

Full Length Research Paper

Gendering of work and its implications on youth sexuality in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria

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This paper examines the nature of gendering work among youth living in two oil-producing communities, Gelegele and Ogulagha of Nigeria, and its implications on youth sexuality, in terms of their perception and use of condom and HIV/AIDS. Data collection techniques used includes observation and in-depth interviews with ten youth from Gelegele and fifteen youth from Ogulagha, from January to April 2003. A total of 25 youth, fifteen females and ten males, participated in this data collection. Prior to each interview, we obtained verbal consent from volunteers. Data analyses started with verbatim translation and transcriptions. Transcriptions were read and re-read several times to identify the major themes and content analysis undertaken by the researcher. We obtained records of timeline for the economic activities of consenting youth. It was found that gendering work in these communities led to more female youth in the traditional occupations of trading, fishing and commercial sex work, while male youth with or without formal education either worked in the oil servicing companies or were on “standby” pay. Male youth earned higher income, which privileges males and reduces the power of female youth to negotiate sex and condom use. It was concluded that Empowering youth through formal education and equal job opportunities in these communities will promote quality of life by discouraging exchange of sex for wealth and promoting the use of condom.

Key words: Gender, work, youth and oil-producing communities, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria, the most populous country in Sub-Saharan Africa occupies an area of 923,000 Km². Her population of over 130 million is unevenly distributed with 63.72% living in rural areas and 36.28% in urban centers (National Population Commission, 2007). The discovery of crude oil has transformed Nigeria's political economy as crude oil became the primary revenue and foreign earning source for government, accounting for approximately 90% of foreign exchange earnings and 80% of federal revenue. Yet, despite the huge earnings from crude oil, Nigeria has increasingly remained impoverished while enriching a selected few comprising mainly of retired military officers, politicians and local capitalist investors. Nigeria remains one of the poorest countries in the world with a per capita gross national product of only 260 USD a year (Human Rights Watch, 1999).

The Niger Delta Region, which covers an area of about 70,000 Km² is endowed with a number of distinct

ecological zones. This region consists of eight states; Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Ondo and Rivers. The commonly found ecological zones range from the rain forests to swamp forests, mangroves, fresh waters and coastal ridges. A number of activities including upstream dam construction, urban and rural population growth, population pressure, deforestation, agriculture, fishing, industrial development and exploitation of natural resources have caused changes to both human and material resources. The once highly homogenous Ijaw communities in Bayelsa and Delta States became highly polarized and diversified because of oil activities. The 1991 population census shows that the Niger Delta Region accounts for approximately 19.22% of the nation's total population (Niger Delta Environmental Survey, 1999).

With adolescents accounting for 60% of new HIV infections among 15 to 24 years old (McCauley and

Salter, 1995) and the fact that teenage pregnancy and births are unintended (Weiss et al., 1996), there is a growing global interest in the sexual health of adolescents. This situation is further worsened with the growing population of Nigeria and the state-wide HIV prevalence that ranges from as high as 10% in Benue, 8% in Akwa Ibom, 4.6% in Edo state, to under 2% in Ekiti, Oyo and Jigawa States (Federal Ministry of Health, 2006). Of the nine states (Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross Rivers, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers) that make up the Niger Delta region, five has been reported to account for the highest sero-prevalence rate in Nigeria and mother-to-child transmission is high in the region (Federal Ministry of Health, 1995; 1999). Youths are prominently represented in this population: 4.7% of 20 to 24 year-olds and 4.9% of 25 to 29 year-olds are infected with the HIV virus (Monasch and Mahey, 2006; UNAIDS, 2005). Among young people aged 15 to 29, the estimated number of young women living with HIV/AIDS in Nigeria is more than twice that of young men (UNAIDS, 2007). Yet, this age group constitutes 25% of the total Nigerian population (National Population Commission, 2007). In addition, existing studies (Farmer, 1997) continue to show that people who are vulnerable to gender inequality and racism/ethnicity carry the greatest burden of diseases such as HIV.

This paper, by examining the gendering of work among youth in two oil-producing communities, Gelegele and Ogulagha contributes to an understanding of its implications on youth sexuality, in terms of their perception and use of condom, and HIV/AIDS.

METHODS

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) takes its roots from Rapid Rural Appraisal (Whyte et al., 1989; Chambers, 1992). PRA is both a methodology and attitude change technique that combines a number of approaches to enable local or indigenous people obtain, share and analyze their knowledge of life and living conditions (Chambers, 1994a; b). It is more reflexive, iterative and flexible than other conventional methodologies because it focuses on gathering local indigenous knowledge and to make indigenous voices visible (Chambers, 1992). Although some scholars (Gibbon, 1999; Gibbon and Shrestha, 1998) see PRA as lacking in aggregating local knowledge to influence policy, it is used extensively in developing countries like Nigeria to plan, design and implement programs and policies that are culturally relevant, specific and sustainable. PRA is a bottom-up approach to data collection process, which promotes equity and empowers indigenous people through participation in the planning, design and implementation of development projects (Greenwood et al., 1993; Petras and Porpora, 1993). Thus, facilitating and empowering local people to prioritize produce and analyze their own behavior, attitude and perceptions. This approach and emphasis call for the use of mixed methods, mainly qualitative data collection techniques such as observation, interviewing, focus group discussions, locally constructed mapping and transect walk PRA on the long run gives the local people ownership, as well as maintain sustainability (Chambers, 1992; Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995).

Prior to data collection, the researched visited the community leaders and their council of chiefs and elders. The focus and goal of

study was communicated to them and their approval and support sought with the presentation of kola nuts and gin. With the approval granted, the youth and women leaders were then introduced to the researcher. Working closely with the youth leaders the nature of study and the focus on hearing from them and making their voices visible, in a context in which they suffered from multiple oppressions and deprivations, based on their gender, age and ethnic group of origin were discussed. The researcher requested and obtained volunteers amongst the youth willing to participate in the study. These youths, who volunteered were seen as playing collegial role and as partners in decision making and not as research objects. The goal was to garner knowledge that gives an understanding of the intersectionality among gender, work roles and their sexuality. The method strives for descriptions that portray the unique personal experiences of the participants. The total participants were 25 youth, fifteen from Ogulagha and ten from Gelegele communities, in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria.

The study garnered data from January to April, 2003 using observation and in-depth interviews. Interviews were conducted under a tree in the school premises after school hours or at the participant's rented accommodation within the community. At the onset of the interviews, the participants were informed of the research ethics requirement to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. The participants were given pseudonyms, such that any quotes from the data collected would use such pseudonyms rather than the real names of the participants. The average duration for each interview was ninety minutes. Interviews were audio-taped with the verbal consent of the participant. The interviews focused on participant's narrative rather than on using predetermined structured interview (Sandelowski, 1991). The interviews were long and gave participants the opportunity to present their own knowledge and perceptiveness, which according to Cuba and Lincoln (1985) provided credibility and transferability to the study. Observation entailed taking notes, when the researcher visited public and social spots such as the bars and games venue, where youth played various games including draft and soccer. In addition, each participant was required to keep a journal of their daily workload in terms of the time they woke up and activities undertaken by them on a daily basis. This record was collected on a weekly basis by the research assistants and submitted to the researcher (who is the author). Research assistants also took notes of their observations when they made visits to the social spots where these youth work in the bars or hang out. The primary medium of communication was adulterated English language, which is commonly spoken by the participants and the research assistants.

Interviews and notes were transcribed verbatim and word processed. The research assistants and the researcher read and reread the transcripts, as well as listened to the tapes to confirm the transcriptions. In the process of reading and rereading, the major themes and common phrases were identified and highlighted. Based on existing sexuality issues, tentative connections were made between gendered work and sexuality concepts. The emergent themes were discussed with field staff and the participants, which further gave ownership to the participants and made them active rather than passive participants.

FINDINGS

Background information

Of the 25 participants, ten youths were recruited from Gelegele and fifteen from Ogulagha. Of these participants, fifteen were females and ten were males. The median age of participants was 19 years.

Participants showed low level of literacy of 10%, which was below the national literacy rate of 21%. The primary contributing factors to lower level of literacy in the studied communities were participants' inaccessibility to schooling and low motivation to acquire an education. Other reported factors hindering effective learning included inadequate staffing of schools, School boards reluctance to send teachers to and/or recruit teachers of Ijaw origin and lack of incentives for teachers teaching in schools located in swampy and impoverished areas.

Most of the schools are publicly owned, but inadequately funded and lacked equipments and teachers. The communities hired and paid community teachers for the schools, thus bearing the responsibility for functional education for their children. The two communities contributed equipments and supplies to the schools. While the schools in Ogulagha had few public teachers (a maximum of two), Gelegele had no teacher posted to the community from the Edo State School Board. The rate of school drop out between primary and secondary school was high, with many children terminating their schooling after primary education. There were gender differences in the rate and reasons for dropping out of school. Females dropped out of school for various reasons including lack of funds, unplanned and unwanted teenage pregnancy, human trafficking, sex work and early girl-child marriage, which was a source of garnering money for other family needs. On the contrary, male youth dropped out of school primarily to seek unskilled labor in the oil industry. In addition, the data showed that the few youths with post secondary education were unemployed. The youth attributed the latter situation to deliberate policies and practices by multinational oil corporations not to hire them. Rather, they noted that oil multinationals and governments continue to cite low education among Ijaw youth as the primary factor hindering their absorption into the oil industry.

Types of work undertaken by youth

The male youth reported that the jobs they do included seasonal unskilled jobs such as security workers, day labor with contractors and servicing companies to multinational oil corporations. On the contrary, the female youth reported that they were rarely employed as unskilled worker jobs. As a result, females tended to work as helpers in the restaurants and "food-is-ready" huts. The male youth argued that the common practice of early marriage between female youth and older men, high unwanted pregnancy and commercial sex work account for their low representation as unskilled workers in the oil sector.

Female youth migrating from outside the communities were more likely to spend days squatting in the home/residence of their male partner. This arrangement

as noted by the youth "translates into more money for the girl, an average of ₦ 5,000 approximately \$50 (USD) per weekend". However, these arrangements involved more of foreign oil workers who are paid in foreign currency and own or have access to company vehicle in comparison to the nationals who are paid in local currency, the Naira. The entrance gate is generally crowded with females waiting for known and/or unknown male partners. The common observation was either to find well dressed girls standing by the entrance to the workers' residence or be picked up with a known regular partner or by a total stranger for the night. Other girls hang around the bars, partying all night or patrol the streets expecting to be picked up by a stranger.

Security personnel discharge their duties by first placing a phone call to a known partner informing him of his guest waiting at the gate. With permission received, the girl signs the book, given a pass and allowed to walk into the residential quarters or wait to be picked up. In other instances, the male partner may drive to the gate to pick the female up. The research assistants observed that the large number of females that hang out at the gate makes the security men to categorize all women appearing at the gate as commercial sex workers. For example, there were days when security personnel mistakenly treated research staff as one of these girls, by asking them for the name of the staff they wanted to see even though the research staff resided in the staff quarters. Other inquiries sought by the security included if "they had a complimentary card from the staff they wished to visit". Most of the security personnel, who were mainly men, categorized all women with the exception of the female contractors as sex workers. In fact, any new female in the community is a sex worker. The female gender was seen as more of a sexual object meant for male sexual gratification.

Daily workload of youth

The present paper further undertakes a gender-based analysis of the daily workload of youth. Social activities outside their homes and in company of peers occurred more when youth are not working or schooling. Tables 1a and b show that the workload of youth is gender-based. In a day, they spend a total of 6 to 8 hours in the waters. The youth reported that cultural taboo prohibiting early morning conversation on their way to a fishing expedition is believed to yield a bountiful harvest. The youth economic activities are aimed at supplementing family income.

Table 1a shows that in Gelegele, a female youth on the average gets up from bed at 5 am and goes fishing or to collect fuel-wood by 6 am. By noon or latest 1 pm, she returns home while her mother may continue fishing for a longer period. On arrival to their homes, the female youth unpacks her fishes or other seafood and begin to prepare

Table 1a. Daily workload of female youths in Gelegele.

Activity	Morning						Day						Night										
	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	
Wake up	X																						
Go fishing/collect fuel-wood		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X														
Set fish trap/cages			X	X	X	X	X	X	X														
Unpack the canoe/Have a bath										X													
Prepare and have a meal											X												
Leisure activities											X	X											
Assist in cleaning fish/ smoking													X										
Assist in Cooking														X									
Check the cages and have a bath															X								
Eat family meal																X							
Hang out																	X	X	X	X			
Go to bed																					X	X	

Source: Fieldwork (2003).

Table 1b. Daily workload of a male youth in Gelegele.

Activity	Morning						Day						Night										
	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	
Get up	X																						
Have a bath/set cages		X	X	X																			
Have a meal					X	X																	
Hang out/play							X	X	X	X													
Check out cages											X	X	X										
Have Bath														X									
Have a meal															X	X							
Hang out																	X	X	X	X			
Go to bed																						X	X

Source: Fieldwork (2003).

and serve mid-day meal by about 3 pm. Thereafter, the female youth in another two hours gains the freedom to play with her peers or walk around the community visiting friends. She

returns home by about 5 pm to welcome her mother, assist her in cleaning and smoking fishes and crayfish caught from the fishing expedition, as well as to prepare family meals. At about 7 pm,

the female youth set out to the waters to check their cages and have a night bath in the river. They return home by 8 pm to share and serve the family meal, which is segregated by gender and

age.

The male head of households eats in company of their young children and other male members of the household, while mothers eat with daughters and other infants/children who choose to join them. By 9 pm to midnight, female youth are out again hanging around with persons of similar background or opposite sex. The expected average bedtime is after midnight.

On the contrary, the average Gelegele male youth gets up from bed at 6 am, an hour later than the female. Between the hours of 7 and 9 am, the male youth goes fishing primarily to set up their cages and traps. This is accompanied by a morning bath in the river. They return home between 10 to 11 am for their morning meal, which was often prepared and put aside by the female members of the household or bought from a food hawker. The male youth start hanging out and playing games like soccer from 12 noon to about 3 pm. They are also involved in other social activities like smoking cigarettes and marijuana before going to check their cages and traps between 4 to 6 pm. By 7pm, they have a night bath, followed by the family meal between 8 and 9 pm. The common observation is that male youths hang out at night much longer, from 10 pm to 1 am, and finally retires to bed between 2 to 3 am.

A very limited number of the Gelegele male population engages in lumbering. These male youth are up at the same time with the females to go into the mangrove forest to cut down timber and craft them for drifting through the waters to other river shores in Sapele and Warri. These youth work for themselves or for other timber dealers residing in the community or in neighboring towns and cities like Benin City and Warri. Apart from the youth that are into lumbering, Gelegele male youth generally have longer periods of leisure than their female counterparts. Data showed that fewer male youths are involved in fishing because they provide seasonal unskilled labor for oil companies or servicing industries or are in the payroll of oil companies, without working. The high income from the seasonal jobs for males, as well as the "standby" (money paid by oil companies to youth and elders for no work done) enable them to save. In the absence of any seasonal job, the youth fall back to their savings to meet their personal needs.

Tables 2a and b show that in Ogulagha, male youth are generally no longer into fishing. They provided a number of reasons. First, the male youth noted that water pollution affects the population of aquatic animals by causing them to drift further into the waters. Second, they lack the skills and do not own modern fishing equipment that is needed to fish deeper into the waters. Finally, accessibility to unskilled jobs in the oil sector which gives them high income, further discourages their involvement in fishing. On the contrary, the economic activity of female youth in Ogulagha includes trading and assisting their mothers/guardians in running a restaurant and beer

parlor. While male youth can obtain unskilled work in the oil industry, females have limited access.

The daily routine of an Ogulagha female youth is very much like that of their counterparts in Gelegele. However, in Ogulagha, an out-of-school female youth wakes up earlier (at about 6 am), while those in-school would prepare breakfast at 7 am and then take a bath. By 8 am, they eat and set out for school. For majority who are out of school, they begin their day by cleaning the house by 7 am, assist in preparing food for the restaurants or in selling other commodities from 7 or 8 am to about 7 pm at night, taking breaks in between for a meal. These out-of-school female youths work longer hours in these restaurants and that makes them vulnerable by exposing them to the admiration of male oil workers and other male customers. This is also the period in which relationships, often with sexual tones, are also initiated with negotiations continuing after the day's work ends. The work in the restaurants only ends when the prepared food is exhausted. Thereafter, the female youth takes a bath by about 8 pm. Generally, the youth goes to bed around 3 am.

The male Ogulagha youth like their Gelegele counterparts are no longer into fishing. They are either providing unskilled labor to the oil industry or are on "standby", simply on the payroll of oil companies; though not rendering any services. This "standby" practice by oil companies is to guarantee that discontented members of the indigenous population do not endanger oil exploration and refinery activities. This practice allows oil multinationals to undertake their activities with little or no resistance from the local people.

Leisure activities

In Gelegele community, we observed that leisure activities occur during the day for male youths and at late hours of the night for female youths. Female youths reported late hours of the night as a period that they are relieved from the strain and stress arising from a hard day's work and from parental and guardian's control. Therefore, parental and guardian control is minimal at this period of the day. The female youth also noted these late hours of the night as the time they negotiate sex with oil and non-oil workers, as well as the elderly men in the community. We observed that female youths tend to walk in and out of beer parlors or restaurant patronized by local men and oil workers. Such entry and exit from these locations became obvious ways of seeking for recognition and attention from would-be male clients. Some female youths also hang out at nights in compromising corners in the community with other male youths. On the contrary, male youths engage in open leisure activities during the day. The male youth reported and we also observed that they engage in open leisure activities which included soccer, table tennis and strolling/walking down the street.

Table 2a. Daily workload of a female youth in Ogulagha.

Activity	Morning			Day												Night							
	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	
Get up	X																						
Prepare meal		X																					
Take a bath		X																					
Eat and go to school or			X																				
Clean the house		X																					
Assist in preparing food		X	X	X																			
Assist in selling food or other items				X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X									
Have a bath															X								
Social activities and working																X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Go to bed																							X

Source: Fieldwork (2003).

Table 2b. Daily workload of a male youth in Ogulagha.

Activity	Morning			Day												Night							
	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	
Wake up and have a bath	X	X																					
Go to work or school		X	X																				
Hang around					X	X	X	X		X													
Back from school										X													
Have a meal											X												
Do school work												X											
Have a bath													X										
Hang around														X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Go to bed																							X

Source: Fieldwork (2003).

In Ogulagha, both sexes begin to hang out and patrol the streets from about 9 pm, dancing and drinking in the pubs/bars. The youth noted that it is at these pubs and dancing floor that the female youth are sexually coerced, wooed and taken

home as sex partners by the oil workers, both foreigners and local persons. This networking with oil workers give the females the opportunity to earn a living from the money paid for sexual services rendered. Information gathered from

female youth showed that the money earned varied with the level of education of the females. The youth also reported that female youths in post-secondary schools such as neighboring universities and college of education engage in

commercial sex work, particularly on weekends and holidays.

Data also showed that not all leisure activities in the bars and beer parlors ended in sexual activities. The youths noted that in some cases, they go away from such bars in company of a man for a limited period to return to the bar alone or some youths after having a good time go home to sleep. The youth also reported that among well established relationships, male partners simply pick up regular female partners from their residence daily to their homes and/or to bars for an evening out with other friends until the early hours of the morning. Home was defined "as either the residential quarters for offshore quarters or rented accommodation in the community."

Perceptions and use of condom

With the sexual networking at the workplace, the study explored the issue of condom use. Male youth were more aware of the use and importance of condom use. The data showed that condoms were not readily available as drug stores were few, one in Gelegele and three in Ogulagha at the time of data collection. The youth also reported low use of condom, and that condom is used only on the initiation of the male sexual partner. Female youths were reported by both sexes as: "not having condoms with them", and "neither do they demand for condom use during sex." According to many of the female youths (12), such behavior would portray the girl as "promiscuous, wayward and unfaithful". In addition, both males and females noted the cultural inappropriateness in females negotiating sex or the use of condom. Therefore, it was unusual and very rare to see a girl walk to the drug counter and request for condom.

The male youth commonly noted that "use of condom is stressful and difficult to put on". They also noted that "condom makes sex unnatural and not enjoyable". On the contrary, the girls were worried over condom getting "stuck in their vagina" as they have heard stories of such incidences from older persons particularly men. Similarly, the boys were uncomfortable with the ease and frequency at which condoms get torn during use. The boys attributed this later incidence to "the availability of fake condoms in the communities" and that most of "the condoms have stayed too long in the stores and are "damaged by their exposure to heat". Long time storage of condoms in the stores allows the high temperature from a tropical climate to affect them. Hence, it becomes "waste of money" and also "nerve racking" to use condoms.

The data further show that most of the youths that displayed likeness for the use of condoms tended not to have ever used it. It appears that much of the stereotypes surrounding condom use are informed by rumors. Those who have successfully used condom appeared satisfied

with it and expressed positive attitudes towards condom use and its efficiency in the prevention of STDs.

For many girls, insisting on the use of condoms is synonymous with expressing a lack of confidence in the partner. They reported that the use of condom is the prerogative of the male partner. The girls who have had sex with foreigners noted that these men were more likely to initiate the use of condom than Nigerian men. However, the female youth explained that over a short period, such foreigners stop using condoms, relying on their partners' faithfulness. The team's visit to the oil companies' residential location for off-shore workers showed that first aid boxes placed in the rooms did not include condoms. The Community Affairs Department at the studied communities noted that the companies had more important issues to deal with and that it was the responsibility of individual workers to protect themselves from STDS and HIV/AIDS.

Attitudes to HIV/AIDS

On the issue of HIV/AIDS, both sexes were quick to note that they cannot get AIDS as they use other precautions like wearing waist bands, rings or toe rings, herbal drugs/antibiotics before and after sex, particularly if unsure of the faithfulness of their sexual partners. For the Ogulagha youth, there has been only one case of an AIDS victim in the community. However, the youth claimed that "the victim was at the point of death from AIDS when he was brought back home from a big northern city to die and be buried in his homeland". The youth explained that "the city where the AIDS victim once resided was located in a high HIV/AIDS prevalence zone." The youth also attributed "this HIV/AIDS case to homosexuality, a practice they claim is condoned more in the northern part of Nigeria", where male prostitutes visibly carry out their activities in hotels and the street. This perception of other peoples' culture is often unsubstantiated and needs further research.

DISCUSSION

The study shows that female youths were overworked by participating more in economic and other household duties than boys. Other studies (Babalola, 1998; Feyisetan and Pebley, 1989; Nichols et al., 1986) have also reported that female youths are seen more as objects in terms of the job they do and the practice of encouraging them to exchange their bodies for sex to older men as a survival strategy for their families and themselves while working. This practice further highlights the issue of patriarchy and its dehumanizing effects on females. The condition a female youth faces may be seen as a resultant effect of the break down in traditional family values and a belief that has laid emphasis on female

virginity and daughter's marriageability; and a shift to family honor values that focus on wealth and class. Hence, the data showed that parental and guardian control are minimal in the night because these adults are either in bed, or maintain a culture of silence because of the need to have the loyalty and support of the youth in carrying out essential economic activities for the survival of their businesses such as running a bar and restaurant that provide family income.

The findings are also indicative of the impediments of global patriarchal and gender-based structures perpetuated by Western modernity and multinational operations in developing countries such as the Nigerian society. Such patriarchal and gender-based values, beliefs and practices give preference to male education and employment than girl-child education and employment, while also categorizing females as objects to be sold or exchanged at marriage through exchange of bride-wealth, or lack social policies or programs to eliminate the sexual exploitation of young women in general, and female youths in particular. Patriarchy oppresses females at the expense of males. Omorodion et al. (2010) reported that poverty due to poor economy, political instability, and structural adjustment program put girls at higher risk of sexual violence than boys.

This present study also bears credence to other studies that have shown that youths of both sexes face serious health problems from their poor knowledge of sexuality and sexual health issues; fear, stigma and discrimination surrounding homosexuality and sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS (Omorodion, 2006; Temin et al., 1999; Akinyemi et al., 1996; Association for Reproductive and Family Health, 1996; Brabin et al., 1995). Yet, the society continues to see youths as the "other" and this perpetuates the invisibility of the experiences of youths, particularly the female youth.

It is held here that feminism best explains the invisibility and lack of policies and programs to address the serious implications of the social conditions that perpetuate the exploitation and commodification of the female body as well as the exploitation of their labor (female youths). Feminism holds that patriarchy oppresses females, often seen as the "other" and categorized as inferior and weak compared to the dominant male group (Nelson and Robinson, 2002). Hence, patriarchy continues to create systems and practices that oppress females through encouraging male education at the cost of female education and through perpetuating female incapacitation to negotiate sex or participate equally in the decision not to exchange their body for cash or kind (Brettell and Sargent, 2002; Baker and Rich, 1992). Furthermore, gender and ethnic inequality in education are not only sexist but also discriminatory.

Conclusion

Gender differentiation due to patriarchy is the underlying

issue that must be addressed. This calls for the elimination of the patriarchal structures and systems, ethnic discrimination and disparity, social injustices and inequality that characterize the Niger Delta Region and the Nigerian society as a whole. Such elimination entails giving both gender equal opportunity and access to formal education, pursued through strongly designed, implemented and monitored policies and programs. This would encourage female education and employment, as well as making visible the social and sexual experiences of younger persons.

The Nigerian Constitution of 1999, strongly states that all persons irrespective of their ethnic group, sex and age have the rights to education and employment. It is therefore argued here that based on such constitutional provisions, the rights of youths including their protection from sexual exploitation and poverty must be prioritized through relevant policies and programs that keep female children in school and criminalize sexual exploitation of female youths.

According to the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Children, the sexual and reproductive rights of youths are also human rights, which must be defended and protected by governments including the Nigerian government, who was a signatory to the UN Declaration. More importantly, the rights of youths are best enshrined through giving and protecting the rights of women generally. Improved rights of women through elimination of barriers to land ownership and to participate in decision-making in families and the society at large, would be the beginning of protecting women's rights and the rights of children.

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