

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Gendered socialization and sexual violence – A socio-anthropological study in Togo

DOI: 10.29063/ajrh2024/v28i8s.15

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Abstract

This article bases its argument on the social representations that justify sexual violence against adolescent girls and women and make it commonplace. It looks at the constructions of masculinity and femininity and their potential effects on the occurrence of sexual violence among adolescent girls. This is a socio-anthropological study carried out in the plateau regions of Togo. The empirical data came from individual semi-directive interviews (55), life stories (4) of adolescent rape victims and group interviews (40) with several stakeholders (adolescents, parents of adolescents, educators, community leaders and religious leaders). The results show that despite the efforts of the State and non-governmental organisations, local sexuality logics often have an impact on the persistence of sexual violence. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2024; 28 [8s]: 130-136).

Keywords: Gendered socialisation, social construction, teenage pregnancy, rape, Togo

Résumé

Cet article fonde son argumentaire sur les représentations sociales qui justifient et rendent ordinaires les violences sexuelles sur les adolescentes et les femmes. Il appréhende les constructions de la masculinité et de la féminité et leurs effets potentiels sur la survenue des violences sexuelles chez les adolescentes. Il s'agit d'une étude socio-anthropologique réalisée dans la région des plateaux au Togo. Les données empiriques proviennent d'entretiens individuels semi-directifs (55), des histoires de vie (4) d'adolescentes victimes de viol et des entretiens de groupes (40) avec plusieurs acteurs (adolescent(e)s, parents d'adolescent(e)s, éducateurs, leaders communautaires et leaders religieux). Les résultats révèlent que, malgré les efforts des acteurs de l'Etat et des Organisations Non Gouvernementales, les logiques locales de la sexualité ont souvent des incidences sur la persistance des violences sexuelles. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2024; 28 [8s]: 130-136).

Mots-clés: Socialisation sexuée, construction sociale, grossesse d'adolescente, viol, Togo

Introduction

As an important social problem at the global level, sexual violence remains a phenomenon that challenges political decision-makers, civil society actors, and researchers. Sexual violence is defined as “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act or any other act directed against a person's sexuality through coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship with the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work”¹. Sexual violence includes rape, sexual harassment, sexual assault, sexual exploitation and incest. Although these forms of sexual violence are present in the Togolese context, it is not certain they are perceived by the populations as sexual violence. However, they have harmful consequences on the

physical and mental health of the individuals who experience them.

A study carried out by the World Health Organization (WHO) revealed that one in three women, one in five girls and one in 13 boys have suffered sexual violence. Worldwide, an estimated 736 million women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence at the hands of an intimate partner, and/or sexual violence at the hands of another person at least once (30%), hundreds of women over 15)^{2,3}.

In Togo, the results of the third Demographic and Health Survey (2015) indicate that 1.4% of women aged 15 to 19 and 3.4% of those aged 20 to 24 reported having suffered from sexual violence during the last twelve months; while 52% of the perpetrators of this violence were

the spouses or partners of the women surveyed⁴. A study carried out by the Non-Governmental Organization BØRNEfonden in Togo, as part of its project entitled “Promotion of a fulfilling environment for education and learning of children and young people” showed that 21.6% of girls suffer from sexual violence (cited by Gado et al, 2023, p 276)⁵. A recent study conducted by the Ministry of Primary, Secondary, Technical and Craft Education (MEPSTA) in partnership with UNICEF in 2022 in schools in Togo reveals that school dropouts among girls continue due to pregnancies and risk of violence⁶. This violence, sometimes unspoken, is favoured or tolerated by the socio-cultural environment and by the extent of socio-economic inequalities⁷. This article is part of the reflections on the barriers to adolescents’ enjoyment of their sexual and reproductive rights.

Indeed, if actions, particularly training, are undertaken by state institutions and non-governmental organizations and associations to reduce gender-based violence, it is clear that the phenomenon would be curtailed. Observing the daily relationships between men and women requires us to break with the idea that legal instruments² are the main solution to eradicate gender-based violence. The socialization of children remains gendered and is based on male domination⁸. This socialization reflects the way in which social gender relations are hierarchical in society. However, it must be placed in its social, economic and cultural context for a more in-depth understanding.

Thus, this article questions the effects of the construction of masculinity and femininity on the sexual behavior of adolescents likely to sometimes lead to (or justify) sexual violence. After describing the methodology of the study, we will present the social representations of sexual violence and show how adolescents put these precepts of socialization into practice in relationships of seduction and sexual desires.

Methods

This study used data from a qualitative survey collected as part of the action research project “Preventing gender-based violence and violations of the sexual and reproductive rights of adolescent girls to reduce early pregnancies in Togo”³. The

data collection was carried out in four localities in the plateau region of Togo (Lavié, Tové, Akparé and Yorokpodzi).

Fifty-five semi-structured individual interviews were carried out with managers of public services and non-governmental organizations whose activities relate to the fight against adolescent pregnancies in connection with gender-based violence and sexual reproductive health and rights. Focus groups (40) composed of 8 participants were held with men and women parents of students, farmers or women working in small trades, adolescents aged 10-19 years students⁴ or trade apprentices, community and religious leaders and life stories (4) from girls who were victims of rape.

The themes of the discussions focused mainly on popular perceptions of gender-based violence and sexual reproductive health and rights; local norms and practices that lead to GBV and teenage pregnancies; the links between gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health and adolescent pregnancies; knowledge of provisions to combat teenage pregnancies; experiences of sexual relations; prevention of teenage pregnancies; and suggestions for reducing teenage pregnancies.

To conduct the life stories, the informants were identified with the support of community and religious leaders in the survey locations. Community and religious leaders, guarantors of local habits and customs, are major players in the regulation of social control. The life stories were reconstructed through the family, school and emotional trajectories of young women who were victims of sexual assault.

The interviews were conducted in French, Ewe or Ifè. recorded on a Dictaphone; they were then all transcribed into French. The data were analyzed using the method of transversal thematic content analysis which made it possible to grasp the implicit norms which influence the decisions and conduct linked to this violence and also to highlight the social logics which influence the social representations of sexual violence by girls and boys to the point of making it ordinary⁹.

Ethical considerations

As a prelude to the data collection phase, the research protocol received approval

N°034/2019/CBRS dated October 3, 2019 from the Bioethics Committee for Health Research (CBRS) of Togo. The survey guaranteed free and informed consent from participants and the protection of their identity through the anonymization of interview data and publication of the data, with a guarantee of confidentiality.

Results

Sexual violence: a “new” concept?

On the social representation of sexual violence...

Social representation is the collective activity of interpretation and construction producing knowledge whose cognitive, emotional and symbolic contents play a primordial role in the daily way of thinking and acting of people constituting a social group. The speeches collected from study participants reveal that almost all men perceive sexual relations as a male right that must be claimed, exercised and defended at all costs. For men, the desire for a sexual relationship is expressed explicitly. A teenager can thus clearly express his desire to have a sexual relationship with a girl. A supervisor at a college recounts a conflict between a boy and a girl:

A teacher kicked out a girl and a boy from the 6th grade class. What happened ? The boy said to the girl: “This morning I really want it (sexual intercourse). I cannot endure “. He begs her to come with him behind to have same [sexual intercourse]. The girl pushed him away. He said the same nonsense again. When the girl pushed him away for the second time, he forced his hand into her blouse to touch her breasts. And the girl got angry and slapped him. The boy repaid (returned) the slap to the latter. The teacher told them: Go to supervisor! When they got to my level, the observation I made was that his pants were like that (he made the gesture showing that he was erect (a supervisor, 36 years old, Tové).

Reading this interview extract, we can identify different forms of violence to which the girl was a victim. We note that she suffered harassment, aggression and psychological violence from her classmate. He clearly does not understand how the

girl could explicitly and violently refuse his sexual request. For him, it is normal for the girl to submit to his aggressively expressed request for sexual intercourse. Just like this boy, many boys and men in this environment do not think that these behaviours (attacks, brutality, touching) constitute sexual violence against girls or women.

During the survey, almost all of the participants interviewed highlighted the trivialization of sexual violence carried out by men. Sexual intercourse is considered a right for men and a duty to be fulfilled by women. Furthermore, the interview extract above highlights the question of consent to the extent that the girl's refusal is clearly not taken into account by her friend. The socialization of boys differs from that of girls who learn not to express their sexual desire explicitly. According to local codes of etiquette, expressions of modesty mark a woman's behavior. The analysis of the speeches collected shows that, in public, a “well-educated” girl is expected to conceal her sexual desire to the point where her explicit disagreement often remains perceived as the expression of tacit agreement. But the expression of a refusal is not associated with demonstrating modesty. Sometimes, as is the case above, the girl's refusal to face this young boy's aggression is explicit. Although there is no consent, the boy's insistence spills over into physical aggression. In the case mentioned here, the girl's refusal is perceived as a “veiled yes”, an implicit agreement, which justifies the boy's insistence which degenerated into physical violence.

Another dimension of the representation of sexual violence by the populations of the localities studied deserves to be highlighted. This concerns the management of cases of violence by witnesses. In the story above the teacher chose to punish both the boy and the girl who was the first to be attacked. We can say that the exercise of the professor's authority carries with it a local logic of men's control over women in matters of sexual relations. By excluding teenagers from the class, the focus seems to be more on the disruption of the class than on the act of sexual violence committed against the teenager.

During the field survey, some informants affirmed that “courting a girl is an art” and that from the moment the girl finds herself in a room with a

boy, it is perceived as a form of courtship. implicit approval on his part for the sexual act. Therefore, according to them, such a sexual act cannot be associated with rape. This social representation of the bedroom, as a place in which rape loses all its meaning and is considered an act consented to by both partners, is specific to certain localities in Togo. The speeches of all the participants from these localities reveal a singular representation of the room as a space where mutual consent is tacitly given. Such a representation contributes to the trivialization of rapes committed in the bedroom. This to the extent that entry into this space by sexual partners justifies the sexual act even though it is not consented to by one of the people, the woman. Consent is associated with co-presence in the space of the bedroom and not by the refusal of the sexual act by one of the two parties. Such social conceptions can reinforce rape culture in these societies.

Such conceptions imply taking into account social injunctions regarding sexuality for men and women.

...to a differentiated expression of sexual desire

In Togo, like other sub-Saharan societies, women do not enjoy the same sexual freedom as men. All the participants in the discussion groups affirmed in their speeches that it is allowed for a man to express his romantic feelings, his sexual desire towards a woman; conversely, a woman who expresses her desire will be called a promiscuous girl:

It is our habit to sleep with a woman whether she says no or not, whether we rape her or not. People say that a woman who gives in easily is not a "real" woman. And even in the mentality of women too, there is this tendency. We think that the man must rush you before you accept. Otherwise, it's like you're an easy woman. For some men too, when the woman resists, it's normal. So you have to force it. (an institutional actor, 43 years old).

I have a character. If I make advances towards you and you come to my house, then I want to touch you and you refuse, I will let you go without forcing you. But, a girl told me one day that "don't you want to force it a little bit?" Don't you know that women are expensive? The woman must be bragging a little.

And you don't want to force it and you tell me go, go, go. (a man, 52 years old)

The expression of sexual desire is different between men and women. Women are socialized not to openly express their desire for a man. Women are taught passivity and submission in sexual relations. The socialization of young girls encourages them to manifest their desires in a modest manner. Therefore, their refusal is sometimes interpreted as proof of their good education. Conversely, a young girl who expresses her sexual desires clearly and publicly will be considered wanton, and devoid of good education. On the other hand, a man is socialized to express his desire explicitly. Masculinity is often associated with the ability to assert one's power over women through the exercise of restrictive physical force. These gender inequalities in the distribution of female modesty and male strength can justify sexual violence. The privilege of masculine force can legitimize the use of violence to impose a sexual act associated with rape. Many girls internalize this disadvantage, which affects their sense of individual dignity and integrity and, in turn, their sexuality throughout their lives.

The influence of socialization on relationships of seduction and sexual desires

When requests for domestic work expose you to sexual violence

In the Togolese context, social gender relations are based on the sexual division of labor assigning domestic tasks to women¹¹ Asked by men for domestic tasks, some women find themselves faced with attempted rape.

This is a story a woman told me. (...) a man often sends him to do the market, wash the dishes and other domestic work because he is a somewhat elderly person. She continued to help him until one day, he was sitting on the bed and as soon as she came home, he closed the door with his foot and pushed her onto the bed. They fought for about an hour. She finally bit him and escaped (a man, 47 years old, focus group)

The latter are sometimes called upon to help men who live alone in the localities. This is the strategy

used, for example, by certain teachers living alone in these localities to force young girls in the establishments where they work to have non-consensual sexual relations. A young schoolgirl recounts how she was almost raped by one of her teachers:

The teacher wanted the wood to be brought home and I was the last person. And I brought him the wood at home (...)and he grabbed me to rape me and I fled (a teenage mother, 15 years old, 5th grade)

Socialization gives women domestic tasks. The internalization of the assignment of this task attenuates their ability to refuse a domestic task, especially since it occurs in a power relationship (teacher/teacher). Vulnerability is on the feminine side. Some women are more exposed to this vulnerability. This is the case of young girls in relation to their teachers, or of young girls in relation to older men with a certain reputation.

When sexual relations are obtained through the use of mystical means: “Akouagna/gabara”⁶

Our interlocutors mentioned that one of the strategies used by men to have sexual relations with girls is the use of mystical practices, also called “Akouagna/gabara” (mystical practices relating to sexual violence in the Ewe language). These mystical practices aim to create in the potential victim an effect of obedience to the desires of the author of the magic. Study participants highlighted the use of these practices:

If I wanted the girl so much, I will bewitch her with “Gabada” and she will come, we will have sex. I just need to know his name. This is why girls now, when we ask their names, they give false names (a village chief, 75 years old)

My sister was raped as a result. She was cooking when she rushed out. When we found her, we questioned the boy. He said he flirted with her but she refused and so he lured her into having sex with her (a teenager, 15 years old, 4th grade)

By using bewitchment to have sexual relations with girls or women, men demonstrate their domination over the female sex. The woman, thus targeted,

seems deprived of her freedom of decision, an entity deprived of its capacity to consent.

When sexual violence becomes normalized through the giving of gifts

Based on all the targets, we note that more than half of the people we spoke to said that gifts are also a way for men to force girls to satisfy their sexual desires. Indeed, if the man offers a gift to a girl, the price to be paid in return by the latter corresponds to a sexual relationship to which she will be subjected willingly or by force:

(...) often, he sends me to buy him food during recess and then tells me to keep the change. One day after handing him the food, he started fondling me in his office. I screamed, then I ask him why is he doing this to me? He took 5,000 FCFA out of his pocket to give me and I told him I wouldn't take it! (a teenage mother raped, 15 years old).

I told a pretty girl, who I am over 21 years old (the age difference between the girl and the man is over 21 years), that I wanted her for my son. One day she came to me for financial help. I knew straight away that I had it. To my surprise, she accepted my advances. I paid him a cell phone for 45,000 F.cfa. She called me all the time and we would meet up to make love in a hostel. Sometimes she even came to the house in the absence of my wife (a man, 49 years old)

These interview extracts highlight behaviours relating to social relations of seduction which establish the offering of gifts from men to women. But we also see the fact that a man's gift-giving can also be associated with a strategy to impose non-consensual sexual relations on a woman. Reading the interview extracts above, we note that the manipulation of girls through the offering of gifts with a view to sexual exploitation constitutes another form of sexual violence. In contexts marked by economic precarity, adolescent girls wishing to own consumer goods (the cell phone is the emblematic example) are often victims of sexual exploitation. It should also be added that the gift constitutes a means of forcing the adolescent to perform an unwanted sexual act. This perception of the gift reflects another form of male domination

and subordination of women. In contexts marked by the economic precariousness of girls, the offering of gifts remains a strategy to buy the consent of girls and offer the illusion of valorization of the latter. Also, these practices are normalized and trivialized even though they lead to sexual violence perpetrated against adolescent girls.

When friends are complicit in sexual violence

The analysis of the speeches indicates the involvement of friends in the occurrence of sexual violence perpetrated against their peers. This is evidenced by the words of a teenage mother, victim of rape:

That day, one of my friends asked me to accompany her to see a soldier who was her friend. When I arrived in his house, we prepared and ate together, then watched television. After my friend left the room, I thought she was going to pee. A few minutes after he came out, the gentleman closed the door and I asked him why did he close the door? Without answering, he threw himself at me. We fought until my pants tore and the act [sexual intercourse] took place. He never made an advance on me, I didn't think about that either. Afterwards, he gave me a loincloth which I tied and I insisted that he open the door for me. When I came out, I saw my friend outside. Without speaking to him, I left. (...) I knew she was an accomplice (sigh) I left. (a teenage mother, 22 years old)

Almost all of the raped girls interviewed individually or in focus groups highlighted the complicity of same-sex peers in the occurrence of the act of rape. If adolescence promotes learning about sexuality from peers¹², they can be accomplices in the occurrence of sexual violence.

Discussion

In this article, we have established a link between male domination and sexual violence suffered by young girls. Male dominance refers to a social and cultural system in which men have dominant power and authority over women, both on an individual and collective level. It often manifests itself through gender stereotypes, discrimination and sexist violence against females.¹³ Representations and social logics in terms of seduction and sexual desire

operate in gender social relations and account for violence sexual abuse suffered particularly by adolescent girls. The connotation of the concept of violence and more precisely of sexual violence is recent with the advent of ideas of equality, justice, recognition and exercise of rights¹⁴. The sexual violence noted in the participants' speeches underlines an effect of trivialization by men and women of sexual and reproductive rights relating to the prior consent of the partner before any sexual act¹⁵. These are strategies of seduction and therefore recurring "ordinary violence" between close people, violence committed by ordinary senses in ordinary contexts¹⁶.

Gender relations are often characterized by abuse of power of domination by men over women. Children are educated in this context. Each parent socializes children of the same sex as them. Comparatively, girls are educated more strictly than boys, because it is believed that a woman to be a good wife must have many qualities to later be a good wife and a good mother: "Ensure good restoration of the household, keep the house clean, be attractive in bed, and be courteous to visitors"¹⁷. This sexual socialization gives the adolescent a subordinate position and the adolescent that of superior. However, social constructions of masculinity and femininity act in sexual behavior, men impose their sexual desires to which women submit¹⁸. Thus in sexual relations the latter often uses various strategies to coerce his partner in order to satisfy his sexual desires. The interviewees' story allowed the development of a non-exhaustive typology of strategies used by men in sexual relations in Togo: solicitation of girls for domestic work, captivation of girls, offering of gifts (money or materials), use friends as accomplices, etc. A recent study showed the use of bewitchment in sexual violence among adolescent girls¹⁹. These strategies make the rape of adolescent girls recurrent.

Furthermore, relationships motivated by material expectations of adolescents find their explanation in economic precariousness and pressure from those around them (parents, friends). This transactional sexuality is the site of a role play during which one observes not only relationships of dependence between men and women²⁰ but also a vulnerability of the latter to sexual violence.

Conclusion

In Togo, the gap between social representations of sexual violence and institutional ones, illustrated by the persistence of rapes against adolescent girls and their low reporting, especially among the populations of Lavié and Tové, not only raises the question of "unofficial" norms »²¹ whose negligence slows down the positive impact of actions to combat teenage pregnancies linked to sexual violence. Taking this result into account by control policies and programs will make it possible to review communications messages aimed at populations for a change in behavior.

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