people from protecting themselves. Public health programs must harness morality without simultaneously exacerbating the moral stigma of HIV/AIDS.

Notes

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