

Sexual Negotiation and Power Imbalance Influencing Intimate Partner Violence Among Adolescent Girls and Young Women in Nigerian Urban Slums

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Abstract

This study looks at the complexity of sexual negotiation in the context of gender inequality and power inequalities in patriarchal societies, using Nigeria as an example. It emphasizes the necessity of knowing the risks and problems that adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) confront in these contexts, including their vulnerability to intimate partner abuse. The study dives into issues surrounding the negotiation of safe sex among AGYW and its impact on the possibility of intimate partner abuse using an anthropological approach and qualitative methodologies such as in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Some of the most important things that were found were the environmental factors that make the power dynamics between AGYW and their partners unequal, the prevalence of androcentric bias in sexual decision-making and family planning, and how these power struggles lead to gender-based violence, such as physical harm and injury. The study recommends assisting young people in developing a culture of respect in sexual relationships and negotiations, which aligns with Nigeria's Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5.6.1 and is critical for promoting equality and protecting the well-being of AGYW.

Background

Power dynamics in heterosexual relationships can reflect gendered power imbalances, which often result in poor sexual health outcomes among girls and women [1–3]. These imbalances manifest in a variety of ways, from sexual advancement to the ability to engage in family planning, including condoms and other decisions about when, how, and where to have sex [1–3]. Relational power has been defined in several ways, including how partners can behave to influence each other. It also refers to the “extent to which a person can act/ behave independently, including in decision-making, behaving against or influencing the other person's will, or controlling the partner's actions” [4]. In some instances, power is exercised through threats, the use of force, and other means. In some cultures, relationship power is predicated on women's socioeconomic status and education, as well as on androcentric values. These values tend to be found in patriarchal societies, where social value systems attribute more power to men in decision-making.

Power dynamics remain an important factor that is well documented to influence sexual behavior and to be a major contributor to violence in heterosexual relationships [5, 6], [5, 6]. Coercive sex and exerting control over a partner, particularly over young adolescent girls, have detrimental effects on their well-being and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) [7]. In addition, forced or coercive sex has been associated with greater stress, lower self-esteem, and poorer life opportunities [8].

The theoretical underpinning of this study is guided by dyadic power theory (DPT), which posits that power relations between partners determine how safe sex is negotiated [9, 10]. This theory emphasizes the level of communication in dyadic relationships, which includes power negotiation and decision-making. Empirical studies have shown an association between intimate partner violence (IPV) and adolescent girl and young woman (AGYW) negotiation of safe sex and have shown that factors such as fear, age disparity, threat, sociocultural norms, and lack of comprehensive knowledge on HIV/AIDS influence power imbalances and safe sex among AGYW. Fear was associated with the level of conversation or negotiation of condom or other contraceptive use with those experiencing IPV [11], as well as age disparities and partner control.

Fear of abuse and the threat of violence are important factors impeding the negotiation of safe sex, especially among vulnerable groups such as young adolescents and those engaging in transactional sex [12]. A lack of comprehensive knowledge of HIV/AIDS among AGYW was found to be another factor predicting the negotiation of safe sex [13]. In contrast, women who were more likely to negotiate safer sex in heterosexual relationships were more likely to experience greater physical, emotional, and sexual violence [14]. In sub-Saharan Africa, culture and religion were also found to set the tone, as sociocultural factors are predictors of safe sex negotiation, especially in northern Nigeria [15].

The dimensions in which women can make decisions about their sexual and reproductive health are significant in the context of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5.6. There is limited evidence on the ability of young adolescents, particularly those considered most vulnerable, to make autonomous decisions, including the ability to refuse unwanted sexual advances, the ability to use contraceptives, and access to sexual and reproductive health services. These three elements also influence the negotiation of safe sex practices. In Nigeria, several studies have examined various factors that influence the negotiation of safe sex practices, mostly considering women of reproductive age (15–49). However, the experiences of adolescent girls and young women in informal settings present different nuances and typologies. Studies have shown that the timing of a woman's first marriage influences the extent to which she has the power to negotiate safe sex [16]. The influence of cultural norms as a barrier, especially androcentric values for sexual decision-making among adolescent girls [15], and low self-esteem lead to risky sexual behavior among adolescents. Other studies have shown that the negotiation of power depends on behavioral factors and socioeconomic status [17–19].

Women's empowerment, especially the ability to make informed decisions about sexual and reproductive health services, contraceptive use, and consensual sexual relationships, are important pillars of reproductive rights [20]. However, in Nigeria, AGYW still struggles with these rights due to a lack of knowledge, low awareness, and low socioeconomic status, especially among those living in informal settings in urban areas. While several studies in Nigeria have examined the negotiation of safe sex practices and IPV among women [19] and about HIV and IPV [18, 21], few studies have focused on AGYW, who are least able to negotiate safer sex to safely navigate their sexual lives. This is especially true for AGYW who live in slums, are disproportionately affected by poor health outcomes, including IPV, and deserve research attention.

Nigerian slum or low-income community overview

Due to rapid urbanization in Nigeria, the World Bank estimates that nearly 50% of the population lives in slums. Additionally, 5 of the 30 largest urban settlements on the African continent are in Nigeria, with an annual growth rate of 4.3% [22]. Our study focuses on two southwestern parts of Nigeria, where the number of urban slums is particularly high. The United Nations estimates that approximately 12 million people lived in Lagos as of 2015, with a projection of 20.5 million by 2030. Approximately 3 million people are estimated to be infected, and this number is projected to reach 5 million by 2030 [22]. In Lagos state, 66% of the population lives in slums, the largest in Nigeria [23], and this is also the case in Ibadan. Young girls growing up in this complex sociopolitical environment are exposed to several social realities, including power dynamics and sexual health.

In the urban slums of Lagos and Ibadan, diverse cultures and norms shape people's perceptions. Several cultural beliefs and practices are prevalent in the study area and inevitably affect people's way of life, social interaction, and relationships. The focus of our study is on understanding the power relations and gender roles that influence AGYW IPV experiences in heterosexual relationships and how AGYW in urban slums in Nigeria engage in negotiating safer sex practices, which is important for relevant interventions that consider the broader dyadic context.

Methods

Study Setting

Nigeria is a country located on the western coast of Africa. It is the most populous country in Africa, with more than 200 million people. Nigeria is a federal republic comprising 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory, where the capital, Abuja, is located. The largest city in Nigeria is Lagos, one of the largest metropolitan areas in the world and the largest in Africa. This research was carried out in Lagos and Ibadan, which are located in the southwest region of Nigeria, from January to June 2021. Lagos is the largest metropolitan city, with a population projected at 9 million people, and Ibadan's population was projected at 3.5 million people, making it the third largest metropolitan city [24]. These cities are the major cities in southwest Nigeria with the largest slum settlements. As of 2020, the World Bank database showed that the population living in slums in Nigeria was 49% of the total population [25]. The selected communities included Sango, Soretire, Kwakwauku, Powerline, and Oniwaya in the Agege LGA, while the Oniyanrin, Ogunpa, Ayeye, and Ori-eru communities were selected from the Ibadan Northeast LGA. The two study locations (Ibadan Northeast and Agege LGA in Lagos) were characterized as having poor social and health infrastructures and were more vulnerable to violence and all forms of social vice.

Study Design and Study Participants

The study utilized an anthropological approach and qualitative methodologies such as in-depth interviews and focus group discussions that were triangulated for cross-validation of findings. This qualitative study focused on adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) aged 15–24 years who were single, in intimate relationships, married, and/or had children. Additionally, young male participants aged 18–30 years who either were in relationships or already married were selected across the study locations to provide insights and interpretations from a male perspective. Within the two locations, participants were chosen through the help of community leaders, community mobilizers, and healthcare providers. The first author with research assistants conducted face-to-face 9 focused group discussion (FGD) sessions with AGYW and 6 sessions with young men, each consisting of 5 to 10 participants. We had 17 in-depth interviews (IDIs) in Ibadan, 3 dropped out and 23 AGYW were interviewed in Lagos among AGYW until we reached data saturation.

Data collection

A familiarization visit was observed before the commencement of the fieldwork to both study locations. A biographical approach was employed in the data collection process, concentrating on the experiences of intimate partner violence (IPV) and its effects on the negotiation of safe sex and power imbalances. This method created a conducive environment for individual participants to openly and freely articulate their perspectives. Each IDI had a duration of 30–45 minutes, while the FGDs took between 60 and 90 minutes. These sessions were conducted in diverse settings, including community halls, individual homes, primary health centers, or locations preferred by the participants. To ensure data security, both the IDIs and FGDs were audio recorded and uploaded to the Open Data Kit (ODK) immediately after each interview, minimizing the risk of information loss. The participants were duly informed about the purpose of the study, and consent forms were signed; however, some individual's verbal consent was obtained and recorded. Confidentiality was assured; all the given names were pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants, and interviews were conducted in private places. The interview guide maintained a moderate level of structure, fostering open communication among participants. Both the IDIs and FGDs explored the practice of negotiating in intimate relationships, collecting personal narratives and other experiences, and validating both methods for investigating this topic. Participants were asked to share stories about either personally or about acquaintances, focusing on how they negotiated safe sex in heterosexual intimate relationships: the decision-making power related to sexual issues, the uptake of contraceptives, and how this approach influenced the experience of intimate partner violence. The first author and two female and two male research assistants who were familiar with health research with a background in Social Sciences conducted the interviews. The research assistants participated in the pre-field training for six days, during which the interview guide was pretested in another location outside the primary sites for the study. All the instruments were translated into the indigenous language (Yoruba) for participants who could not understand English and were back-translated during the analysis phase. A language expert from the Department of Linguistics (with a specialty in the Yoruba language) performed the translation to ensure correct interpretation. To foster familiarity with the community and engage in informal discussions with community leaders, the first author conducted a pre-visit to the field locations. All the collected data were subsequently sent and stored at ODK-central of the Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute, University of Basel.

Analysis

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. Immediately before the coding process, all the transcripts were anonymized so that no name was traceable to the transcripts. The Atlas ti version 8, computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), was used. After an in-depth reading of the transcripts, codes, and themes were developed iteratively through inductive and deductive analysis. The coding was performed by the first author and assisted by a sociologist, who is an Atlas ti. certified, to ensure intercoder reliability [26], see the Fig. 1 for the code tree. The coding process served as a method to deconstruct the transcribed information into meaningful data units, facilitating analysis through the categorization of themes, see the Table 1 for further explanation of themes. The Gale framework method was used to extract insights into sex negotiations and experiences of IPV among AGYW, as well as to demonstrate the power imbalance demonstrated by males within the relationship [27]. This process was performed using the following recommended steps: transcription of the data, familiarization with the information collected (data), coding, development of a framework, application of the framework, charting the data into a framework matrix, and interpretation of the data [27]. A three-stage approach of coding was used to determine the meaning of all the information collected from the participants, which was coded thematically according to Braun and Clarke [28]. The research took into account reflexivity after each interview, with additional field notes used to guide the analysis, which also included observations and informal discussions with the participants. Reporting of the data was guided by the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ-32) [29]. The positionality of the research team is very important in a qualitative study to minimize bias [30]. To ensure this objectivity, the first author took an online course on GBV to position herself well enough to avoid any form of bias. The team of research assistants was also taken through the module to reduce bias in the data collection. The demographic characteristics of the participants from both locations are shown in **table 2** below.

Table 1
further explains the themes:

Definitions and examples of safe sex negotiation and power dynamic in heterosexual relationships themes		
	Definition	Example of quotes
Negotiation themes		
Factors influencing sex negotiation	An episode in which AGYW negotiates safe sex with their partners, to prevent unplanned pregnancy or acts of violence within the relationships. These are usually hindered by low esteem, poor communication, male behavior, fear of sexually transmitted infections	In responding to the question on protection and negotiation, participants from AGYW FGD responded... [..”Some people decide because of sexually transmitted diseases. Since one cannot know if the other person is infected. They do not want to be infected too”]. This is a response from IDI from a young male on the issue of negotiation...[..”Most times, envy and jealousy make a girl start having sex at a very tender age because she wants to feel among and accepted by her friends...She wants to be seen as a big girl. Hmmm...this is due to low esteem”...]. [..Therefore, when it gets to the level of misbehaving, although some girls are not mature enough to be in a relationship, even if they are,... maybe that boy wants to have sex with her and she says no, that one may beat her..]. [..”She should leave the relationship is paramount because if he hits her to an extent, he can begin to force himself on her and starts raping her. It will eventually cause damage to the girl”...]. [..They call ladies silly and disrespectful names “young but deep”, “goat” and dehumanizing names like that to AGYW...] FGD session from YM in Ibadan...[...it is we the guys that try to avoid sex without protection because ladies carry sexually transmitted diseases more than guys...]
Power and decision-making	An episode where power and decision-making conflict in heterosexual relationships; the power imbalance causes poor negotiation of safe sex...it is somewhat difficult. Male partners do not accept the autonomous decisions of females	A question on who makes decisions on sexual acts from FGD response from YM in Ibadan...[...so since I am the male, I decide on that, mostly it is males that make the decision especially when the male usually satisfy her with material things she needs..]. IDI response from AGYW Lagos...[...you know, is the boys who do decide on sexual act...]. An FGD session with YM in Ibadan [..some guys do you use power, while some use their influence to control her in that area...].
Challenges in negotiating safe sex and power control	An episode of total dependence on a sexual partner makes negotiation nearly impossible for AGYW	The question on challenges on negotiating safe sex if the girl comes from a poor/rich background...AGYW in FGD session [..like I said before, the girl depends on the guy, and again, I think maybe because the guy may know about the girl’s family background, maybe her family isn’t stable, and the girl is depending on the guy for money and everything, so he maltreats her anyhow because he knows that no matter what, she will still come back to him]. FGD response from YM in Lagos [..to make matters worse, they like fake life, if you are wearing fake gold chains on your neck like this, they want to associate with you...thinking you have money to flaunt around...they obey what you want...].

Table 1 here: Further explanation of themes

Table 2 here: Demographic characteristics of AGYW and young males by locations

Table 2 Demographic characteristics of adolescent and young women and young males (YM) by locations

Category	Ibadan, Nigeria				Lagos Nigeria			
	In-depth (AGYM) N=17	FGD (AGYW) N=5 (42)	In-depth (YM) N=7	FGD (YM) N=3 (24)	In-depth (AGYM) N=23	FGD (AGYW) N=4 (23)	In-depth (YM) N=6	FGD (YM) N=3 (15)
Age								
15-19	11	36		2	15	17		6
20-24	6	13	2	12	8	5	4	4
25-29		3	4	8		1	2	3
30-34			1	2				2
Sex								
Female	17	42	N/A	N/A	23	23	N/A	N/A
Male	N/A	N/A	7	24	N/A	N/A	6	15
Education								
No schooling, incomplete								
Primary	3		1	4		2		
Secondary	3	12	4	14	11	13	4	7
Secondary Incomplete	10	30	2	6	7	6	2	8
Higher education	1				5	2		
Marital Status								
Married/formal marriage	2	1	1	3	3		1	
Married/ Cohabiting	9	11	3	7	7	4	3	1
Single/ Casual relationship	8	30	3	14	13	18	2	14
Divorce/Separated widow	N/A					N/A		
Ethnicity								
Yoruba	18	29	7	24	15	9	6	13
Hausa		5			5	8		2
Igbo	1	6			3			
Religion								
Muslim	10	26	5	17	14	14	4	9
Christian	9	12	2	6	9	9	2	6
Traditional				1				
Occupation								
Student	4	19		2	7			8
Trainee/Apprentice	8	8	2	8	6	23	2	7
Trader/Artisan	3	11	5	14	10		4	
Full housewife	2							

Results

Factors influencing the negotiation of safe sex

3.1 Relationship temporality

In AGYW relationships, structural factors influence the type of relationship, and the certainty of the duration of relationships usually influences sexual negotiation. Some relationships were intended to end in marriage, while others were intended only for sexual satisfaction. This was mostly not communicated at the beginning, commonly among young people. However, this approach is usually difficult to use when the intentions of the two parties differ.

3.1.1 Relationship duration/type

Some relationships were not planned for, and they became superficial, which made negotiation difficult. This type of relationship is most likely not to last, especially when one of the parties is not interested. This is a common experience in slum areas, as one of the participants explained:

I have a friend who... got pregnant and started living with a man because of the pregnancy. Unfortunately, the man started beating her for little offenses. Like not washing his clothes. Their coming together was not out of love, but the desire for sexual satisfaction, which eventually led to pregnancy. For the first 4 months, they lived together; he beat her until she lost her pregnancy. Thereafter, my friend left the man's place (FGD AGYW Lagos).

The male participants mentioned the kind of shallow relationship that is prevalent among AGYW because they are involved with more than one partner; in such situations, the negotiation of sex becomes difficult, as it is short-lived, and sometimes it is transactional. One of the participants commented:

Ladies currently are very promiscuous and unfaithful. They will accept relationship proposals from more than one guy; such cannot last (FGD Male Ibadan)

The type of relationship that exists among AGYW influences how sex is negotiated, this is a consistent occurrence in a typical relationship among this group, especially with those living in low-income communities.

3.1.2 Life course

In the slums of Nigeria, the living conditions of AGYW usually reinforce their sexual behavior. Most of them have been incorporated into socially defined roles, perceptions, and acceptance in terms of sexual socialization. This usually has an impact on how negotiations in abusive relationships are viewed and accepted. In terms of the acceptance of violence and poverty, AGYW is more vulnerable to abuse. One of the participants noted that the structure of the environment influences the perception of relationships and the acceptance of violent incidents:

When you grow up in a violent environment, you always act violently (IDI Male Ibadan).

The participants mentioned that the non-availability of parents to monitor the activities of their growing young girls made them vulnerable, as the pretense of neighbors sent them errands to lure them to sexual activities they could not resist. One participant commented:

[...] It is also in practice here that when parents are not around in the house, some boys may rape the girls that were left at home even in the same compound; they may ask the girl to run errands for him, and as a result of this, end up raping the girl (FGD AGYW Lagos)

A high prevalence of poverty in low-income communities makes young girls vulnerable to abuse, as many parents assume that AGYW will usually have to fend for themselves to meet their daily needs when their parents cannot do so. Some parents were in the habit of instructing their daughters to help a male neighbor earn money, while others could not meet their basic needs. See one of the participants' opinions:

[...] If one is unable to provide a child with the necessities, for instance, a child needs N100; the parents give her N40, where will she get the remaining N60? Therefore, she has to source for the balance. This makes them victims of abuse by boys and even older men because it is difficult to negotiate sex in such an arrangement (FGD AGYW Lagos).

The living condition of AGYW determines the kind of relationship they experience. An environment where violence is a norm, parent unavailability, lack of basic provision, and many more are their way of life.

3.1.3 Absence of Social Support

Unplanned pregnancies caused by AGYW lead to cohabitation with a male partner, which means that AGYW parents automatically suspend their support, which makes it difficult to access further support from relatives. A lack of support makes it difficult to negotiate sex, as every attempt to negotiate leads to violence, and many cannot return to their parents.

[...] because some of them cannot go back to their parents, because the parents have suspended their responsibility on her since she has moved to a man's house, so if they ask her what happened to you, and she cannot explain that it is her boyfriend that beats her (FGD AYW Kwakwauku Lagos).

Social support remains an important tool to help AGYW negotiate safe sex, where in her absence she is at risk of various forms of violence.

3.2 Decision-making power

3.2.1 Male behavior in sex negotiation

3.2.1a Young men's role and expectations

Young men's expectations of their wives or girlfriends are high due to their socialization, especially in a patriarchal system. This usually complicates negotiations between AGYW mothers and their partners, as some of them automatically expect sex in exchange for any financial support, while many refuse to accept rejection. A participant in an FGD in Ibadan mentioned that there is a form of exchange when a man gives his girlfriend money; the girl is expected to return the gesture with sex:

Males are mostly the ones that do ask for sex since they have been giving the girl money; even his friends will make jest of that... 'You have been giving her money and you are not doing anything with her, you are a fool'. Therefore, when they give the girl money, they will want to have sex with her so that, at least if the girl breaks up, they will not be at a loss; at least, I gave you the money you gave me sex (FGD, AGYW Ibadan/Lagos).

Another male participant mentioned that they usually do not want to accept no for an answer. The following is the response from one of the male participants:

Men are scared of being rejected, so if you are a woman with shallow morals and values, the man will approach you without any fear, and she will give in (IDI, Male Lagos)

3.2.1b Young Men's Autonomous Decision

Male partners usually assume a position in a heterosexual relationship to decide upon both parties. This assumed position cuts across all areas of a relationship and is particularly prevalent among young people regarding sexual negotiations and decision-making. A male participant responded:

[...] that is the male partner because of his capacity; he decides to use a condom or not even if he has enough ability and the wife/girlfriend asks him to use a condom; he will say no, it is "flesh to flesh" he wants; he has the power to say so (IDI Male, Kwakwaku Lagos)".

Men usually make autonomous decisions, as this usually happens in a relationship where the male partner is responsible for the overall financial burden; this also mostly occurs due to wide age differences. One of the female participants retorted:

[...] that kind of relationship, since they are not married and he is just taking care of her. If he wants to have sex, she has to give him; I think the reason why he has that kind of power over her is because he is older than her and he finances all her needs. (FGD, AGYW Lagos)

3.2.2 Dependency

Both males and females have been socialized in a manner in which females are dependent on males for decisions in the areas of finance, family issues, and health, including sexual health. This form of socialization invariably influences negotiation, as most decisions come from the male partner, and more often than not, it is difficult for the female counterpart to object.

It is the male, and they say, "Whenever the masquerade is ready, the cane is as well ready". Once the male is ready, the female is also ready, and she cannot object (FGD Male, Ibadan)

While the female participants mentioned this:

[...] Her partner is supposed to give her money to feed, as she is not expected to beg for money from her neighbors. Once the partner returns from work, at a slight demand for money, it attracts beating from him (AGYW FGD, Lagos).

The AGYW's dependence on their partners often leads to their male partner assuming a position of authority, and any negation or rejection of this position leads to violence. Unfortunately, if the male partner does not fulfill certain needs, this leads to violence due to AGYW expectations, which is dependency on a partner.

3.2.3 Sexual interaction

Different sexual interactions occur between females and males, especially in young people's relationships. Some are involved with more than one partner; this applies to both sexes, while others forcefully have sex with girls with no apology. Some of the participants described a scenario they witnessed:

So maybe the guy wanted to date her or she was dating another guy and probably the guy liked her. She refused the guy when he asked her out, and the guy liked her so much. Therefore, the person she ended up dating happened to be the friend of that guy. The guy was angry that, "Why can't you date me, you're dating my friend." Both the guy and the friend team up. The so-called boyfriend invited her over. When she got there, both of them raped her. I was like, 'So what happened after?' Even the two guys happened to be her brother's friends. Therefore, she was like, "My brother's friend is going to settle. My brother has handled it." Things like this.

Another issue mentioned is the multiple partner relationships among young people, which reinforce the practice of violence and mistrust.

When a particular boyfriend gets to know that you're dating someone else, "Okay, so you're

playing games with us", the guy might plan with maybe a few of his friends and want to deal

with the girl to punish and plan to rape her. These are the common symptoms among

adolescents (IDI AGYW Lagos)

Sexual interaction between both sexes predicts how the relationship is viewed. Respect for individual sexual relationships is low among AGYW, this has led to mistrust and sexual relationships are taken with levity.

3.3 Challenges in sex negotiation

3.3.1A Communication

3.3.1a Verbal communication

Communication remains an important tool in negotiating safe sex, and it determines whether intimate partner violence will occur at one point in such a relationship. This remains a challenge in AGYW relationships, as male counterparts have no regard for them. The participant said:

They just go straight to the point. There is nothing like being polite here. That is why I said that if she refused, she was going to experience a problem. They would waylay her around and might end up being raped or forced to do something else (IDI male, Ibadan).

However, some young women attract violence from their partners and make negotiations difficult in relationships. The male respondent said:

First, if a woman does not have manners of speaking respectfully as if she does not show respect, she has a very high chance of receiving beatings and scolding from her husband or boyfriend. (FGD AGYW, Lagos)

Communication in a relationship are responsibility of both parties, to reduce or avoid IPV. Poor verbal communication from both parties can lead to multiple occurrences of violence, which affects sex negotiation.

3.3.1b Nonverbal communication

Males usually use nonverbal means to communicate their intentions to girls in terms of gifts, writing letters, and other actions. The challenge of non-verbalism is that the girl might not be interested in the guy, and it is difficult to say no because the gift has preceded the request. Participants provided two different scenarios in which boys use nonverbal communication with girls; one, boys believe that giving a girl money and/or buying her a gift would eventually lead to sex with the girl. Second, if the boy keeps dropping love notes for her, he will eventually have the courage to approach her;

Some men see spending on a woman as no disadvantage because they are confident that they will have sex with the girl after giving her money. He may buy a gift for her, but just as Valentine's is approaching now, he will be thinking of what to get for the lady, so he will be appreciated. The lady may feel it is because of what he is buying that will make me like him, but the man will know that he is doing all that to gain her attention. (IDI YAW, Ibadan)

As a school girl, I remember that boys used to drop notes inside the desk of a girl they had emotional interests in and such notes would also contain some love messages. They will keep on dropping such notes until they can boldly approach the girls of their interests. (IDI AGYW, Lagos)

Although, non-verbal communication may not influence violence, where the other party could not understand the intention becomes a problem.

3.3.1B Social status

3.3.1 Socioeconomic status

The social status of AGYW patients is mostly associated with socioeconomic status. The negotiation of safe sex is invariably predetermined by the socioeconomic status of an individual, especially among AGYW, and serves as a challenge to sex negotiation. Involvement in a sexual relationship with some AGYW is a way to increase income for survival. A participant in Ibadan believed that most girls are involved with multiple partners to increase their sources of income;

For men, having more girlfriends means nothing, but for women, it is the person who

has a solid relationship who would know not to go here or there. Most girls who have

more than one sexual partner does it as a source of income, a way to make money

(FGD Male Ibadan).

While others believe, having multiple partners is an avenue to secure one when the other decides to end the relationship.

However, to be sincere, I have a lot of guys who call me and my grandma always shouts on

me, that why do I have to take calls from too many guys when I already have

someone I am dating. I always tell my grandma that the guy I am dating may decide to

say he is no longer interested in the relationship (IDI AGYW, Ibadan)

Social status in terms of education of AGYW and socioeconomic influences how sex is negotiated in a relationship, for the participants of this study who reside in slums, it becomes a challenge.

3.3.1C Bargaining power

3.3.1 Age disparity

In a relationship, bargaining power is determined by various factors, one of which is age. Age disparity in a relationship strengthens the level of negotiation or faults it, especially in a relationship with a wide age gap, as is usually the case with AGYW in slums.

[...] if it is between adult male and adolescent girls, and the man says the girl did not respect him, or she is talking to him anyway, that causes it (FGD AGYW, Ibadan)

3.3.2 Typology of couples

There are several types of couples or intimate partners in slums due to the low socioeconomic status of those who reside in the community. For this study, we focused on legally married couples, as well as cohabiting partners (which are rampant among adolescents and young women in the slums), and girlfriend-boyfriend relationships. Additionally, this relationship varies by age: older versus younger, young people versus young people with a slight age range. These various types of relationships influence how bargaining power is exhibited in AGYW relationships and the level of violence likely experienced.

3.3.2a Legal marriage status

Most well-consummated AGYW relationships (e.g., legally married couples) rarely experience violence because they are legally bound to stay together for a long time.

[...] then couples who are together and still want to be together hardly beat each other or have any reason to exhibit any violent act toward each other; however, when the boy wants to date another or is tired of the relationship, the girl can be beaten for anything even to the tiniest issues (FGD AGYW Lagos).

3.3.2b Cohabiting and girlfriend | boyfriend

Conversely, a relationship where partners are not legally married shows the temporality of the union; therefore, violent experience is unavoidable. The participants responded:

Due to the type of relationship, some girls have more than one sexual partner despite living with their partners. It is dangerous because it leads to violence between the sexual partners when they determine she has been cheating on them (IDI AGYW Lagos).

One of the constraints that influences girls to decide to continue staying in abusive relationships when they already have a child.

If the male decides to bring another woman home and the woman at home opposes it, this usually results in violence.

I did not do anything to him; I went out, and I came in and was thinking, had I known I would not have had a child for him. I began to think to the extent that I almost committed suicide by taking poison because I was slapped in the face; it was not the first time he had done that to me. He might bring her girlfriend around, I went to meet him there so that he could give me money for feeding; he would now talk to me anyway, and beating would start (AGYW IDI, Ibadan).

3.3.1d Trust/Loyalty

Loyalty remains one of the challenges in AYW relationships. In the study location, trust and loyalty are not values that are common in relationships; hence, it is usually difficult for both parties to trust their partners in terms of finance and sex, which makes negotiation difficult.

Whenever he finds money on me, he assumes I have gone to meet a guy or I just

went out, he will be angry that I went out with his child, he doesn't want me to go out

and there is no way I will be at home jobless. He is afraid of me having affairs, as this is common among young married couples here. (AGYW IDI, Lagos)

Age disparity, typology of couples, and trust remain some of the challenges in negotiating safe sex, as recounted by the participants. These characteristics should be considered in helping AGYW negotiate safe sex in IPV relationships.

Discussion

First, our findings showed that low self-esteem and poor communication occurred between AGYW mothers and their partners, resulting in a lack of safe sex negotiations and thus increasing the extent of IPV experienced among this group. The life course of AGYW slums is characterized by poverty, the non-availability of parents, and violence that has been normalized, which reinforces their sexual behavior. Due to the low socioeconomic situation at which participants permeated the study sites, AGYW was always at the mercy of their partners or advanced. They were usually regarded as objects and were often approached as individuals who needed financial help in exchange for sex. This, therefore, affects the self-esteem of AGYW, which usually results in fear of negotiating safe sex, as individuals yield to the demands of their partners. Adolescent girls with low self-esteem were more

likely to be sexually active and exposed to high-risk sex; this finding corroborated the findings of Enejoh et al. on the impact of self-esteem on risky sexual behavior [31]. Our findings complement the results of previous studies in Nigeria. Michele et al reported fear as one of the predictors of not negotiating safe sex among more than half of AGYW patients, while a study by Awoloye and colleagues [32] showed that sociocultural systems influenced the negotiation of safe sex, as women were subjected to obeying their husbands or partners. Similarly, societal expectations require young girls to marry before they become pregnant, and pregnancy out of wedlock is often regarded as a form of deviant behavior. This explains why most AGYW individuals, especially men who did not show commitment to their relationships, resist unprotected sex. AGYW exhibited the worst relationships, coupled with age and socioeconomic status [32]. Findings from other settings showed that the experiences of AGYW in negotiating safe sex in Nigeria were mostly similar to what has been observed in the majority of individuals in low-middle-income countries and others [11, 33]

Men are usually custodians of power in heterosexual relationships, which is common in sub-Saharan African countries, including Nigeria. According to our study, AGYW recognized that this power imbalance existed in their relationships, as they were most affected by the sexual autonomy decisions of their partners. The results of our study highlighted that male partners without any negotiation automatically assumed autonomous decisions in their relationships, and it was usually difficult for AGYW to assert their sexual rights. AGYW were usually in a dilemma of asserting their sexual right, which could be due to their economic status, lack of sexual empowerment, or the patriarchal system that gives power to men. These findings support previous studies showing that the sexual assertiveness of women increases with greater social equality and that sociocultural aspects that exist in the Nigerian system continue to empower males.

Factors associated with difficulties in negotiating safe sex and circumstances surrounding rejecting sexual advances in our study are related primarily to AGYW. In our study, the participants mentioned that the acceptable conditions for rejecting sex were usually when they were menstruating, were in a bad mood, or had a newborn child. However, an untenable circumstance that was not accepted by AGYW by a male partner was a frequent demand for sex, which usually resulted in disagreement and, if not well managed, caused violence (sexual, physical, and emotional). These results are from previous reports on tendencies to negotiate safe sex, which increases the likelihood of IPV [19]. Others mentioned having extramarital affairs or being in multiple relationships. With these circumstances, negotiating safe sex often resulted in IPV in a relationship, as some of the male participants believed that if their wife or girlfriend rejected the sexual advances, it was because she was seeing another man or usurping her authority.

Regarding the challenges faced by AGYW in negotiating safe sex in intimate relationships, our findings are congruent with previous studies on the greater extent of violence due to negotiations of safe sex. Previous studies have shown that all forms of IPV are more common when a woman or an adolescent girl in a heterosexual relationship tries to negotiate safe sex, which sometimes results in forced sex and reproductive coercion [34, 35]. In addition, our study showed that the low socioeconomic status of one's partner determined the level of violence experienced by the participants, and vice versa. Some of the AGYW emphasized that the financial irresponsibility of their partners would make the demands for sex difficult to accept, which usually results in violence. This was also expressed by previous studies, although age and economic asymmetry were directly related to having a sexual relationship with an older person [36, 37].

Adolescent girls and young women's ability to make autonomous choices regarding their SRH remains a public health concern. From our study, it was evident that acceptance of the dictate of the male partner was related to AGYW's lack of understanding of their sexual rights. This lack of understanding has resulted in difficulties in negotiating sex among AGYW to avoid any form of violence in their sexual relationship. In the context of the SDG of which Nigeria is part, indicator 5.6.1 [20], which is a woman's ability to make autonomous choices, is nowhere near the awareness that is required by young women, and this continues to cause increases in violent experiences. These studies support the findings of previous studies showing that the education of both women and their partners, household wealth status, area of residency, exposure to media, age, and knowledge of SRH rights at the individual level were factors influencing the decision-making of women. Our study showed that AGYW in slum areas lacked knowledge of sexual rights. The study participants were young and already with sexual partners, while many were already married but were confronted with the problem of negotiating safe sex to reduce experiences of IPV. A power imbalance is still one of the prominent factors influencing the negotiation of safe sex among people with AGYW and people with low socioeconomic status. This finding is consistent with a study that showed that sexual assertiveness increases when social equality increases [35].

Our study showed that AGYW has many limitations in terms of negotiating safe sex, which can result in violence. First, the issue of power, which is mostly asserted by their partners in their relationships, makes them ignorant of the sexual rights they are entitled to demonstrate as individuals. This could be due to low levels of education in sexual empowerment and low socioeconomic status, which automatically make them vulnerable. However, in navigating negotiation and IPV, it is evident that this has not been easy due to the sociocultural factors, low social equality, and masculinity that exist among intimate partners. Previous studies have also shown concerns about masculinity, sociocultural factors, and women's economic status, which are mentioned as predictors of negotiating safe sex and autonomous sexual rights [5, 17, 18, 32].

Limitations and Direction for Future Research

This study provides a unique, comprehensive exploration of the negotiation of safe sex among AGYW who were in an intimate heterosexual relationship with IPV, the power imbalance that occurred within these relationships, and the male perspectives on power imbalance in heterosexual relationships and how it leads to violence. Replication of our study in other settings with different samples will contribute more to the body of knowledge. There are several limitations of the current study that should be mentioned. First, the study participants were not only those who had experienced IPV in their heterosexual relationships but also others who had a sexual relationship in recent years. This finding suggests that both

AGYW who have experienced IPV and those who have not participated in this study. This may have introduced bias in the data collection. We cannot generalize our findings due to the small sample size resulting from the sensitive nature of our approach. Second, the study was geographically limited to two sites, two slums in two of the largest populated cities; therefore, the experiences examined in this study may not be present at the other sites. It is worth noting that, in the past, some of the male participants in our study were unable to disclose whether they had engaged in abusive behavior toward their partners. Therefore, the context of violence in their relationship was not entirely clear. However, the experiences some of them shared were based on what they had witnessed happening to others, which could have potentially biased their perspective. Fourth, it is possible that participants framed their responses in a way that did not offend the interviewer or other participants, as is the case with any other FGD [38, 39], and that they reflected a particular self-perception and limited the information obtained during the interview.

Implications

The implications of our findings for AGYW's experiences of IPV in heterosexual relationships are significant. First, the power imbalance in AGYW relationships continues to drive the reinvention of GBV, which is not limited to IPV but also includes verbal abuse, domestic violence, and interpersonal violence, particularly in low-income communities in urban centers. Second, AGYW is disadvantaged by socioeconomic status, age, and gender. Third, gendered expectations have placed AGYW in a predictable situation where they must rely on their partner's decisions, which complicates the decision and leads them to engage in violence in heterosexual relationships. These effects render AGYW who do not conform to gender expectations victims of IPV. Finally, some of these responses from two groups of our study participants reinforce inequality in interpersonal relationships, as male participants believe that men should be in charge of and control the affairs of AGYW. This will continue to lead to conflicts that escalate into violence, as some males view AGYW as objects to be controlled sexually and otherwise.

It is essential for various stakeholders, including educators, the health system, youth leaders, community leaders, and civil society organizations, to address the gender inequality that contributes to difficulties in negotiating safer sex. Such inequality leads to violence against girls and women, including but not limited to interpersonal violence, sexual violence, abuse, and IPV.

Conclusion

An attempt by AGYW to assert their sexual rights in heterosexual relationships usually results in higher incidences of IPV, which may be due to their age and low socioeconomic status. Nonetheless, sexual empowerment through an understanding of the autonomous rights of AGYW in sexual relationships has not been broadly examined. Overall, the power imbalance and power dynamics (control, partner's socioeconomic status, and age disparities) in heterosexual relationships of AGYW point to increased incidences of IPV, while negotiating safe sex became extremely impossible. Moreover, the findings underscore the need for sexual empowerment, and understanding sexual rights needs to be emphasized among many other interventions for young people to achieve SDG 5.6.1 on autonomous choices in sexual health. The findings suggest a need for policy toward gender equity and a holistic gender-transformative program among young people that promotes equitable, safe sex negotiation.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Approval for the study was embedded in a larger study from the Ethics Committee Northwest and Central Switzerland (ID Number: AO-2020-00028) and the University of Ibadan Research Ethics Committee (ID: UI/EC/20/0513). It was conducted by the Declaration of Helsinki. Permission was granted by Ibadan Northeast LGA and from Agege and Orile-Agege LGA Lagos. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants and legal guardians for the study. Participants agreed to participate in the study and could stop the interview at any time. Confidentiality was assured; all the given names were pseudonyms to protect the participants.

Consent for publication

Not applicable

Availability of data and materials

The dataset presented in this article is not publicly available, because it contains information that could compromise the privacy of the interviewees and a breach of the agreement. The datasets used and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Competing interests

The authors declare they have no competing interest

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Authors' contributions

OOI collected, analyzed, and interpreted the interview transcripts and wrote the manuscript. AIA supervised the data collection and reviewed the manuscript. SM supervised the interpretation of data and critically reviewed the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Figures

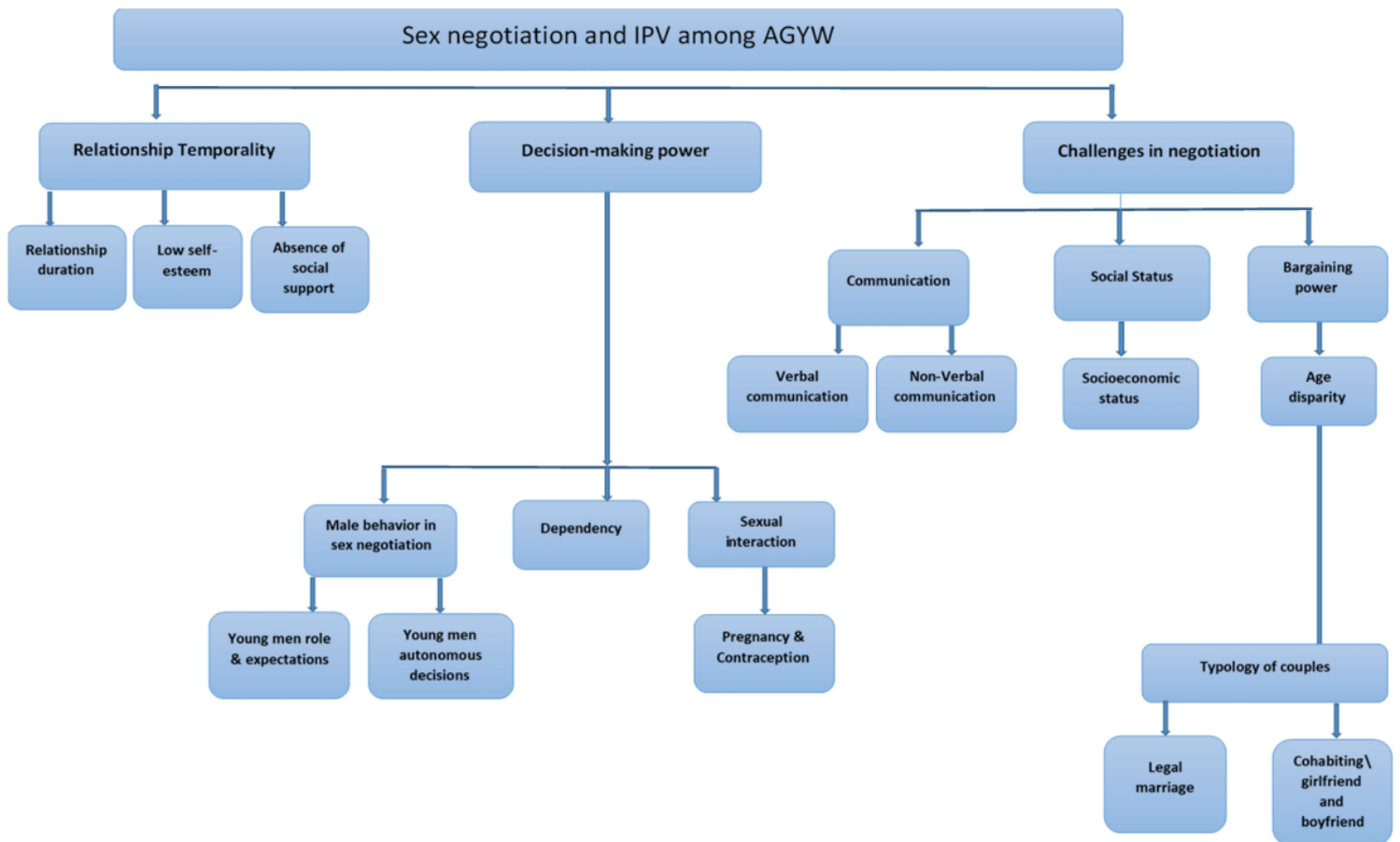


Figure 1

Coding tree for sex negotiation and IPV among AGYW

Note: Code tree explaining the codes derived from the data, showing different stages of coding.

Supplementary Files

This is a list of supplementary files associated with this preprint. Click to download.

- [SexNegotiationofIPVCOREQChecklist.docx](#)