# Socio-Cultural and Parental Practices on Sexual Behaviour and its Impact on the Educational Attainment of Public Secondary School Students in South-South Nigeria

**By**
**Akara-Nwaogu, Linda Nkeiru**

**&**

**Prof V.U Dienye**

**&**

**Prof J.A Onyido**
**Department of Educational Foundations**
**Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt**

## Abstract

Every society continues to evolve influenced by cultural, religious, economic, and societal peculiarities. The growing evolution of sexual behaviour in most societies is a testament to the continuous evolution of societies. This evolution has seen the growing tolerance towards premarital sex and sexual orientation in many societies. This study therefore critically analyses socio-cultural and parental practices towards sexual behaviour and how they impact the educational attainment of adolescents in public secondary schools. It identifies that despite the evolution of culture, certain cultures, particularly African cultures, are reluctant to accept certain aspects of sexual behaviour. Furthermore, it highlights that the parent's relationships with their children play a key role in influencing their sexual activities. The study equally projects that this sexual behaviour exposes adolescents to unwanted pregnancies, drug abuse, resulting in abuse of drugs, emotional challenges, unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases particularly syphilis and HIV/AIDS to mention but a few. It recommends therefore that the government should equip their health facilities with the necessary equipment and qualified personnel, policies that encourage the enrolment and educational attainment of females should be implemented by government, sex education should be effectively implemented in educational institutions, parents should be educated on the importance of sex education for their adolescents and government must take into account the cultural, economic and religious peculiarities when drafting and implementing policies around education and adolescents in Nigeria.

**Key Words: Sex, Behaviour, Students, Attainment.**

## Introduction

Today's society is characterised by technological advancement, religious peculiarities, language, globalisation efforts. Nevertheless, societies continue to evolve influenced by cultural, and societal expectations, and religious beliefs because societies inherit and learn from other societies. For instance, sexual orientation and behavior continue to be influenced

by culture and societal behaviour. Sexuality is determined through culture that is inherited and learned from the level of the family, surrounding, and the community in general (Hofstede et al., 2010). In the sense that, culture which largely influences societal expectations and religion and guides where whom to have sexual orientations with. This explains the growing participation of adolescents in sexual relationships because of the evolving and growing evidence of cultural tolerance towards underage marriage, premarital sex, contraceptives, unsafe sexual practices, and sexual orientation. This evidence of the evolution of sexual behavior as a result of cultural evolution across societies has been posited by several scholarly publications (Wellings et al., 2019; Inchey et al., 2020; Barbagli, 2013). According to Milanzi et al (2023) posit that the number of adolescents displaying sexual behaviour before they turn 16 has significantly increased as a result of the growing acceptance of teenage pregnancy. Buttressing this viewpoint, Sigusch (2004) the rise in neo-sexuality surrounding intimate relationships, preferences, dimensions, and behaviour is increasingly displacing pre-existing sexuality patterns. In the sense that, whilst early sexual behavior was based on organism, sexual intent and heterosexual couples the evolution of sexual behavior on the other hand, is increasingly placing emphasis on prosthetic substitution, risk appetite, gender differentiation, and self-gratification. Nevertheless, it is critical to highlight that different societies have their levels to which sexual behaviours are seen as accepted or deplorable (Achen, Atekyereza, and Rwabukwali, 2021; Baraki and Thupayagale-Tshweneagae, 2023). This is despite the growing impact of globalization and technology on culture as is evidenced by the growing influence of foreign cultures on the dressing, interests, food culture, and temperament of adolescents in societies today. Buttressing this viewpoint Wellings et al (2006) opine that although globalization has impacted several areas in the lives of the populace, there are still disparities in sexual behaviour across societies. Globalization nevertheless is significantly influenced by education as it remains a key instrument to the socio-economic well-being of any society empowering and equipping generations with the necessary competencies to adapt to the demands of society at every point in time.

**Conceptual Framework**

i) Concept of Educational Attainment

The concept of educational attainment has received various interpretations. According to Wu et al (2020), it is the peak stage of completed education with regards to the degree of level of schooling completed. However, several studies have described educational attainment by quantity, for instance, years of education, college attendance, and graduation from school or

college. According to Berry et al (2006) educational attainment is the performance in school or score in cognitive ability test. In their words, Wu et al (2020) opined that educational attainment does not necessarily mean the level of education completed with regard to academic degrees but also the level of training and certification received. Nevertheless, there is a general consensus that educational attainment is a strong predictor for labour market success showing an attainment of advanced cognitive skills and personality traits.

ii) Concept of Secondary School

Scholars, however, hold that one key phase of education in the Nigerian educational system is secondary school education (Austin, 2020). According to Oluwatelure (2015) secondary school education typically covers the two stages on the international standard classification of education scale where the lower phase of the education scale is known as junior secondary education and the upper phase of the education scale is known as senior secondary education.

**Parental practices around Sexual Behaviour and Sex Education**

The earliest influencers on the life of an individual is his parents and immediate family. They are the first individuals, community, and communication sources the child encounters. As such, they have historically remained one of the earliest socialization agents in the lives of adolescents. According to Ikramullah et al (2009) parents have the biggest influence on the beliefs, behaviour, and attitudes of adolescents toward sex when compared with anybody. The approach therefore the parents adopt in communication with the children is directly related to the sexual knowledge, attitude and sexual behaviour of adolescents. This is particularly instructive in the face of the biological, emotional and mental challenges and experiences adolescents' undergoes on their way to adulthood. According to Olubayo-Fatiregun (2012) Adolescents are known for their pronounced sexual zeal and they need accurate information about healthy sexual activities.

In that, the adolescence stage is a wonderful period in one's life and time filled with new and exciting things and inventions. Parents to make sure that the transition from childhood to adulthood happens under favourable conditions and environments. Similarly, Lloyd (2005) in a study titled "Growing Up Global The Changing Transitions to Adulthood in Developing Countries" found that an estimated 4.3% of young women and 1.5% of young men 15-24 in sub-Saharan, were living with HIV while 9-13% young women had given birth by age 16. This implies that young people need access to productive information and skills before they become sexually active to reduce their risk of contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and having unwanted pregnancies at an early age. In Nigeria and other African countries alike, a confluence of cultural, religious, and geographical factors creates a

sensitive environment where issues of sexual and reproductive health have remained highly taboo for decades.

When the word “Sex” is mentioned, it seems to evoke itchy feelings among both the young and old. Adults in Nigerian society especially parents have occasionally refrained from discussing sexually related information with their adolescent kids. Traditionally, adolescents are brought up under strict discipline as well as fear and are punished for questioning their parents, especially the girls when sexually related questions are asked (Brocato and Dwamena-Aboagye, 2007). Consequently, young people are afraid to ask questions relating to sexual issues as they would be “disrespectful” and “disobedient” hence, sexual issues are topics for adult discussion only. This is further worsened by the shyness and embarrassment parents are towards discussing such topics (Othman et al, 2020). Parents are not sure of the right approach and time to discuss such topics as most times they are either not fully equipped with every information regarding sex education or the challenges they would experience as they undergo the phase of adolescence. According to O’Regan (2001), it was conceived by parents that children were too innocent, young, and not sexually active to undergo sex education. This is buttressed by Baku et al (2018) who opine that guardians and parents shy away from educating their teens on sensitive topics such as sex and sexual behaviour as a result of the fear that talking about sexual issues with their children has the potential to stimulate their sexual interest to practice what they have been taught at school or among their peer group. In addition, parents also shy away as a result of religious beliefs in the sense that, parents find it immoral to educate their children on sex as they fear this will encourage pre-marital sex which is regarded as a sin in most religions. Paradoxically, it has been established that adolescents desire to engage in discussions relating to sex with their parents (Hegde, Chandran and Pattnaik, 2022).

Unfortunately, a number of societal and religious complications impact the development of this line of communication between parents and their adolescents leading to a rise in negative sexual behaviour by adolescents as well as more focus placed on sexuality rather than morality. According to Klemp, Moore, and Moore (2003), sexuality rather than morality has become the custom, and young people are not excluded from this exposure. Adults today may rightfully describe the youth as morally wayward. The truth of the matter, however, is that this is due to the emergence of globalization and torrent of sex-related information available to children via media, foreign influence, and technology (Nyarko et al., 2014). This culture of silence that has hampered the lines of communication between adolescents and their parents has been further strained by the divergent views of parents and teachers regarding sex

education. The attitude of some parents concerning sex education indicates that sex education is a taboo and should be abolished by any educational institution. According to Marion and McCabe (2009) sex education and the Western media have created an avenue for adolescents to be equipped with too much information about sex. This has therefore made sex education a significant force in the breakdown of the moral fabric that holds societies together as modernization has exposed adolescents to ideas they would have not been opportune to experience. Another school of thought however, highlights that sex education equips adolescents with the necessary information to avoid life-changing mistakes, allows for the exchange of ideas, and challenges with the sex educator, and therefore helps the adolescents meet his/her objectives (Sabia, 2006; Lindberg and Maddow-Zimet, 2012). These days, adolescent constantly surprise their parents with their questions and gestures. This should not be strange as sexual images can be found on the internet, billboards, newspapers, and television. In addition, music videos are so sexually explicit with female dancers almost naked, and with mobile phones pornography can be accessed with just a click. Sadly, every day, young people are having sexual intercourse at much younger ages i.e. between 8 and 17 years (Odebode, 2019). In a recent survey carried out by Lim and Kui (2006), boys as young as nine years stated that they have had sexual experiences.

**Cultural Influence on Sexual Behaviour**

In Africa, cultural beliefs and practices such as early child marriage and rights of passage have condoned early sexual involvement of adolescents (Kassegne et al., 2018). For instance, in Kenya according to a study by Juma et al (2014), an estimated 37 percent Kenyan adolescents aged between 15-19 have engaged in sexual practices.

In Uganda, another study indicates that an estimated 15 percent of female adolescents are married at the age of 15. This therefore establishes that adolescents are displaying sexual behaviour across the continent very early. This is rather compounded by the reality that in Africa culturally, sex-related discussions are considered taboo or entirely avoided between adults and adolescents. Nevertheless, the traditional practice of female circumcision has continued to be practiced and has exposed adolescents to several STIs, and complications during pregnancy and childbearing. Furthermore, LGBTQ relationships are seriously frowned upon in several African countries such as; Kenya, Ghana, and Nigeria where regulations have been passed discouraging such practices of sexuality in these countries (Arimoro, 2021). Literature however suggests that while in Africa, polygamy is commonly practiced in most societies and patriarchy plays a big role in culture practices (Ikuenobe, 2018; Ndabayakhe, 2018). The western world on its own part, has experienced tremendous socio-cultural

transformation of sexuality in the last fifty years (Bjerregaard, 2001). According to Witte (2015) literature suggests that the western society is largely dominated by monogamous relationships and marriages. Nevertheless, the western world has seen the cultural structuration of the sexual behaviour of adolescents tremendously altered (Hagestad and Dykstra, 2016). In the past, sexual life for adolescents was experienced when they went into marriage. It was largely uncommon except through prostitution would adolescents engage in sexual activities before marriage (Caltabiano and Dalla-Zuama, 2013). Men however engaged in premarital sexual activities a year or 2 before the women (Billiari et al., 2007). Over the years, an increasing number of adolescents gradually began sexual activities before marriage (Vasilenko, Kreager, and Lefkowitz, 2015, Inchley et al., 2020). Today, the evolution of the Western culture has seen a society largely reserved and influenced by the need to adhere to traditional sexual behaviour, family and school experience increased sexual behaviour amongst adolescents that is centered on pre-marital sexual behaviour, risky sexual appetite, gender transformation, self-satisfaction and violence has increasingly been tolerated by the society. In essence, ensuring a growing cultural shift in tolerance towards premarital sexual activities of adolescents. Buttressing this standpoint, Kuntz et al (2015) highlight that the increasing normalization of casual sex, acceptance of occasional sexual partners, and the growing view of virginity as a taboo by adolescents has become a sociocultural feature in the Western world. Allison and Risman (2013) argue that Western society is however plagued by double standards about cultural tolerance towards sexual activities engaged in by female adolescents. In the sense that, in some parts of Europe, there is still a bias towards the involvement of adolescents in sexual relationships despite the position that Western culture promotes gender equity between females and males. There is therefore significant growing cultural similarities in the cultural tolerance between the West and Africa and this can be attributed to the increasing liberalization of the rights and cultural tolerance of societies as well as the ridicule of virginity and increasing acceptance of contraceptives. This explains the increasing rise of premarital sexual behaviours amongst adolescents globally. According to a study 52 percent of adolescents in low and middle-income countries are currently engaged in sexual relationships with multiple sex partners (Jing, Li, Wang, and Zhou, 2023). Nevertheless, even though there exist several cultural similarities, scholars highlight that there exist several cultural disparities and double standards among societies in the world. This disparity in sexual behaviour across societies can be linked to cultural tolerance, beliefs, and family orientation. Aligning with this viewpoint, Gabrielli and Borgoni (2007) posit that societal attachment to family, early marriage practice, and beliefs have impacted the sexual

behaviour of adolescents in societies. This is particularly true in African societies where pre-marital sexual activity continues to be frowned upon by most societies. As such, family plays a critical role in the values, and patterns of communication of adolescents and shapes the attitudes adolescents have towards sex and sexuality.

**Sexual Behaviour and Educational Attainment**

Historically premarital sex has largely been seen based on moral standards, in most cultures and religions, it is regarded as a sin or taboo. Over the years, however, particularly in the 1960s growing acceptance of sexual activities as a result of growing open-minded western influenced cultures saw an increase in sexual indulgence. Scholars hold that premarital sex can be described as any sexual activity that occurs between individuals who are not officially married (Teachman, 2003; Alo and Akinde, 2010; Kpe-Nobana and Kpai, 2022). Today premarital sex is largely considered to be sex between adolescents, early-age sex, or adultery notably, in today's culture, especially in the European culture, the idea of abstinence from sexual intercourse before marriage has seriously died down. According to a recent study in the United State, although male and female adolescents became actively involved in sexual activities before they became adults, male adolescent students engage in sexual intercourse more often than their female counterparts. This can be linked to the cultural, and societal expectations and biases that the male counterparts enjoy. For instance, men are not judged for engaging in the services of prostitutes or indulging in regular sexual activities compared to women who would face societal criticism and scorn for indulging in such activities (Anene et al, 2017).

In 2005, a study aimed at assessing the sexual behaviour of secondary students in Edo state Nigeria, established that male students are more sexually active than their female counterparts (Orji and Esimai, 2005). This is further buttressed by the findings made by UNICEF in 2001 where it was identified that out of the 12 developed nations that included United Kingdom, Norway, German, Finland, Germany, and Iceland surveyed for the research, 10 of the countries recorded more than two-thirds of young persons actively indulging in sexual activities at their adolescent age (UNICEF, 2001). According to a study by UNICEF in 2010 across the United Kingdom, United States, and Australia, it was established that 25% of adolescents aged fifteen years and 50% of students aged seventeen years have been involved in at least one sexual activity (UNICEF, 2010). According to Durowade et al (2017), adolescent in Nigeria between 15-19 years initiated sex in their relationship. Participants in several studies surrounding sexual behaviour and adolescents have highlighted the peer pressure to have sexual intercourse, particularly among women. As

such, it can be deduced that females significantly are more at a disadvantageous position about sexual activities and educational attainment. Onyido and Osigwe (2019) postulate that females face serious bias about education. Adegoke (2003) posits that female adolescents, therefore, form the basis for the growth of any society, as they represent a critical numerical aspect of the surging number of adolescents in the continent. In the sense that, the growth rate of female secondary school adolescents engaging in sexually risky behaviour has over the years continued to grow. This therefore presents serious socio-economic implications for Africa and the world in general. Buttressing this viewpoint, scholars highlight that the female adolescent is predisposed to significant impacts as a result of sexually risky behaviours that can result in the abuse of drugs, unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases, particularly syphilis and HIV/AIDS. The poor understanding of sexual and reproductive health needs has largely remained poorly comprehended and attended to by government and non-governmental agencies across the globe. This has made females more exposed to sexually transmitted diseases than males particularly as adolescence continues to remain a difficult stage for girls even for females with support from parents and schools. According to Stanford and McCabe (2005) the changes occurring in their bodies is occasioned by serious challenges emotionally and psychologically. According to a report by UNGASS in 2010, 56 percent of all adolescents aged fifteen years and above are living with HIV (UNGASS, 2010). Another survey carried out by the Staying Alive Foundation in 2011, established that 76 percent of individuals infected with HIV are females between the age of 15 to 19 years (Samuel and Sanusi, 2019). This is despite the rise in condom use by adolescents (Wellings et al., 2006). The implication is that despite the rise in condom use, it has largely remained insufficient to curb the spread of disease among adolescents. This explains the growing rate of HIV/AIDS transmission among adolescents that has saw a 5.4% prevalence of individuals within the age of 15-49 years in 2008 with HIV/AIDS (Iyang, 2013). These premarital sex activities have been linked to negative academic outcomes that even extend beyond secondary school education. For male adolescents, the implications of premarital sex could forever alter their lives. According to Williams (2016), engaging in premarital sex exposes the adolescent to the risk of becoming a father while trying to attain educational feats. As such, premarital sex by adolescents increases the likelihood of facing complications that may lead to school drop to meet the expectations of being a father. Furthermore, Mlyakado (2013) highlights that indulging in sexual activities exposes adolescents to poor academic performance, and sexually transmitted diseases that can have life-changing challenges. According to Anochie

and Ikpeme (2011) engaging in sexual intercourse can cause female adolescents who become pregnant and are likely to face challenges in their quest for educational attainment. The societal stigmatization of these individuals has seen several of them quitting school to be able to cater to and provide for their offspring. The consequence of premarital sex that exposes them to unwanted pregnancies, poor academic performances, and as well as the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases such as Syphilis, HIV, and gonorrhea has therefore impacted the educational attainment of victims. This therefore places a challenge to the career development of those involved. It is therefore pertinent to point out that educational attainment is a key step to the career development of any individual as such, premarital sex fails to secure the guarantee of excellent education attainment and career advancement which in the long run impacts the advancement of society in general.

**Conclusion**

Sexual behaviour has continued to evolve in societies today, especially around premarital sex and sexual orientation. The attitude of parents and cultural, societal, and religious practices have largely continued to impact and influence its rise. In the sense that, the African culture and Western culture influence how sexual behaviour is practiced in these societies. Nevertheless, the rise in sexual behaviour tendencies has led to unwanted pregnancies, psychological damage, drug abuse, and sexually transmitted diseases that can alter the life of those involved. Furthermore, increased sexual risk behaviour can be attributed to a poor understanding of the consequences of these activities. In addition, females are more impacted by engaging in premarital sexual activities when compared to male secondary students.

**Recommendations**

- The government should equip its health facilities with the necessary equipment and qualified personnel.
- Policies that encourage the enrolment and educational attainment of females should be implemented by the government.
- Sex education should be effectively implemented in educational institutions
- Parents should be educated on the importance of sex education for their adolescents.
- The government must take into account the cultural, economic, and religious peculiarities when drafting and implementing policies around education and adolescents in Nigeria.

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