

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Gender and the Reproductive Rights of Tarok Women in Central Nigeria

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Abstract

The study investigated how unequal gender relations inhibit the attainment of women's reproductive rights. It examined whether women can choose if and when to marry, who to marry/have sex with, ability to negotiate sex with spouse, and their access to family planning. Based on theoretical orientation from gender-sexuality framework, this paper employed the qualitative research design. The main respondents were female and male of various socio-demographic groups who were engaged through in-depth interviews and focus group discussion sessions. Findings show wide scale abuses of Tarok women's reproductive rights. Most of these abuses may be traced to traditional male-centred socio-cultural structures and patriarchy that help guarantee the immunity of male violators. It is concluded that in the context of unequal gender relations and dominance of patriarchy, the attainment of women's reproductive rights is a major challenge which has profound implications for life and death (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2012; 16[1]:83-96).

Résumé

Droits de sexes et de reproduction des femmes tarok au Nigéria du centre : Cette étude a examiné comment les relations fondées sur l'inégalité des sexes entravent l'accomplissement des droits de reproduction chez les femmes. Elle a examiné si les femmes peuvent choisir de se marier et quand se marier, qui épouser /avec qui avoir des rapports sexuels / la capacité de négocier le rapport sexuel avec les époux et leur accès à la planification familiale. Cet article, qui est basé sur l'orientation théorique du cadre de sexualité fondée sur les genres, s'est servi du modèle de recherche qualitative. Les principaux interviewés étaient des femmes et des hommes venant des groupes sociodémographiques divers qui ont été engagés dans des interviews en profondeur et des sessions de discussions à groupes cible. Les résultats ont révélé une grande échelle d'abus de droits de la reproduction des femmes tarok. La plupart des ces abus peuvent être attribués aux structures socioculturelles qui sont centrées sur les hommes et le patriarcat qui assiste à l'assurance de l'immunité des violateurs. Nous avons conclu que dans le contexte des rapports des sexes inégaux et la dominance du patriarcat, la réalisation des droits de la reproduction est un défi majeur qui a des implications profondes pour la vie et la mort (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2012; 16[1]:83-96).

Keywords: Culture, Gender Relations, Patriarchy, Reproductive Health, Reproductive Rights, Sexuality and Tarok

Introduction

Reproductive rights (RR) and reproductive health (RH) continue to be topical in Nigeria because of the heavy death toll attendant on child birth. The suggested baseline estimates for maternal mortality rate at the end of 2007 is 872 per 100,000 live births.¹ While there are differences between various States of the vast Northern

Region, all of Northern Nigeria is a region of high maternal mortality.²⁻⁵ A primary reason for the carnage is the nature of gender relations and how culture, including religion, is used to deny women access to RH information and services. One unchanging cultural practice in the region is early marriage, often compelling girls, some as young as ten into marriage.^{6,7} While female subordination does not necessarily mean that the situation of every man is better than every woman's, it remains

true that men generally have greater access to scarce resources and are more valued than women. Thus, gender relations in general but especially, the definition of the identities, rights and responsibilities of women and men in relation to one another are often characterized by inequality. The pervasiveness of patriarchy in societies across Nigerian ethnic groups and indeed, Africa creates and sustains this unequal relationship. Thus, patriarchy denies women access to and control over scarce resources and decision-making. It also subjects them to male power in virtually all spheres of life including sexuality and reproductive matters.

Reproductive rights are integral to fuller realization of RH. The issue of RR goes beyond the 'pro-choice' position of supporters of legalisation of abortion to include all other areas of sexual and reproductive health and the rights of the woman as a human being to make free and informed choices. Reproductive rights are thus, human rights in relation to sexual reproduction. These rights are already recognized in national laws, international human rights instruments, and other consensus documents.⁸ Some of them are: the Right to Life, Liberty and Security; the Right to be Free from Gender Discrimination; the Right to Modify Customs that Discriminate Against Women; the Right to Marry and Found a Family; the Right to Decide the Number and Spacing of Children.⁹

The Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the International Convention on Population and Development (ICPD), the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Child Rights Act, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) guided most of the policies of the Nigerian government on women's RR and RH. However, the implementation of these conventions, declarations and policy instruments has remained illusive as various harmful cultural and traditional practices that constitute a violation of human rights especially women's RR, abound in Nigeria particularly at the grassroots. Examples of these practices include: female genital cutting (FGC), forced marriage, forced celibacy, rape and other violence against women, harmful child delivery practices, sexual hospitality practices,

widowhood rites most of which are degrading, widow inheritance, woman-to-woman marriage, and unfair divorce regulations.^{10,7}

The Tarok ethnic group (details below), is characterized by patriarchy and well established discriminatory and male-centred traditional institutions like most other ethnic groups in Nigeria. Set against this backdrop, this paper, part of a larger project for which data was collected in April-May, 2008 principally investigates how unequal gender relations affect the attainment and exercise of Tarok women's RR. It examines specifically:

- a) whether they have a choice of marital status,
- b) if they can choose their spouse or who to have sex with,
- c) women's ability to negotiate sex with their spouse,
- d) women's rights to reproductive decision-making with reference to family planning.

In what follows, we first describe Tarok women's social setting after which we review some related literature and outline the study methodology. The research findings are next presented and discussed. It is concluded that the situation of the Tarok women is one of gender based disadvantage all through life.

Tarok Women and their Social Milieu

The Tarok constitutes the predominant ethnic group in Langtang North and Langtang South Local Government Areas (LGAs) located in the lowland Southern Senatorial District of Plateau State, Central Nigeria. Together, the two LGAs occupy a total land mass of about 2,476 square kilometres and have a total population of 246,948.¹¹ They are bordered by Kanke LGA to the North West, Kanam LGA to the North East, Wase to the East, Shendam to the West, and Taraba State to the South.

Tarok men and women are traditionally agriculturalists who cultivate several kinds of cereal like guinea corn (*Sorghum Bicolour*), millet (*Pennisetum Americanum*) and benneseed. They also keep some livestock such as goats and sheep while horses and some dwarf cows are reserved for the well-off. Men, women and grown up children all take active part in farming while cattle

herding is exclusively by boys or young men. Some of the men combine farming with hunting (especially in the dry season) and others engage in artisanal trades like blacksmithing, woodcarving, and weaving. Certain aspects of masonry such as plastering and flooring of houses, pot making, fetching firewood and water, cooking and brewing of local beer made from guinea corn or millet (*nce/burukutu*) are done exclusively by women. Weekly markets which are fora for buying and selling as well as intense social activities are held in the communities that host the various district headquarters.

The dominant religions in Tarok land are traditional religion and Christianity; there are a few Muslims especially in Gani area close to Wase town, in an LGA of the same name. The traditional religion of the Tarok is characterised by the belief in a supreme being and the worship of the spirits of deceased ancestors through *orim* and *icir* cults.¹² The activities of *orim* cult are strictly kept secret from women and uninitiated men, and any betrayal of this attracts extreme penalties including death. *Orim* which is the highest institution of social control is exclusive to men who often use it as a ready instrument to control and subdue women. Traditional religious celebrations, rituals, and markets are incomplete without locally brewed beer. Traditionally, consumption of this beer is commonplace among men, women and some children.

In the early 20th century, early Christian missionaries of the Sudan United Mission (SUM) an international and interdenominational Mission which comprised various protestant missionaries from Britain, United States of America, Netherlands, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand arrived Tarok land.^{12,13} The missionaries brought Western education and medical services. The Tarok people embraced Western education and many on completion sought paid employment in the large urban centres. They have taken to several careers but made the most impact in the Nigerian Armed forces. Many Tarok families have either serving or retired military personnel. Military career seems to fit the traditional values of bravery and valour among Tarok men and women.

The Tarok are organised around patriarchal system. Juridical rights over children however, rest in their maternal uncle or grand uncle (*ukyan*). They practice strict lineage exogamy and traditionally, marriage is mostly polygynous with patrilocal mode of residence with each uterine family having a separate hut. This patrilocal residential pattern often implies that authority, control and inheritance lie with the male head of the family. Traditional forms of marriage in Tarok land include (1) marriage by elopement (*ivang kebar*); (2) marriage by abduction;^{14,13} (3) giving a woman out in marriage to compensate for damages caused by her family^{14,15} or an arranged marriage either between the groom and the girl's grand/maternal uncle or between the groom and latter's maternal grandfather often without the girl's consent or the usual marriage rites (*ivang nzok/nzok ucar*); and (4) widow inheritance (*Ntem akup*).

The role of grand/maternal uncle in marriage

After the birth of a child, its biological father is expected to take one or two goats or any other culturally prescribed item to one of his wife's maternal or grand maternal uncles who exercises legal rights over the child in order to formally claim her/him. This payment is referred to as *nkamshi*. However, most biological fathers prefer to "redeem" only sons while daughters remain under their maternal uncles who thus, have the legitimate right to their bride wealth and labour services. Some of the reasons for this are: (1) daughters are generally regarded as less economically productive than sons; and (2) the general belief that daughters will transit to their husbands' homes. Consequently, girls remain under the authority of their grand/maternal uncle except in very rare cases when the latter may be generous enough to surrender his right over any of the female children to her biological father. Thus, in most cases, a selected grand/maternal uncle (rather than the girl's biological father), is entitled to the bride wealth and the labour service of the groom. Some of the implications of these prevailing gender-based traditional social and cultural practices for Tarok women's RR and RH are the focus of this paper.

Literature on Reproductive Rights in Nigeria

The 2001 National Reproductive Health Policy and Strategy to Achieve Reproductive and Sexual Health for All Nigerians¹⁶ identified some harmful practices which are common in traditional settings in Nigeria. In addition to widespread discriminatory upbringing and socialisation of girls and boys (to the disadvantage of the girls), poor nutritional status of the girl child from birth, and gender-based violence against women are forms of harmful practices and RR abuses. It proffered how to curb these practices through the policy declaration, but the Nigerian Government at all three tiers (central, state and local), has done very little in the implementation of this and other related policies to improve women's RR and RH.

Domestic violence against women, high bride wealth, the use of women as essentially "farm tools" were identified by Alubo,¹⁷ as harmful practices that negatively affect women's RR and RH. Also, in their analysis of sexual behaviour among the Yoruba, Jegede and Odumosu¹⁸ documented some of the social cultural factors that contribute to placing Yoruba girls at risk of reproductive ill-health two of which are: arranged marriage (because these encourage early marriage and multiple sexual relationships) and poverty which forces parents/guardians to give out their daughters early in marriage. Similarly Makinwa-Adebusoye⁷ showed that gender power relations which tend to favour men especially in patriarchal societies expose adolescent girls to forced early marriage and impact negatively on them by heightening their vulnerability to reproductive ill-health through large spousal age gaps, little or no inter-spousal communication between young women and their much older husbands, and the risk of HIV infection from husbands who more often than not, have multiple sexual partners.

In his study of marriage customs among the Tarok, Fazing¹⁴ documented that women's consent is important only in marriage by elopement which often involves courtship and multiple suitors. Galam¹⁵ equally discussed Tarok courtship and marriage and explained the processes used by young Tarok women to choose who to marry during courtship. The author indirectly addressed aspects of women's RR by discussing denial of the brides' consent in other forms of traditional Tarok marriages besides marriage by elopement. These

studies however, did not directly link unequal gender relations with women's RR.

Theoretical Orientation

The gender-sexuality framework explains the various dimensions of sexual attitudes and behaviours and the differences in gender power dynamics. It perceives sexual and RH outcomes as directly influenced by interpersonal power relations. Dixon-Mueller¹⁹, a major proponent of this model identified four interrelated dimensions of sexuality that reflect the social organization of gender differences in any given society: 1) Sexual partnerships (the number, timing, social identity, choice and conditions of change of sexual partners); 2) Sexual acts (the nature, choice, frequency and condition of choice of specific sexual practices/acts); 3) Sexual meanings (the subjective cultural meaning of femininity and masculinity expressed in sexual norms and ideologies); and 4) The level of sexual drives and enjoyment of individuals.

The theory provides for a socio-cultural explanation of sexuality and demonstrates how social agents construct concepts of sexuality and gender and how sexuality is socially organised along gender dimensions. It explains that rather than being an emotionally neutral act, "as a biological concept transposed by culture, sexuality becomes a social product, that is, a representation and interpretation of natural functions in hierarchical social relationships."¹⁹ It explains how a woman's lack of control over the various dimensions of sexuality makes her vulnerable to abuses of her reproductive rights. Finally, Dixon-Mueller¹⁹ links each of the identified dimensions of sexuality to the larger social system and asserts that the presence of "double-standard in virtually every society" is a reflection of the "structural and ideological forces, power and resource imbalances" that deprive girls and women the ability to determine their sexual and reproductive lives as individuals.

Methods

A qualitative research method was utilized in conducting the study which was carried out in four Tarok communities in Langtang North Local Government Area of Plateau State in Central

Nigeria, namely:- Langtang, Gazum, Reak and Pilgani. In-depth interviews and focus group discussion were the two major instruments used for data collection. In-depth interview (IDI) respondents included community, religious, and opinion leaders as well as senior modern health service providers while focus group discussions (FGD) consisted of female, male and youth participants all with a good knowledge of the mores, social norms, workings, and practices of the community in relation to issues of interest. These were purposively selected with the assistance of the research assistants drawn from three of the four communities who arranged initial meetings and liaised between the researcher and would-be-respondents in each of the communities. Four IDIs and six FGDs were conducted in each community, three each for men and women. To ensure homogeneity, the FGDs were constituted based on age, educational and marital status among other socio-demographic factors. Youth groups of different socio-demographic background were also part of the study sample. The opinions of this class of respondents some of who were sexually active varied from those of the older respondents and thus, enriched the data. The respondents were females and males aged 15 years and above, mostly married with a few unmarried women and youth. This is because sexual and reproductive matters are largely discussed within marriage setting in most Nigerian societies. They were Christians with very few male animists. Virtually all of them were involved in one form of farming activity or another, while a few combine this with paid employment and petty trading. Less than half of the respondents reported having completed secondary education and far less than that, tertiary education.

Two experienced research assistants and a retired professional Hausa/English teacher all Tarok who were fluent in Tarok, Hausa and English languages were recruited and given adequate training on the study objectives and field work procedures and expectations. Interviews and discussions were conducted in Tarok, Hausa and English languages and auto-recorded. The principal researcher and all three research assistants were involved in data gathering, transcription and translation of data into English

language as well as in the examination and coding of key variables in relation to the issues and themes covered by the research instruments

Thereafter, results were written from translated texts, coded master sheets, and researchers' memos to ensure that reported responses were contextual. Some of the findings with contextual connotations were reported verbatim, most were summarized and others that were not so relevant to the study objective were left out. Reported findings were then compared with those of previous studies on similar issues and discussed.

Major Findings

Several issues characterize Tarok women's RR and extent of violation. Of immediate relevance here are types of marriage; choice of spouse; ability to negotiate sex and access to family planning. These issues are briefly discussed.

Types of Marriage

Two major types of marriage exist in Tarok land: traditional and Christian.

Traditional marriage

Traditional marriage could be further divided into: marriage by elopement, marriage by abduction, *nzok* marriage, and widow inheritance. Each type has separate dynamics and exhibits different dimensions about the nature of Tarok women's RR. There are however many forms such as the following:

- i). *Marriage by elopement*: In this form of traditional marriage, the man initiates a relationship and proposes to the girl. He is expected to provide labour service on the farm of her maternal uncle and her parents for two to three cropping seasons as well as construct traditional round huts. Since a girl would usually have more than a suitor at a time and they all provide the gifts and non-refundable labour services, she is free to choose which of them she loves most. She could then secretly ask him to bring a special hand woven blanket (*agwodo*) and special hoes exchanged at Tarok

marriages (*adir*). When these gifts have been delivered, she then elopes with him leaving behind the gift items in her room as an indication to her parents that she has eloped with her groom. Elopement is usually with the girls' consent. As the majority of respondents said, elopement occurs variously because of: shyness or modesty on the part of a girl, and/or fear of her parents' disapproval. However, with the advent of Christianity, the practice is now frowned upon.

- ii). *Marriage by abduction*: This form of marriage is different from elopement in the sense that the girl's consent is not sought. Instead, she is forcefully abducted by the suitor's friends and taken to his house. There was consensus among respondents that marriage by abduction is still a relatively common practice in Tarok land. Abduction may take several forms but share the common characteristic of denial of the young woman's right to consent. The following statement gives a clear description of this form of marriage:

Traditionally, nothing like *nab igwar* (traditional marriage rites) and so on. If today today I see a girl like my sister here (pointing at the young female research assistant), and I like her, I can arrange with my friends and take her to my house today today before other traditional demands will be made... Up till today, it is still happening in villages, deep deep villages because it is being abolished in towns ... What they do is to run away if they don't like him, even if they have a child for the man. They can take her today, lock her, you know they can't allow her to stay free like that so she doesn't run away, so they have to lock her for some time. But the very day after they took her, they have to send some people to inform her parents of what they have done ... You don't have to start by approaching the girl because she may refuse because she doesn't know you so the capturing of the girl has to be done first... you plan with some other persons to capture her {FGD, 30-39, Male, Educated, Gani District, Urban}.

Abduction persists because the traditional structures sanction the practice whereby the man simply "captures" a wife without

presenting himself for her consideration. In this way he is saved from the possibility of being rejected but still achieves his ambition. Respondents enumerated the major reasons for this form of marriage as: fear on the part of the man that the girl may reject his proposal; the girl's actual refusal to marry him; and men's superior physical strength as illustrated by the following statement:

... The girl will be crying and if she insists and she wants to run, they will beat her and get the hell out of her... When they capture her and she knows she is not going, she doesn't like that man, she will say '*oremifa! Oremifa!! Leave me! Leave me alone!!*' They will say '*irebukat nzhi vata sai buga!*' (We will not leave you, that house you must go!). Leave me alone *mamingakat!* (I'm not going!). They will *nim* (beat) her, they will beat her very well and she will cry, they can even break one of her hand(s)... {FGD, 15-24, Female, Educated, Langtang District, Urban}

- iii) "*Poor Marriage*": Here, very poor fathers or maternal uncles give their daughters/nieces out in marriage (with or without the girl's consent) to wealthy married men mainly because of the material benefit they stand to gain. In this form of marriage, the man (groom) also arranges for the girl's abduction and provides the normal bride wealth. "Poor marriage" was explained thus:

... If the family of the girl are (is) poor, they know they cannot sponsor that girl to school, they cannot do anything for her so if that rich man loves the girl he will come and say 'I love this girl' and they know that definitely that is where they will get something, they will give him the girl... She will be willing to go because she knows that in the house, there's nothing for her and if she goes there she knows that the man is rich ... that the man will be bringing money and food items to them (her parents) {FGD, 15-24, Female, Educated, Langtang District, Urban}.

Only a minority of respondents mentioned this form of marriage which according to them is a relatively recent practice connected to the introduction of cash economy. This form of marriage usually involves elderly men and

innocent teenage girls whose consent is not considered relevant.

iv) *Nzok marriage*: Closely linked with “poor marriage” described above is *nzok* marriage. It is devoid of the normal requirements of labour service and bride wealth. It is a simple form of marriage generally contracted between a girl’s maternal grandfather and a mature groom usually without the involvement of a maternal uncle (*ukyan*) and without the girl’s consent. This is because daughters usually given out in *nzok* marriage are illegitimate children, born out of wedlock that naturally come under the exclusive control of their maternal grandfathers. Opinions of respondents on the nature of *nzok* marriage differed significantly. For instance, some respondents reported that it is usually a gesture of goodwill from the maternal grandfather of the offspring of an unmarried young woman to a man who ordinarily cannot afford the customary bride wealth. Others said it is usually contracted exclusively between the bride’s father and the groom irrespective of the legitimate status of the bride. Despite the different opinions on the reason for *nzok* marriage, three common features that seem to characterize all *nzok* marriages are: (1) they are cheap to contract; (2) they are generally devoid of *nkamshi* since they confer legal rights over the offspring of the marriage to their biological father; (3) this form of marriage does not command the same respect as other traditional types of marriage and it is not very common. The basis for this form of marriage is poverty on the side of the groom and goodwill from the bride’s maternal grandfather.

v) *Widow inheritance (ntem akup)*: This form of marriage compels a widow to marry any male member of her deceased husband’s extended family who is willing to take care of her and the children. She is however, highly restricted to her deceased husband’s agnatic brothers to ensure the security of her children and to sustain the relationship created through procreation. In other words, a widow who has children cannot choose any man she loves outside her deceased husband’s family for fear of repercussions as such an act often leads to

severe sanctions from her in-laws as well as serious conflict between the two families, lineages, or clans. On completion of the official mourning period (*nce-orim* ceremony), elderly members of the deceased man’s family would call his widows and ask each one which of their brothers-in-law they would like as husband. Although each of them is allowed to make her “choice” from all the eligible men, her brothers-in-law on the other hand are not obliged to accept to marry her and can choose not to accept the proposal. It is only if they all reject her or if the widow is childless that she is free to marry outside her deceased husband’s family. Whichever of her brothers-in-law accepts to marry her is legally recognised as both her husband and as the social (*pater*) and biological father of the offspring of the marriage. A major reason adduced for widow inheritance is to guarantee social protection for the woman and ultimately for the children.

Christian marriage

The inexpensive nature of *nzok* marriage which is generally devoid of *nkamshi*, explains why the early Christian missionaries found it suitable to their Christian values and therefore adapted it and made it the standard Christian marriage in Tarok land. As explained by a key Christian leader respondent:

When the *Bature* (white men) came they were trying to find out which marriage will suite that of Christianity, and in Tarok land, there’s a marriage called *nzok*. That *nzok*, you present twelve goats before you marry her. If you marry her there’s no question of *kau* (maternal uncle), nothing like *kau*. He will not have anything to do with the marriage. If you are blessed with children they are yours, the *kau* will not have anything to do because you’ve paid everything... the early missionaries ... turned it to payment of money. It started with three Pounds. Presently we pay N6,000.00. That is the dowry (bride wealth) as replacement for 12 goats. It has to be reviewed upwards. It is not realistic because even one goat today is well over N6,000.00. We are still doing something about it ... It is a token between the parents of the girl and

the parents of the boy... they come to the pastor to pay the dowry (bride wealth). It is fixed at N6,000.00 {IDI, Male, 62, Educated, Langtang District, Urban}

Although emphasis was placed on the relatively low bride wealth that distinguishes Christian from traditional marriage by all the Christian respondents, the main difference however, lies in the fact that the former is blessed in Church and not in the value of material exchange. This is because fulfilling traditional marriage customs is a prior condition for Christian marriage. Furthermore, majority of the Christian respondents mentioned that formal introduction (known as *ngyia*) is particularly important in Christian marriage because it explicitly demonstrates the importance of the consent of both parties and their parents. Formal introduction has become a basic requirement for marriage by native law and custom that is a precondition for Christian wedding.

Choice of Marital Status

Marriage is seen as the appropriate passport to child bearing and every Tarok person is expected to marry and procreate. Marriage is also regarded as a duty as everyone must be part of propagation; this general position is clearly expressed by a respondent thus, "All are expected to marry. It is an abomination for a Tarok man or woman not to marry". The Majority of the respondents indicated that any mature man or woman who is not married faces intense social pressure from the community that believes so much in procreation. For purpose of social respectability and to be seen as making a contribution to propagation, Tarok women (and men) have little choice over whether or not to marry.

Choice of Who to Have Sex with

Respondents generally associated sex with marriage. The cultural norm is that women remain virgins until marriage and men too are expected to avoid sex. However, while there are sanctions against women who break the cultural norm, young men who indulge in sex are overlooked. Some men even initiate sex with potential wives

during courtship. Thus discussion on a woman's ability to choose whom to have sex with was tied to marriage and because many marriages (apart from Christian marriages and marriage by elopement) defy a woman's right to choose who to marry, they equally defy her right to choose whom to have sex with. As discussed earlier, it is socially accepted in many cases for sexual intercourse to precede payment of bride wealth including provision of labour services (in kind or cash) to the bride's family. Thus, many young women are violated and raped by men under the guise of marriage and thus compelling women to have multiple partners when courtship breaks down. Typically during courtship, the young girl visits the potential groom and "She has no option because once she spends a night or two in the man's house, he will sleep with her so whether she likes it or not she becomes his wife. She has no option" {FGD, 50-59, Male, Educated, Langtang District, Urban}.

In many instances, mere attraction is enough, the man who is attracted to the girl can arrange for her abduction and coerced sex. A respondent expresses this clearly:

...Can you imagine, sometimes in the market if the woman is in the market maybe I'm passing by and I see her physical appearance or whatever, then I can say '*kai!* I love this girl oh!!' I organize with my people, they take her home for me that's all ... certainly once she is brought to your house, you have to marry her ... the first day she may tend to resist but ... she is a lone fighter. She is the only one fighting against a battalion. Do you think she will succeed? No. Then they quickly send a message to the family of the girl that em... that girl that is lost is in our house. You understand? They are covering up their wrongful act by sending a message... so the girl ends up marrying the man... sometimes some of them later run away from the man's house {IDI, 51, Male, Educated, Langtang District, Urban}

Another form of forced sex or rape that is not directly related to marriage happens under the guise of an extremely cordial and convivial relationship between specific clans in Tarok land and between the Tarok and some other ethnic groups in central Nigeria like the Igalla, Idoma and Jukun (referred to as *ijam*). Although no

information on the history and reason behind this practice, two very important features relevant to this study are: first, there is hardly any limit to this conviviality. Second, women are often the victims of such geniality. A male member of clan A for instance, that has an *ijam* relationship with clan B, is socially permitted to force a female member of clan B (married or unmarried) to have sex with him even in the presence of her husband and it would merely be regarded as an expression of cordiality. A traditional religious priest expressed the nature of *ijam* relationship and the people's attitude to it thus: For instance... someone from my *ijam* can come and catch my goat and take it home without any problem... even my own wife. If he likes her, he can come and take her and sleep with her in my presence and nobody will do anything to him, even my daughter.

The general belief among male respondents was that women enjoyed this form of sexual act simply because the men involved were playmates to their husbands or fathers. Most women respondents who discussed this practice however expressed their disgust for it and the fact that as women, they had no option but to accept their predicament. Interestingly some women were too shy to talk about it. Others however, expressed a feeling of apathy, while many urban respondents were of the opinion that such an extreme form of conviviality no longer exists. All categories of respondents however, unanimously reported the high rate of indiscriminate sexual activities among unmarried Tarok boys and girls in modern times.

Women's Ability to Negotiate Sex with Their Spouse

The general consensus was that a woman cannot negotiate sex with her husband. She cannot refuse his sexual advances neither can she tell him when it is safe for her, when it is suitable to, or when she wants to have sex with him. Decision-making in sexual matters was portrayed as the man's exclusive right. A husband is equally perceived (by male and female respondents, young and old alike), to have the right to compel his wife to give-in to his sexual demands even if it means beating her up, and he will go scot-free because he paid

her bride wealth. An example of this perception was expressed thus:

She does not have the right to refuse her husband. Why did she agree to marry him in the first place, her refusal can even make the man suspect her of extra marital affairs so she has to give him... *wetin* she come find for the man house (meaning sex is recognized as a primary reason for marriage) ... he paid her dowry (bride wealth) for that *now!* {FGD, 30-35, Female, Primary, Langtang District, Urban}

A minority of the respondents however said that in modern times, some dauntless women defy threats and beating from their husbands or *orim* (male dominated institution of social control) and insist on not having sex for various reasons which can be summarized as: anger and bitterness, tiredness, inadequate care from their husbands for themselves and their children, poor feeding, birth spacing and lactation.

The lack of choice also pertains to safe sex in general and to condom use in particular. Condom use was generally associated with casual sex or extra-marital affairs to prevent sexually transmitted infections (STIs). It was reported by younger women that most married women cannot discuss the use of condom with their husbands as a preventive for STIs for fear of being beaten by the latter who may either interpret it to mean that they (the husbands) are being accused of infidelity or that their wives are "getting too exposed to sexual matters outside the home." This often implies accusation of female infidelity on the part of men. This means that even women who may have information about their spouses' extra marital sexual activities are afraid to suggest the use of condom. Some younger respondents however mentioned that some educated married couples willingly use condom as a family planning (FP) method.

Women's Rights to Decision-making on the Number of Children to Give Birth to, Child Spacing, and Family Planning Method

According to all the respondents, just like negotiation of sex, decision making about the number of children was not an issue in the past. On the contrary, women according to older

respondents, gave birth until “they had exhausted the eggs in their ovaries” or simply, until they became too old to give birth. Child spacing, according to majority of the respondents, was mostly done naturally through prolonged breastfeeding (from birth until the child walked) and abstinence notwithstanding the desire of virtually every couple to have a large family. The two major reasons proffered for the desire for large families are (1) the number of offspring a man had (especially sons) served as a yardstick for measuring his strength, status and wealth in the community; (2) sons also accorded their mothers some level of respect and guaranteed their future in their husbands’ home. Women who have many sons are protected from sudden divorce as well as have a source of labour. The same is not true if a woman has only daughters or is childless.

There was however some consensus that although young couples in these modern times do not decide on the number of children to have as children are still largely perceived as blessings from God, increasing number of young women (particularly educated Christians who live in towns, who earn salary. and who are in monogamous marriage), now employ modern FP methods of child spacing. They no longer rely on prolonged breastfeeding and abstinence as practiced in the past. Concern for the education of their children and the prevailing harsh socio-economic environment reportedly compel young women to space their children through the use of modern FP methods. However, many of the older male and female respondents expressed their disgust with the current practice of FP and the refusal of some women to give birth to all the children bestowed from God despite the fact that most of this category of respondents equally appreciated the prevailing harsh economic conditions. Similarly, some respondents explained why some men deny women access to available modern FP methods. First, the general perception by members of the community that women who use FP methods are loose or wayward based on the belief that a woman’s temporary inability to become pregnant predisposes her to promiscuity. Second the belief that FP causes illness and infertility in women and third, the belief that contraceptives can poison breast milk.

All the health care providers in the various communities mentioned that only a few enlightened men encourage their wives to access modern FP services. Men’s disapproval according to them is also partly responsible for women’s preference for injectables especially Depo Provera® and Noristerat® in all the communities studied because the method can easily be hidden from their spouse:

They prefer injectables like Depo and Noristerat...you’ll see them seated quietly without talking to anyone except those they are very familiar with ... those they can tell secretly because they want to have it secret. Some of them come without the knowledge of their husbands... {IDI, 45, Female, Educated, Gani District, Urban} A minority of elderly women and male respondents strongly objected to the idea of joint decision-making by a couple in family matters including RH. For them, the man is the head and should not compromise his position. The woman has no choice but simply to obey because it is the man who bears the family responsibility of providing basic needs and paying children’s school fees.

Contrary to the opinion expressed above, most young and educated female respondents defended women’s action of engaging in secret FP practices and blamed it on men’s lack of understanding of the stress associated with pregnancy and child birth, male negligence, husbands’ attraction for young girl friends and involvement in extra-marital affairs, general economic hardship, and men’s increasing inability to care for the family which has resulted in increased economic hardships for women:

Here, all responsibility ... I will say all, all responsibilities are on women. The men do not care for their wives. They will never never buy you pant. His own is just to impregnate you and leave you with the pregnancy. Only a few are assisting women in training and educating their kids. For majority, once you’re pregnant, you’re pregnant. From child bearing to whatever level of education your child attains, for some men it is not their lookout. So a woman has rights to take her decision to control the number of children she gives birth to... some do it secretly without the

men knowing {FGD, 50-55, Female, Educated, Bwarat District, Rural}.

A minority of respondents however mentioned that ill-health could sometimes cause a husband to allow his wife to access FP services and that such situations often result in these husbands marrying younger wives with prospects of child bearing. Overall responses indicated that more educated and urban based young Christian Tarok women use FP services with the consent of their husbands compared to the uneducated, and that many women seek clandestine FP services for fear of their husbands' disapproval. This according to them is mainly because many people associate FP with female immorality, illness, infertility, and poisoning of breast milk during lactation which is believed to be harmful to breastfeeding infants.

Discussion

The reproductive rights of many Tarok women are violated due to prevailing male superiority and male centred structures that characterize Tarok ethnic group. Male interest in reproductive matters is placed over and above those of women and unequal gender relations inhibit the realization of women's RR and RH as espoused by the gender-sexuality framework which informed this study. As the findings clearly indicate, the men can always assert themselves and achieve their goals, but not the women. Traditionally, many women (especially in rural communities), are compelled to marry men they may not love. Even those who are able to marry men of their choice can hardly express this choice for fear of their parents' disapproval. The only option open to them is to elope with the men of their choice. Forced marriage and rape are major causes of "divorce" and unsafe abortion among many young women and suicide in some extreme cases. Others would abandon the offspring of forced marriage and abscond with men of their choice. Furthermore, most young women married to wealthy elderly men do so primarily because of the material benefits that will accrue to the members of their natal family and in fulfillment of societal perception of them as self sacrificing^{20,21} and not necessarily out of genuine love for the men. Men benefit directly from this practice hence, as gate

keepers of cultural norms and practices, they make it appear normal and women are encouraged to accept these abuses from men and avoid prospects of scandal and stigma in the face-to-face interpersonal relationships of everyday.²² Furthermore, widows are only at liberty to marry outside their late husbands' patrilineage if they are rejected by all eligible men in their marital home. The practice of widow inheritance in many cases does not respect women's reproductive rights because not only does it limit their choice to agnatic brothers of their deceased husbands, the final choice actually rests in the men who may accept or reject women's proposal.

Women are not expected to negotiate sex with their spouses because these rights are culturally subsumed under their perceived obligation to fulfill men's right to sexual pleasure which is directly linked to the latter's obligation to the payment of bride wealth.^{17,23,24} Findings reveal that a few married women at the grassroots who attempt to exercise their right to negotiate sex with their male spouses for cogent family reasons, are labelled "stubborn" and they risk facing the wrath of the much dreaded *orim*. Only urban-based educated Christian women who are convinced that they are outside the purview of *orim* dare exercise their right to negotiate sex. Even this class of women stands the risk of facing other consequences for their action from their male spouses as earlier documented.²⁵ Besides, even when sexual encounters between men and women involve a process of negotiation (whether implicit or explicit) many women do this from a disadvantaged position and are therefore constrained to do men's biddings.^{15,6}

Typically, a Tarok man does not consult his wife before taking any decision including decision on reproductive matters. He informs her after the decision has been made because it is believed that the woman could frustrate his plans if consulted. And because of the low level of acceptance of modern FP methods by men¹⁸ and elderly women (out of fear that it would lead to female promiscuity and certain illnesses in women), many young women do not only consult FP service providers in secret but also opt for methods that can be concealed from their male spouses¹⁷ which confirms the theoretical framework. Women's

poor access to reproductive decision-making poses much threat to their RR and RH because in contrast to men, women's ability to maximize their health and autonomy is largely determined by their capacity to determine the nature of their reproductive lives.^{27,21,19} While economic and educational status of women is a major determinant of their ability to exercise their RR, early marriage that characterises many rural communities limits this and keeps women in perpetual bondage.

The major barriers to women's RR are: resilient and conservative traditional beliefs and practices, poor or lack of female education, poverty and women's poor economic base, sex stereotypes, women's generally poor access to family decision making, the nature of women's socialisation, fear of male violence especially the much dreaded male controlled *orim*, experience of shame and fear of stigma, forced/early marriage, marriage and payment of bride wealth. These confirm the theory used for the study that argued that the organization of gender relations in any society is a key determinant of sexual and reproductive health.¹⁹ Other socio-cultural factors found to denigrate women are: perceptions about infertility and women, poor male responsibility in reproductive matters, male child preference, polygyny and multiple sex partners, non-availability of and poor access to RH facilities,¹ ignorance of the value of modern maternal health care services and user-fees. Some of these were earlier documented.^{2,7,28-33}

Although some young Tarok women especially those in rural areas are still defenseless against different forms of forced marriage, with increasing education, modernization and Christianity, many young women are now better informed. They are therefore increasingly being allowed to choose their husbands, take part in formal introduction (*ngyia*) and marriage ceremony, some secretly patronize modern FP service providers and obtain methods that can be concealed from their spouse. Furthermore, with increasing access to formal and informal education, more Tarok men enter into courtship with their would-be-bridle and value the consent of the latter. More Tarok men also encourage their pregnant wives to attend antenatal care and health

facilities for delivery. Thus, there is a visible pull between tradition and modernity in Tarok land as in most parts of the developing world.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The life of the Tarok woman is blighted by the pervasiveness of patriarchal attitudes in practically every sphere. Tarok women are disadvantaged vis-à-vis their male counterparts, virtually from birth: she is less valued at birth as there is a preference for the male child; she goes through a socialization process where she is taught to accept a subordinate status and she may have little say who to marry and access to family planning; the average uneducated Tarok woman generally lacks control over her body and does not participate in decision making; neither does she control vital resources like labour and farm produce.¹⁷ This situation therefore forces her to remain dependent on her male spouse for most needs. She is compelled to go through a life cycle of discrimination compounded by difficulties and challenges that act collectively to deny her access to basic rights and opportunities.

In relation to the findings above, the following recommendations are advanced as strategies for promoting the attainment of women's reproductive rights:

Adequate infrastructure to be put in place by government in very remote communities to encourage girl-child education up to senior school certificate level. This will delay marriage among young girls and serve as a means towards empowering women as education holds the key to more rapid improvement of RR and RH since abstract rights and declarations make little meaning in a context of pervasive gender inequality. Local government should pass bye-laws to discourage marriages between elderly men and young girls and set up machinery at community level to enforce same. Civil society groups working in the areas of gender and human rights, reproductive and sexual health, health education, etc. could use information such as those contained in this paper to intensify campaign for the domestication of CEDAW and to design behavior change communication (BCC) materials to sensitize and educate especially rural

communities on the negative impact of certain socio-cultural practices on reproductive rights and health such as:

- gender power relations as regards the need for women to have access to reproductive decision-making and reproductive rights;
- the dangers that male violence (including the use of *orim*) pose to women's reproductive rights and health;
- the need for parents/*okyan* to seek girls' consent in marriage and discourage all forms of forced marriages; and promotion of interpersonal communication among spouses especially on sexual and reproductive matters.
- Government should reform the criminal justice system to ensure that the rights and dignity of women are safeguarded even in marriage.
- Need for more research in the area of gender inequality and men's sexual health to deepen our comparative understanding of women and men's experiences.

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