

## YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERCEPTIONS OF SEX AND RELATIONSHIPS IN NORTHERN NAMIBIA

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**Abstract:** This paper examines conceptions of gender identity and gender relations among youth in rural northern Namibia to see whether or not real life practices are meeting the requirements of legislation that supports gender equality including the right to work in all spheres for equal pay and benefits, discouragement of gender-based violence and marginalization, and equality with regard to property inheritance. More specifically, we describe the attitudes and behaviour regarding sex and male/female relationships among these youth. Qualitative research methods based on focus group discussions (FGD) were the core of the data collection techniques in this exploratory study. Our findings indicate that male respondents feel that males are superior to females. Both 15- to 19-year old and 20- to 24-year-old boys confirmed this. Girls affirm this finding but feelings of inferiority were more marked among girls aged 15 to 19 than among 20 to 24 year olds. All these groups regard sexual intercourse as normal, contributing to a sense of powerlessness when girls are in the presence of boys. Males initiate sexual behaviour (as it is culturally unacceptable for females to do so) and seem to have many more partners than girls. The gap between existing laws and what is culturally desirable (in sex practices) seems real and must be addressed in extended sex education forums whose curriculum challenges long held cultural beliefs about masculinity and femininity.

**Keywords:** sex, relationships, Namibia, youth, masculinity and femininity.

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## Background

Gender relations are the ways in which a culture or society defines rights, responsibilities, and the identities of men and women in relation to one another (Bravo-Baumann, 2000). Especially in traditional societies, the relations between women and men are typically hierarchical and tend to disadvantage or disempower women. Although often accepted as “natural” particularly by fundamentalists groups, these are socially determined relations, which are culturally-based, characterized by conflict and co-operation, and subject to change over time (Connell, 1987). Traditional gender relations in Namibia favour men over women. Not only are women subordinated to men, they also have less power, fewer opportunities, and restricted access to resources compared to men. Since independence in 1990, the Government of Namibia has shown commitment to achieving gender equality by passing legal and policy provisions in an effort to create a supportive environment for attaining gender equality within the country. Namibia has several Acts that regulate and promote gender equality. These include the following:

- ***Combating of Rape Act No. 8 of 2000:*** This law is aimed at combating rape by prescribing stricter minimum sentences for rape. It abolished the rule that a boy under the age of 14 years was incapable of sexual intercourse. It also modified certain rules of evidence that were hitherto applicable to offences of a sexual or indecent nature. According to Hubbard (2007), this law introduced the issue of marital rape and brought about a broad gender-neutral definition of rape. It moved the focus from consent of the victim to force or coercion by the perpetrator. It is thus seen as a major instrument in combating gender-based violence in Namibia.
- ***Married Persons Equality Act 1 of 1996:*** This was among the first of the post-independence laws specifically aimed at uplifting women’s social status. Among its major achievement was its elimination of the concept of marital power (Hubbard, 2007) that defined women in civil marriages as minors without rights to administer property or to contract without the assistance of their spouses. With this law wives and husbands were subjected to similar restraints and power with regard to property. Wives like husbands can now enter into contractual obligations without asking their spouses.
- ***Combating of Domestic Violence Act No. 4 of 2003:*** This legislation covers such things as physical abuse, sexual abuse, economic abuse, intimidation, harassment, and trespassing; additionally, emotional, verbal, or psychological abuse; and the psychological abuse of a child. Its coverage includes those in marriage, living together as husband and wife, having a child or children together, parents and their children, family members, and boyfriends and their girlfriends. This law gives the victims of domestic violence avenues for protection, laying charges, and for privacy. In theory, this law allows women to freely enjoy their human rights. The relevant article in the Namibian Constitution is Article 10 which provides that: (a) all people shall be equal before the law; and (b) no persons may be discriminated against on the grounds of sex, race, colour, ethnic origin, religion, creed, or social or economic status. An additional constitutional provision which should be mentioned here is Article 14 which provides that men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, colour, ethnic origin, nationality, religion, creed, or social or economic status shall have the right to marry and to found a

family. They shall be entitled to equal rights as to marriage during marriage and at its dissolution.

All these laws rest on the Namibian Constitution Article 10 (23) that ensures gender equality before the law. It must be pointed out that the Acts that regulate and promote gender equality in Namibia do not necessarily target young people. Thus two of the three laws listed above pertain to sexual violence and the third has to do with some aspects of equal rights in marriage, while young people are mostly unmarried.

The challenge that faces Namibia is putting these policies and laws into practice. Thus, although the above laws enshrine gender equity, social practices that focus on gender relations may not live up to the law. In this paper we ask the general question of whether these legislative changes have had any impact on interpersonal relationships and gender relations and attitudes. More specifically, we look at conceptions of gender identity and gender relations among the young people in rural northern Namibia to see whether practices are living up to the requirements outlined in the new legislation. The purpose of this article is to describe the attitudes and behaviours regarding sex and male/female relationships among young people.

Our choice to focus on young people is deliberate because the young are most likely to adopt new views and practices. Additionally, our choice to focus on a young cohort of adolescents is also informed by the knowledge that young people are those most affected by HIV/AIDS and related sexual and reproductive health problems (Ministry of Health and Social Services [MoHSS], 2007) because they are the most sexually active. While cross-sectional studies have looked at knowledge, attitudes, and practices of young people with regard to pregnancy, sexual knowledge, HIV and family planning in Namibia (e.g., SIAPAC 2005), few have investigated gender attitudes and practices involving rural youth. Sexual activity in Namibia starts early and attitudes about gender roles, sex, and relationships may also form during early years (Hubbard, 2007; SIAPAC, 2005). This study may provide insights from young people that could help policy-makers design programs and services to promote greater gender equality.

### **Literature Review**

Often gender is constructed in terms of “femininity” and “masculinity”, that as Butler (1999) so clearly shows, are a socio-culturally relative set of behaviours and characteristics inscribed onto female and male bodies.

**Masculinity** is a set of characteristics and behaviours expected of men in a given culture, behaviours that are constantly created and recreated over time. Thus masculinity is an expression of current images men have of themselves in relation to women and these images are often contradictory and ambivalent (Brittan, 1989). Connell and Messerschmidt (2006) argue that these images are also constructed in relation to other men. Thus in any culture, pluralistic images of masculinity are identifiable, but there exists an ideal hegemonic masculinity against which men measure themselves and are measured against by others (Connell, 1987). Hegemonic masculinity occupies a position of cultural authority and leadership in relation to subordinate masculinities and to women (Silberschmidt (2003). An example of a type of subordinated masculinity is homosexuality, as is dominance by older men over young men in given

occupations (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2006). According to Jewkes and Morrell (2010), patriarchal African societies are heteronormative, that is, they require men and women to demonstrate their gender by actively participating in heterosexuality and by affirming heterosexual desire. Studies in southern Africa suggest that there exists a hegemonic masculinity that emphasizes “toughness, aggressiveness, stoicism and sexuality” (Brown, Sorrell, & Raffaelli, 2005, p. 586). Brown et al. found that in Namibia, having multiple partners and fathering many children are important markers of traditional and contemporary notions of masculinity.

Silberschmidt (2003) found a link between the affirmation of hegemonic masculinity and susceptibility to HIV/AIDS in east African communities. She argues that socio-economic change has affected men more deeply than women. Consequently, men’s traditional roles and identities have been challenged because they are no longer the breadwinners while those of women have in some ways been strengthened as they have become sole providers for families. Silberschmidt also points out that although men are benefiting from patriarchy and have formal authority, social and economic changes have ensured that many lack employment and have insufficient income, and thus cannot fulfill their culturally expected roles and maintain authority. As she puts it, “Not being able to live up to social roles and expectations has serious consequences for male gender identity, social value and self-esteem – not to mention their sexual and reproductive behaviour” (Silberschmidt, 2003, p. 132). As a result of men’s inability to become “men” through breadwinning roles, they seek affirmation of their masculinity through multi-partnered sexual relationships and sexually irresponsible behaviour such as having multiple partners. It is also in this context that “women all too often pay the price in terms of domestic violence and abuse in spite of their increased economic and social role as well as increased self-value” (Silberschmidt, 2003, p. 132). In other words, men’s inability to become “men” in this sense leads to rape and violence.

In similar circumstances Abrahams, Jewkes, Laubscher, and Hoffman (2006) found that young men who perpetrated partner violence engaged in significantly higher levels of risky sexual behaviour than non-perpetrators. A key issue that seems to be bypassed or ignored by both Silberschmidt and Abrahams et al. is that of homosexuality. It must also be mentioned that HIV risk through “men who have sex with men” is significant in Namibia (Lorway, 2006). Despite this, Namibia’s criminal code defines homosexuality as “sodomy” and illegal. Consequently, prisoners involved in same-sex relationships are denied access to condoms (Lorway, 2006, 2008). These relationships are also rarely targeted in public health campaigns.

*Femininity* is also identified as a set of characteristics and behaviours that are expected of females in a given society and while there are different forms of femininity in different societies at different times, these forms all seem to be constructed in the context of overall subordination of females by males (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2006). Thus femininity and masculinity are not isolated from each other. As Connell (1987) points out, femininity is “organized as an adaptation to men’s power, and emphasizes compliance, nurturance and empathy as womanly virtues and is not much of a state to establish hegemony over other kinds of femininity” (p. 25). Across cultures, the most significant attribute of femininity is attractiveness to men. Thus in most cultures feminine behaviour extends to physical appearance, supporting male partners, containment of ambition and anger while at the same time

prioritizing motherhood. In many cultures femininity implies sexual availability without sexual assertiveness in relation to given partners.

Connell (1987) talks of emphasized femininity, which more or less implies compliance with subordination of women to men by accommodating the interests and desires of men. She also talks of other forms of femininity including those that imply non-compliance if not resistance to the interests and desires of men, and femininities that may reflect an intricate calculated blending of conformity, resistance, and collaboration with men and their interests and desires. Connell does not extend her discussion to whether or not there are hegemonic and subordinated femininities, just as there is hegemonic and subordinated masculinities (Schippers, 2007). Schippers takes up this concern and describes pariah femininities (women exhibiting conventionally masculine characteristics), male femininities (men exhibiting conventionally female characteristics), and alternative femininities and masculinities. Accordingly instead of possessing or having masculinity, individuals move through and produce masculinity and femininity by engaging in masculine or feminine practices. This is actually something that both men and women do (Schippers, 2007). As Hurd, Martin-Matthews, and Matthews (2006) state, dominant constructions of femininity define it in the language of marriage, domesticity, and child-rearing, while masculinity is dominantly seen in terms of paid work and the ability to father a child. In Namibia initiation ceremonies that are mostly focused on women (such as olufuko, i.e., a traditional initiation of girls and young women into womanhood and marriage) are also used to validate submission of women to men (Indongo, 2007; Mufune, 2003).

### **Methodology**

Qualitative research based on Focus Group Discussions (FGD) was the core of the data collection techniques in this exploratory study. Merton, Fiske, and Kendall (1956) first developed focus group discussions in the 1940s. Focus groups are premised on semi-structured interviews in which the discussants know in advance the topics to be covered. The people included are those known for their involvement in a particular situation. People who have a similar background and/or experience are targeted and assembled to discuss a specific topic of interest (Dawson, Mandelson, & Tallo, 1993). In focus groups, homogenous groups of people are best because mixing people without regard to their age, sex, etc. may prevent some participants from fully expressing their views. Focus group discussions allow researchers to explore views in detail, and local expressions and views that describe important phenomena help researchers to delve into meanings of given findings. FGDs are sometimes said to produce findings that reflect an inclination in participants to conform to the group. Morgan (1996) has therefore argued that the focus group moderator ought to be aware of this potential and should attempt to counteract this inclination. Despite the potential that a focus group might elicit conformity, FGDs also have the benefit of group synergy. As Kitzinger (1994) stated, FGDs also generate more critical comments than ordinary interviews. Morgan (1996) points out that focus groups are best when the goal is to combine the observation of phenomena in context with a rich understanding of participants' knowledge.

All the research assistants for this study were brought together in Windhoek for a two-day training workshop where they took part in a course focused on conducting FGDs, on the construction of focus group questions, and on the interpretation of participant responses. The construction of focus group questions were in line with the purpose of identifying gender

identities and gender relations among youth in rural Namibia. More specifically, questions dealt with what participants do in relation to others with whom they sexually engage, as well as what they knew and what they thought or felt about gender relations. Focus group facilitation training consisted of researchers and research assistants intensively going through a guideline that included: general preparation for the FGD (i.e., ensuring that seating arrangements for the participants enabled them to interact with each other comfortably, providing refreshments for the participants, and being courteous to them), greeting and introducing the participants, thanking them for their time, and stating the purpose of the interview. Ground rules were stated and respect for confidentiality and anonymity was emphasized for both participants and researchers as participation was voluntary. It was also emphasized that the information gleaned was for academic purposes and that feedback would be given to participants in the form of seminars and reports.

All questions were translated into Oshiwambo (the language of northern Namibia). Final changes were made to the research methodology and research tools based on pilot tests.

### ***Sample and Site Selection***

Purposive sampling was utilized in choosing the two sites of Eenhana (the capital of Ohangwena) and Oshakati (the capital of Oshana) in northern Namibia. Probability sampling was not possible in these areas that have few maps and no sampling frames. The areas were chosen because they are administrative centres that represent different parts of the country. Eenhana as an administrative centre, has a number of government offices, a hospital, clinics, a senior secondary school, and a number of combined and primary schools. The majority of the people live in traditional palisade homesteads outside the town. Subsistence livestock farming and pearl millet (mahangu) cultivation dominate economic activity. Oshakati is the centre of the whole of northern Namibia with a business district surrounded by formal, informal, or mixed housing areas. It is also a major receiving area for rural migrants searching for economic and health facilities located there. Some migrants seek wage employment in formal and informal economic activities in Oshakati before moving on to other urban areas. Finally, the people that were to be interviewed were chosen through consultations with community leaders (specifically village headmen, youth leaders, and teachers). We must point out that we had no way of telling how biased these community leaders were towards a stereotypical masculinity and male dominance. There is the possibility that their biases could have skewed participant selection given the homophobic sentiments that many leaders in the area sometimes publicly display. The choice of a non-probability sample suggests that this research is hypotheses generating and the validity of the hypotheses produced will ideally require further testing in quantitative work

### ***Research Measures***

Among the various areas of inquiry that are in the interview guide are knowledge of sexual and reproductive health issues, views on gender identity and relations, sexual behaviours, sex education at home and at school, and social problems young boys and girls face. In this study four FGDs stratified by age and gender were conducted in each area and audiotaped for later transcription and translation.

### ***Group Profiles***

Each group consisted of between five and seven people. The groupings were: adolescent boys (14 to 19 year of age) and adolescent girls (14 to 19) in secondary schools; out of school girls aged 20 to 24 and out of school boys aged 20 to 24. All the participants were told that they were free to not participate in discussions.

### ***Data Analysis***

Participants were seated in a semi-circle in a classroom. This enabled participants to interact with each other comfortably. Then refreshments were provided. Each participant and researcher was asked to introduce themselves. The researcher thanked participants for coming and introduced the ground rules such as being courteous and respectful to each other. The researcher also reminded participants that the session was voluntary and that it was important that what was discussed remained confidential. Participants were asked to pose any question they had with regard the FGD. The researcher then started asking questions. The researcher and research assistants took notes. With participant agreement the interviews were recorded. All the FGDS were later transcribed. Then using the steps listed by Krueger and Casey (2009) and Krueger (2006) the three main investigators were given the transcripts to read and reread. The aim was to have the investigators familiarize themselves with the discussions.

The investigators first met to review the major objectives of the study and the main questions in the interview guide. Then they were each required to develop categories for the topics discussed by the various focus groups. They were also required to select statements that represented given topics from the transcript and give interpretations of what they meant. In these cases the coded material was mainly sentences and exchanges between individual respondents in the focus groups. Thus each investigator first independently scanned the transcripts for comments from respondents about sex and relationship issues. They then systematically examined interview data and established themes and located examples within the transcripts of ways in which these themes were portrayed in the participants' own words. The use of multiple analysts was strategic. It provided us with the opportunity to assess the reliability of coding of major themes and issues. The investigators again met to compare notes and identify commonalities including examples from participants' quotes. Our discussions showed that there were many similarities in our individual analyses, but also some differences. These differences were discussed until agreement was reached. In the findings section illustrative comments are presented for the various themes in order to give a sense of what the respondents actually believe and said. For these examples, responses from subjects are enclosed in quotes.

## **Findings**

### ***Gender Identity Issues***

Among questions asked pertaining to gender identities were the following:

- In your culture what are the main characteristics of a girl?
- What are a girl's and a boy's assigned roles in the family?
- How are girls supposed to behave towards men?

- How are boys supposed to behave towards women?
- As a girl do you think you are superior to boys?
- As a boy do you think you are superior to girls?

**Girls' views on gender identities:** The girls in the 15 to 19 age group described the cultural meaning of girlhood as follows: *“When she can cook, pound mahangu [the local grain] and clean the house. You will also know by the way she talks to grown up people. A real girl should also know how to make traditional beer”*. They said that a girl is different from a woman because, *“The women have more responsibilities. A woman is someone who is married and she looks after her children”*. They see the assigned roles of a girl in the family as *to cook, clean the house and look after children*. *“Sometimes the role of the girl is to pound mahangu and cultivate the mahangu fields, while the boy in the family goes fishing, looks after cattle and hunts. The boy shoots goats with the catapult”*. According to the 15- to 19-year-old girls, *“girls are inferior to boys who are culturally considered more powerful. Boys have more rights than girls. Boys have more sexual freedom; for example, if they impregnate a girl there are no strings attached while the girl is embarrassed and has to leave school to stay with the baby”*. In their opinion, parents are more lenient towards boys than girls and this makes boys feel superior, *“they bully girls and think they can have girlfriends, but girls should not have boyfriends. A brother will tell you not have a boyfriend but it is okay for him to have a girlfriend”*. Girls feel powerless because boys do not appreciate what girls do.

According to the 20- to 24-year-old girls: *“a real girl is one that is still a virgin – untouched by a penis; feet must not move in different directions when walking; there should not be a space between the big toe and the second toe - good quality for marriage”*. We do not actually understand the *“good quality for marriage”* comment although we speculate that in the rural setting that was the context of our research there is a high premium on marriages for both girls and boys around 24 years of age. The 20 to 24 girls age group continued by stating that a, *“girl has never had sexual intercourse while a woman is one who had sexual intercourse, whether she had a child or not. In Ovambo culture a girl should not have sexual intercourse and a woman should be married and have children. If you are not married and you have a child you are regarded as a bitch – ‘oshikumbu”*. They saw a girl's role in the family as one of helping parents, *“to cook food, fetch water from the well, pounding mahangu, collect fire wood and doing washing”*. The roles of the boys were listed as, *“looking after the cattle; protecting younger sisters from bullying boys; digging wells and pounding mahangu if there are no girls in the family; cultivating mahangu field and doing all household chores that cannot be done by women”*. They stated that girls and boys in the same family are not supposed to share rooms. While boys bring girlfriends to their parents' houses, girls do not and if caught by a parent with a boyfriend, the girl's punishment is more severe than that of a boy.

**Boys' views on gender identities:** According to the 15- to 19-year-old boys, *“a penis shows that you are a boy. He has to be strong. He only wants to talk about girls and sex and does boy things. I think a boy always wants to be with other boys and work with his father. He is interested in wearing boy's clothing. Where I become confused is when there are boys who want to be like girls. They like to be with the girls and to dress like girls”*. According to them, *“A boy is still developing and a man has already developed. A man is someone who can produce babies”*. For them a man of 40 years without children *“is not a real man”*. A boy is said to

protect little brothers, look after cattle, and light the fire in the evening. On the other hand, the girl's role is to cook, look after children, and assist the mother with household chores.

We asked them whether there is any pressure for a boy to prove his manhood through sexual intercourse. They said that there is *“no pressure because no one can tell you when you can have sex, the decision is yours”*. Others felt that 21 years is a good age for sex because now you are mature. A few argued that people should wait until they are married. They said: *“The feelings are there but you can control them, it is just when you are drunk that you cannot control your feelings, have unprotected sex and get AIDS. But some people cannot control their feelings and that is why some women get raped”*. From this discussion of HIV and rape it is quite clear that the respondents imbibe the dominant script that sex is by its definition heterosexual. A “key element of successful African manhood is heterosexual success and this is proved by being able to ‘win’ desirable women, keep them (and thus prevent them from being seduced by others), and show evidence of being a man in control (of others)” (Jewkes & Morrell, 2010, p. 3). The mythology that HIV is a mostly heterosexual issue in Namibia is related to this attenuated notion of hegemonic masculinity. Jewkes and Morrell (2010) observe that, “hegemonic masculinity inextricably links having multiple sexual partners with the subordination of women to male control, if necessary with the use of violence” (p. 5). These authors further state that patriarchal African societies are heteronormative, that is, they require men and women to demonstrate their gender by actively participating in heterosexual activity or affirming heterosexual desire. It is also in this context that some LGBT Namibians have experienced homophobic violence (Lorway, 2008).

They did not think that their culture pressures girls to remain virgins until marriage. *“I don't think so because children usually play [as in vigorous games like football and netball] so a girl can lose her virginity when she is small”*. When asked whom they prefer to marry they said *“The woman that you had sex with for a while”*. Others indicated, *“We prefer a virgin because she tastes much better”*. Another complementary view was that *“you should marry a virgin because then you know she is not having this (HIV) virus”*. Others disagreed: *“I don't think you can tell if someone is a virgin. You must marry a girl who already is having a child because then you know that she can produce”*.

Most boys feel superior to girls. Some felt the superiority is based on their culture: *“it is the tradition because the elderly tell us that man controls the whole house. The girls do the work in the house but are controlled by men. And because the boy learns what his father is doing he will also behave like that. It is Ovambo culture and this culture is the biggest that is why it is so in Namibia”*.

When the 20- to 24-year-old boys were asked about the character of a real boy, they described it as follows: *“When he has a penis and has certain behaviour of male and not the female. He must be a hard worker and respect parents”*. A real girl must be a *“hard worker doing woman's things, looking after kids and women activities at home. One can also identify them by the face. The face of a girl is soft and fresh while the face of the boy is not”*. According to them, *“a boy is still in the process of becoming a man. At age 15 years one is still a boy and if older is a man. A boy also becomes a man after he has had sexual intercourse”*. When asked whether there is any pressure for boys to prove their manhood through sex, their views were:

*“Not every day, we are supposed to have girlfriends and sex. We can only do this on our own if our parents see us we will be in trouble”.* This older group of boys also stated: *“Long ago if a man had a lot of girlfriends his name would be praised in songs. I would also like to be praised. Forefathers had a lot of girls. In today’s times it is very expensive to have a child and a man needs to plan. Our forefathers were in competition with each other to have the most children but that was before schooling came. Some men may want to have a child because if they die without a child they will be buried with a knopkierie”* [a short wooden club with a heavy rounded knob].

Although they value virginity in girls, they see it as unrealistic: *“mamas still want to see the white cloth at the weddings – so I think the pressure is still there. But in reality nowadays there are no more virgins. Even the girls of 13 years age are already having sex”.* When asked to whom they would like to marry, they said, *“a virgin but also a woman without a kid. I cannot marry a girl with a child I do not know how to be with that child”.* They were asked about the feelings of girls with children who get married to other men. Their response was: *“some men do not mind, but I cannot marry a woman with a child. Some men believe that a lady must prove that she can produce so they like a lady with a child. But I cannot, other males will laugh at me saying there are so many girls why must I take one with a child”.* Another individual said: *“I can take a lady with a child because she made a mistake when she fell pregnant. It depends on her behaviour – how she gets along with me and my family”.*

On the question of superiority towards girls, they unanimously agreed to that: *“a man is way ahead, the lady is inferior because men do all the hard work. They say a girl works ten times more than a man, it is just this light work women do. We cannot look at these new things of gender balance that is out. In the Bible a woman is made out of the rib of a man so they need to be inferior. To be serious women cannot compare themselves to men, it is only now that we men have decided that women need some upliftment”.*

Absent from these discussions are the power dynamics involving non-heterosexual relationships. This is because all our respondents self-identified as heterosexual. Given the cultural environment that is strongly against homosexuality and other forms of sexuality, none of the respondents would be expected to admit to alternative sexual orientations. This does not mean that alternative orientations do not exist. Power dynamics between men and women in the Namibian context are complicated by the heteronormativity of policies and public discourses around sex. The idea of “heteronormativity” encapsulates an understanding of the ways in which gender and sexuality are structured hierarchically (Clucas, 2012, p. 942). It is “the normative status of heterosexuality which renders any alternative sexuality ‘other’ and marginal” (Jackson, 1999, p. 163).

Many sexual and gendered ideas and practices (including marriage) in northern Namibia carry an aura of “what is considered right and normal”. We also assume that alternative sexual relationships that exist also involve an unequal power relationship but due to the cultural environment they are underground. According to Horn (2008) and Rigillo (2009) Namibia is one of the most Christianized countries in Africa. Its Christian roots date back to the early 19th century, when the first German and Scandinavian missionaries arrived in the country. Some versions of Christianity work to reaffirm heteronormativity (Heath, 2009) by insisting on different gender roles and heterosexual relationships. Many Christians in Namibia object to

homosexuality and homophobic attitudes remain entrenched. This has allowed people in government (including the former Head of State) to openly advocate against homosexuality.

### ***Gender Relations and Sexuality***

In this section the focus was on asking what girls and boys do when they are together.

***Girls' views on gender relations and sexuality:*** Accordingly the 15- to 19-year-old girls, they “*discuss about sexual and reproductive health issues. In high school we challenge each to see who scores the highest marks. We also talk about feelings for each other and share ideas about the future*”. Boys and girls give each other, “*Chocolate, cards and flowers and games to play with. Some girls give gemstones to their boyfriends so that they think about them whenever they wear it*”.

This group of girls saw the suitable time to start a sexual relationship as “*After finishing school, after marriage or after twenty-one years (21) of age*”. They said that one could have a relationship without having sexual intercourse because; “*love is about caring and not only about sex*”. They confirmed that boys demand sex: “*when a boy proposes and you tell him that you only like him as a friend, he will not take no for an answer or even when he takes no for an answer he will go and spread lies about you*”. Not all girls disapprove of boys who demand sex: “*Okay, I do know of a girl who has a lot of boyfriends and has sex with them in return for money and clothes*”. Another girl stated that “*I know someone too; she says that after three days of having a relationship with a guy who has not asked her to have sex, she dumps him because she feels that there is nothing to do with such a boyfriend*”.

The 15- to 19-year-old girls mentioned parents, teachers, peers, and older siblings as people they prefer to talk to about sex and relationship issues because they have a lot of knowledge. In their opinion “*a girl cannot initiate sex*” and only those who do not have respect for themselves do it. Although they know about masturbation it is not popular.

The 20- to 24-year-old girls group said that they discuss their background, likes, and dislikes with boyfriends although some of the boys mislead girls: “*some boys are clever, they know how to mislead girls especially if they want to sleep with the girls*”. They listed chocolates, kisses, greeting cards, roses, and necklaces as gifts from boyfriends. When asked about their reaction when a boy demands sex, one girl said, “*it is a nice gift*” but few supported her. The girls agreed that it is possible to have a relationship without sex, “*but you have to fight for that because boys are always demanding sex*”. The girls also talked of “*masturbation*” although they said this is not common. The respondents also pointed out that it is not acceptable for a girl to have many sexual partners because she might not know who will be the father to her child. They confirm that sugar daddies are common in the area and it is usually men over 45. These are the men who prefer sex with younger girls who do it for money.

According to this group, marriage “*makes your parents happy, but there are also many problems within marriage. It prevents one from having many sexual partners*”. From the girls’ observation, there is a lot of divorce due to a failure to understand one another and alcohol abuse.

**Boys' views on gender relationships and sexuality:** The 15- to 19-year-old boys group confirmed gifts like cards, kisses, movies, and sex are common in relationships: *“Some of the big guys prefer sex. You can find young boys going to the cinema with girls but the older ones just want sex”*. These boys claimed, *“some girls with experience will ask for sex. Girls cannot really ask a boy for sex but the way she is looking at you, you can see that she wants sex”* and when this happens, it is not easy for a boy to refuse. Some said it is all right when girls refuse sex, *“some guys know a lot of girls so they do not mind they will just say there is a lot of fish in the sea”*. Others take it badly: *“some guys beat their girls if they do not want to have sex. Some guys buy pills [type not specified] at the pharmacy. The pills is just for adults and it makes you active in sex and makes you to want sex even if you have not planned it. Then they put pills into the drink of the girl and when they go home the girl just wants to have sex”*.

Their views on rape were negative: *“It is bad because a girl is not supposed to be raped. She can become your wife in the future. Sometimes the girl's whole future is destroyed due to the rape because she can have AIDS now”*. They suggested the punishment for the rapist should be severe. They emphasized that the boy who impregnates a girl should support and maintain the girl. Some boys deny the pregnancy and reject the child because *“They are afraid of the parents or to pay or other girls will reject them, but like in our case if we make a girl pregnant you have to leave school”*.

The 15- to 19-year-old boys had very negative views of sugar daddies: *“they are not planning to marry these girls but just giving them diseases. The girls must go out with boys their own age then they will not get disease”*. They also said, *“parents have to stop this they must talk to their daughters and they as parents must say that although there is no money in the house we cannot get money this way. It is the mothers who are sending these girls to sugar daddies to bring money into the house”*. According to these boys, girls get pregnant because of money: *“Some of the sugar daddies say that if you need money you must have unprotected sex and that is how some girls fall pregnant”*. No one amongst the group had a child but they knew about neighbours with children: *“One of my friends was told that he has impregnated a girl but he just denied it saying that he is still young and that he wants to go around, he is too young. They can also not accept because they are afraid to pay. In our culture a boy has to pay N\$1,200 when he has impregnated a girl”*. They went on to say that this boy and his family are now supporting the girl and the child.

The 20- to 24-year-old boys claimed that with girls they, *“usually talk about our relationship and create good communication. We also discuss sex as we get ready to reach that part of the relationships”*.

In summary these findings support general discussions of masculinity and femininity in that male respondents clearly feel that males are superior to females. Girls also affirmed this sense of male superiority. There were however differences among female groups. Thus the younger girls were more likely to feel males are superior than the older girls especially in the presence of boys. Males are the initiators of sex, as it is culturally not acceptable for a woman to do so. It is prestigious for boys to have multiple partners.

## Discussion

We believe that we need to note here that especially with regard to sexual relationships there are many nuanced ideas and experiences that were discussed in our focus groups that may be lost in translation. This is so because language is not merely a representation of ideas through words, but also plays a role in the construction of ideas. It is very possible that we did not capture every thought and experience from our respondents given that we relied on translation. Therefore the interpretation of these data should take this limitation into account. The findings of the research are in line with general discussions of masculinity and femininity. Male respondents clearly feel that males are superior to females. Both 15- to 19-year-old and 20- to 24-year-old boys confirmed this. Girls affirmed this but feelings of inferiority were more especially marked among girls 15 to 19 than among those 20 to 24 years old. This contributes to a sense of powerlessness when girls are in the presence of boys. Relationship power depends on the relative interest partners have in a relationship. The partner that has less interest possesses more power. All the groups confirm that men initiate sex as it is culturally not accepted for a woman to do so. It seems that girls invest more in relationships because it is important that they are perceived to have one partner. For boys having many partners is prestigious and boys take advantage of their position

Much more still needs to be done to effect change regarding attitude and behaviour among the young as they still practice unprotected sex despite their vast knowledge, although this is not necessarily evident from the data presented. Sexual encounters are regarded as part and parcel of the male/female relationship. This “part and parcel” notion that sexual encounters are to be expected also served to underpin our finding that respondents from all the groups registered their concern about increasing rape cases and the light punishment culprits receive. Girls confirmed that maintaining a non-sexual relationship with a boy is a difficult challenging task because without sex, the boy will leave. This raises the question of just how consensual their consensual sexual relations really are. It is evident from respondents’ opinions that alternative modes of sexual satisfaction are not utilized. Few mentioned masturbation as an alternative although they knew about it. The fact that girls find masturbation unpopular is a really important finding because this illustrates that they have few alternatives for sexual release. Many of the practices discussed by our participants enforce heterosexuality as the normative form of sexuality thereby reinforcing heteronormativity in young people.

Namibians seems to have a long way to go in order to promote gender equality in the sex intimacy and relationship sphere. The dissonance between existing laws and what is culturally desirable seem real and must be addressed in sex education forums. However, this may not be enough. We hypothesize that in rural Namibia the laws are not seeming to have any effect partly because there is a lack of knowledge of the provisions of these laws and, more importantly, because adherence to culture and tradition (that may well be homophobic) mean that these laws are ignored. Gender inequality in rural Namibia may be so deeply rooted in culture and tradition that it is unlikely to be changed through sex education alone.

Sex education in Namibia is limited. All schools now have life-skills programmes providing young people with facts about sexual and reproductive health (SRH), pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections. Teachers, however, receive little training in SRH and many are not sensitive enough to handle the subject. Namibian students do not take examinations in SRH education; consequently, few teachers and students take it very seriously (Mufune, 2008). This means that it would be useful to consider other ways of addressing this issue. This might mean investing more resources in fighting gender-based violence and attitudes that come with deeply entrenched inequalities. As Carmody and Carrington (2000) argue, this means that in order to change deep-rooted cultural ideas and traditions around sexuality, we need to go beyond two-hour or one-day workshop-based education programs. What is needed is a preventative strategy with an extended curriculum that is tailored to fit specific groups of young people and their cultural mix. This curriculum should be able to challenge cultural norms and traditions that see women as sexual objects and allow participants to rework their views of masculinity and femininity.

This education should confront forms of masculinity and femininity that promote and condone sexual violence and the exercise of power and control over women (Carmody 2006, 2013). Efforts to change cultural norms that underpin the imbalance of power in heterosexual relationships should target all levels of community (individuals, relationships, community, family, schools, religion, and other institutions). Men should be an important part of the overall solution (Dyson & Flood, 2008). Men should be provided with curricula that teach them to reflect on their own masculinity and masculine beliefs and how these impact on themselves and potential sexual partners. Further, religion may be a means of surveillance and control in the interests of gender inequality and power imbalances (Macey, 1999; Clucas, 2012). With regard to religion, ethics emphasizing non-violence in relationships should be taught and fundamentalist ideas about the subordination of women should be discouraged in order to allow young men and women to rework their gender practices. In conclusion there is a lot of work to be done if Namibia is to achieve its stated aim of gender equality in the realm of sexual and reproductive health.

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