

# Sex and sexuality: a cultural taboo

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## Introduction

There is high recognition for morality, family life, community life, sociability and solidarity. This is shown through initiation, stories and rites of passages, but could differ from tribe to tribe and from culture to culture. The issue of sex and sexuality is often challenging where tradition is deep into their ethos.

The role of cultural taboos through the ages has an impact on one's identity, self-esteem, relationships, health and societal traditions is more real than is often imagined. This essay will critique how cultural taboos play a role among the girl child and women as a group in the Ghanaian culture and its impacts on their sexuality and health.

### **Critically examine culture, look at how cultural practices impact on general health and lives of its members.**

Sexuality impacts widely on our lives because it differentiates and sets us apart. This starts with how we feel inside as men and women. Sexuality is central throughout life and includes sex, gender, identities and roles, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction in the view of Nye, (1999), with culture expressed in desires, thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, values and behaviours. However while all these aspects can include sexuality, not all of them are practiced. They can also be influenced by social, cultural, legal and religion (Parker & Aggleton, 1999 and WHO, 2004). These are practices that reflect their values and customs which hold the members of the group for many generations. Cultural practices consist and reflect their values held by members of the members of a given group hold, the norms they follow, and the material or goods they create. In the world today, there are many social groups or cultural groups with specific traditional cultural practices and

beliefs of which are beneficial to its members, while on the other hand presents harmful and negative impact to a specific group, such as women, who such cases are the receiving end. Such harmful cultural practices include female genital mutilation (FGM); forced feeding of women, early marriage, taboos and practices which prevent women from controlling their own fertility, nutritional taboos and birth practices, dowry price and son preference and its implications for the status of the girl child (Hosken, 1994).

### **Identify one particular cultural group and critically examine sex and sexuality how it is accepted and portrayed**

The issue and discussion of sex and sexuality is viewed as a taboo and shameful by many cultures and it is simply not discussed. Taboos in this sense are put in place to ensure that norms and traditions are adhere to such as no sex before marriage and men sleeping with men (White, 1984).

There is also some veil of secrecy surrounding sex. To openly discuss sex with older adults is considered a sign of promiscuity. Issues of sex and sexuality have great implications on women as a group to exercise theirfeminism. Whether for procreation or carnal gratification, sex in the traditional African context is a thing not be trifled with. Traditionally in this context, sex is restricted to family life and only persons who are joined in marriage are expected to have sex. In the view of Kosemani (2005) ‘ when it comes to the question of what the African scale of value is,’ sex relates to the totality of the human condition. Any deviation from that is faced with stigmatization.

Female genital mutilation (FGM) or female genital cutting (FGC) is widely practiced among the northerners, an ethnic group mainly found in the northern part of Ghana. This practice among these groups appears to be associated with spiritual roots, tradition and tribal beliefs (ref). It forms part of the rites of passage ceremony marking the coming of age of the girl child. To this group, by removing the female's genitals, her sexuality will be controlled; but the main aim is to preserve a woman's virginity before marriage and chastity thereafter (Hosken, 1994).

Normally young girls from age 7 to puberty age are circumcised, however for a girl attaining puberty and not being circumcised is regarded as a taboo and an abomination. The belief is to deter these girls from experiencing early sexual activities and unwanted pregnancy, sexual transmitted infections and unsafe abortions. Also, it is believed that by performing this practice it leads to cleanliness and fidelity of the woman, therefore making her sexually attractive for any prospective husband. Women who object to this practice are regarded as unclean, less attractive and less desirable for marriage; that is how their views on sexuality are expressed (Osho, (2005). The acceptance of FGM among this group is deeply rooted in their custom or tradition and has being practiced for many years by generations. The practice of FGM leaves a negative label on women and the girl child such as psychological problems and this violates the right to enjoy the highest attainable standard of health of the convention on the rights of the child (United Nations, 1979).

The early marriage of girls as opposed to boys is also practiced amongst this culture. Normally girls around the ages of 11-13years and reaching the age of puberty must be given away in marriage and start having children

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otherwise it's a taboo. Such practices are not only seen among this ethnic group but prevalent in Asia and Africa. Jenson and Thornton (2003) argue this practice exist because of the girl virginity of the girl and the bride-price, and believe these girls are virgin and have had no sexual contact therefore this raises the status of the family.

In many cases her virginity would have to be verified senior female relatives before the marriage. This practice robs the childhood-time essential to the development of these girls physically, emotionally and psychologically. In many cases, the man would be many years older (Singh and Samara, 1996). With this circumstance, she is to develop an intimate emotional and physical relationship and adhere to sexual contact, although she may not be physically ready. A label is placed on a girl or woman as promiscuous if she refuses or fails to abide by the tradition. Sometimes a spell may be cast on her or sent out of the village for flouting the tradition.

### **What are good about these practices and what is not so good**

Referring to the above situations, it is clear that sexual taboos thus put a lot strain on parents and other siblings by allowing them to go through the initiation. The negative implication of sexual taboos is that it does not allow dialogue between parties. The world is now a global village with globalizations spreading everywhere; this makes girls more aware of such negative practices. By keeping silence, sexual taboos are allowing indirectly unreasonable and irresponsible sex or promiscuity so that she won't be give out to an old man in marriage therefore not be able to enjoy her youthful days and having fun. As they defy these taboos, it results in broken hearts, broken homes, sex scandal and HIV/AIDS.

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On a positive note, sex taboo forms a code of sexual conduct that in a sense is deeply and highly regarded that any deviation from it is detested. However, parents especially women must stand up and break this silence of sexual taboos and cultural beliefs which fuel the spread of emotional pain, diseases and infections. The sacred manner in which sex is held is emphasizing on the positive use of sex firm and basic that it is necessary for people to understand such importance people place on sex, therefore the positive point is the need to stress on its use (Kosemani, (2000).

### **Health impact**

The health impact of FGM on women does irreparable harm. In many cases women experience severe bleeding which can lead to death and hemorrhagic shock, infection and septicaemia. Physical effects of this practice make the wound not heal properly leading to severe pain during sexual intercourse this increases the susceptibility to HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections including reproductive tract infection, infertility and increased risk of bleeding and infection during child birth (Carovano 1992). In view of that it makes the situation quite difficult for women to be informed and seek adequate knowledge about the risks, but even when informed about risk, it makes it difficult for them to be involved in the negotiating of sex which often as a result of unawareness, embarrassment and unavailability of proper service of information. As motherhood, like virginity is highly considered to be a feminine ideal, the use of contraceptives as safer sex option thus pose a major dilemma for most women (Heise and Elias 1995; UNAIDS 1999).

Health complications that result from early marriage include the risk of operative delivery, low weight and malnutrition resulting from frequent pregnancies and lactation in the period of life when the young mothers are themselves still growing. According to Weiss and Rao Gupta (1998) this practice does not allow the girls to indulge in illicit sex, exchanging sex for money and not perusing any risky behaviour. The stigma and embarrassment associated with sex and sexuality can lead to unwillingness to discuss and address sexual health issues.

### Conclusion

The role of culture in sustaining such practices cannot be overemphasized. Women often see themselves as weaker vessels and therefore accept these tradition and taboos that give men the power to dominate over women in all matters and spheres of life including the expression of sexual desire. The need for education will help in the development of virtues of the mind.