

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Sexual Health of Prison Inmates: A Case Study of Kano Central Prison, North Western Nigeria

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## Abstract

Sexual and reproductive health of prison inmates suffers from serious neglect in Nigeria. This mixed method study examined prison officials and 160 inmates on prison law and administration, and sexual health of inmates. Most of the inmates examined (82.5%) reported having frequent sexual desire. Wet dreams (46.2%) and watching others' nakedness (25.0%) were the common means by which inmates manifest sexual desire. Majority relieve sexual desire through anal sex (72.0%) and masturbation (69.7%). Common forms of sexual violence observed include forceful fondling with genitalia (47.4%) and forceful insertion of finger/object in the anus (21.0%) in males and rape (15.8%) in females. All victims were younger inmates (18 – 34 years). There is a need for legislation on sexual violence and exploring the practice of conjugal visits or furloughs as practiced in some countries. (*Afr J Reprod Health 2016; 20[1]: 98-103*).

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**Keywords:** Sexual Health, Sexual Violence, Prison Inmates, Kano Central Prison, Nigeria.

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## Résumé

La santé sexuelle et de la reproduction des prisonniers souffre de négligence grave au Nigeria. Il est nécessaire de réviser la loi de la prison pour inclure la santé sexuelle. Cette étude à méthode mixte est basée sur les responsables des prisons, 160 prisonniers et sur le droit et l'administration pénitentiaire, et sur la santé sexuelle des prisonniers. La plupart des prisonniers interrogés (82,5%) ont déclaré avoir fréquemment le désir sexuel. Avoir les rêves humides (46,2%) et regarder la nudité des autres (25,0%) ont été les moyens communs par lesquels les prisonniers manifestent le désir sexuel. La majorité se soulagent du désir sexuel par le rapport sexuel anal (72,0%) et la masturbation (69,7%). Les formes courantes de violence sexuelle observée comprennent des attouchements de force avec des organes génitaux (47,4%) et l'insertion forcée de doigt / objet dans l'anus (21,0%) chez les hommes et le viol (15,8%) chez les femmes. Toutes les victimes étaient les plus jeunes prisonniers (18 - 34 ans). Il faut une législation sur la violence sexuelle et il faut explorer la pratique des visites conjugales ou congés c'est le cas dans certains pays. (*Afr J Reprod Health 2016; 20[1]: 98-103*).

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**Mots-clés:** Santé sexuelle, violence sexuelle, prisonniers, la Prison Centrale de Kano, au Nigeria.

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## Introduction

Although a prisoner is one who is deprived of his liberty against his will and kept in confinement or custody in a prison, penitentiary, or jail as a result of conviction of a crime<sup>1</sup>, he/she cannot be denied certain human rights. The United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and the dual United Nation Convention on Civil and Political Rights, and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1967 stated among others the right to health as inalienable from humans<sup>2,3</sup>. Thus, prisoners as humans have the right to a complete state of physical, mental and social wellbeing including the right to respond to fundamental or physiologic

urges for air, thirst, hunger, defaecation and sexual satisfaction.

Many prisoners are sexually deprived, face serious sexual health challenges and regardless of their orientation may lead degrading and dehumanizing sex life while at incarceration. Sexual deprivation exerts pressure on prisoners towards forms of consensual or nonconsensual sexual exposures. This may range from exploitive sex with prison staff or co-inmate, homosexual satisfaction of one's sexual needs to sexual abuse or victimization<sup>4-7</sup>. The effect of sexual deprivation of inmates extends beyond the four walls of the prison as the spouses or loved ones of the inmates are also sexually deprived while they await the

release of their partners<sup>8</sup>. Sexual victimization can be devastating and affect victims physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually<sup>5,7</sup>. Research suggests that rates of sexual victimization in prison may be as high as 41% or as low as 4%<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, sexually transmitted infections including HIV occur at alarming rate among inmates due to lack of access to information, unsafe sex practices and sexual victimization. Empirical evidence from Nigeria, Malawi and South Africa suggest that prisons concentrate large numbers of HIV-infected and at-risk individuals that acquired the infection before incarceration and further propagate the infection as sexual activity is the key cause of HIV infection while in the prison<sup>5</sup>.

For prisoners, sexual relief programs such as conjugal visits, furloughs or overnight leaves have been tried in parts of Europe, Mexico, Canada and few states in the U.S.A, notably Mississippi and California<sup>8</sup>. Such programs have the potential of preventing mental stress from sexual deprivation, reducing coercive sexual episodes, deviant sexual intercourse, as well as improving sexual and reproductive health of the prisoners. Furthermore, safer sexual practices and reduction in the incidence of sexually transmitted infections including HIV/AIDS are among the benefits of sexual relief among this vulnerable group. The prisons in Nigeria are regulated by the Prisons Act, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria of 1990 and interestingly no section of the document specifically deals with denial of conjugal rights to prisoners<sup>2</sup>. However, sexual deprivation is considered a form of punishment for inmates in Nigeria notwithstanding its consequences.

Sexual health of prisons is understudied in Nigeria. This study examined prisons laws and administration on sexual health of inmates, the forms in which inmates expressed sexual desires, and their perceived coping strategies for sexual urge. Findings from this study would benefit policy makers, Reproductive Health programme managers (Governmental and non-governmental), research groups and human right activists by serving as bench mark for improving the sexual health of this vulnerable group.

## Subjects and Method

This study was carried out in Kano central Prison, Nigeria. The prison had capacity for 1260 inmates

and staff strength of 190. There were 16 Cells in the male compound and 2 in the female section, and each cell accommodates an average number of 70 inmates. As at May 1, 2011 the facility was overstretched with 1,349 inmates comprising of 1,319 males and 30 females.

We used a case study approach with a concurrent mixed method of data collection to study 20 prison officials and 160 inmates in Kano Central Prison. The sample size was determined using an appropriate statistical formula for estimating minimum sample size for descriptive studies<sup>10</sup>; and 7% prevalence of women 15-49 who had ever experienced sexual violence in Nigeria<sup>11</sup>. The calculated minimum sample size was inflated by 10% to compensate for incomplete responses and non-response.

A two stage sampling technique was used to select the respondents. At first stage, considering the cells as clusters, five were randomly selected from the 16 cells in the male compound and all the two in the female section were considered. As the average number of inmates in the male's cells was 70 and the total number of female inmates was 30, the sampling frame for the males and females was thus adjudged as 350 and 30 respectively. At the second stage, by proportionate allocation of samples according to the size of sampling frames of the inmates, 147 males and 13 females were selected systematically using sampling interval 2 obtained by dividing the sampling frame with the required sample for each category.

Twenty in-depth interviews were held with different cadres of prison officials to elicit the laws operating in the prisons, how inmates manifest sexual desire, provisions for sexual satisfaction in the prison, and how cases of sexual violence are handled in the prison. Interviews progressed until saturation was achieved. Quantitative interviews were also held with the 160 selected prison inmates using a pretested semi structured self-administered questionnaire. Trained interviewers also administered the questionnaires for non-literate respondents and those that preferred interviewer administration of the tool. The tool elicited information on socio-demographic characteristics of the inmates, how sexual desire is expressed by inmates, and about coping strategies for sexual desire in the prison. The questionnaire also obtained information regarding sexual violence among the prison inmates. For the purpose of this study we considered sexual

violence as any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work<sup>12</sup>.

Informed consent was obtained from prospective respondents. Literate respondents indicated acceptance by signing the consent form, while non-literate participants affixed their thumbprint. Permission for the study was obtained from the Prisons Authority and ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethics committee of Aminu Kano Teaching Hospital. Data was collected in May and June 2012.

Data from the qualitative interviews were analysed using thematic analysis whereas quantitative data were entered into computer system and analysed using SPSS version 16. Quantitative variables were summarized using appropriate measures of location and variability, whereas categorical variables were presented as frequencies and percentages. The chi-square test was used to test for associations between categorical variables.  $P \leq 0.05$  was considered statistically significant.

## Results

### *Socio-demographic characteristics of the prison inmates*

The respondents' ages were between 18 and 76 years with a mean age of  $30.5 \pm 10$  years. The majority was in the age bracket 18 to 34 years (76.9%), males (91.9%), unmarried (65.0%), Hausa/Fulani ethnic groups (85.0%), artisans (75.0%) and those with at least secondary school level of education (62.5%) as shown in Table 1.

### *Prisons law and administration*

Qualitative interviews with the prison officials revealed that administrative procedures and behaviour of prison inmates are guided by the prison standing order and Prisons Act, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria 1990. The appropriate channel for forwarding contributions on the welfare of prison inmates reported by the officials was the prison welfare office. However, the prison guidelines or laws did not provide for incentives in form of holiday (Furloughs) for good work or

behavior of inmates, neither does it provide on issues related to sexual desires and satisfaction of the inmates, nor considered conjugal visits for inmates to satisfy their sexual desires.

**Table 1:** Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Characteristic	Frequency (%) (n = 160)
<b>Age group</b>	
15 – 24	44 (27.5)
25 – 34	79 (49.4)
35 – 44	22 (13.8)
45 – 54	9 (5.6)
55 – 64	4 (2.5)
>64	2 (1.2)
<b>Sex</b>	
Male	147 (91.9)
Female	13 (8.1)
<b>Marital status</b>	
Single	91 (56.9)
Married	56 (35.0)
Divorced	13 (8.1)
<b>Ethnicity</b>	
Hausa/ Fulani	136 (85.0)
Yoruba	5 (3.1)
Igbo	11 (6.9)
Others	8 (5.0)
<b>Educational status</b>	
No education	7 (4.4)
Qur'anic only	32 (20.0)
Primary	21 (13.1)
Secondary	71 (44.4)
Post-secondary	29 (18.1)
<b>Occupation</b>	
Civil servant	13 (8.1)
Artisanship	120 (75.0)
Studentship	22 (13.8)
Unemployed	5 (3.1)

Cases of sexual violence were being reported but there were no registered or reported evidence of such occurrences. Furthermore, the prisons Act have no provision nor prescribed punishment for perpetrators of sexual violence in the prison.

Majority of the officials interviewed considered sexual deprivation as an important part of the punishment in the prison.

### *Sexual desire and coping strategies of prison inmates*

Most of the inmates examined, 132 (82.5%) reported having sexual desire, and was described as being frequent in 69.7% of those affected. Sexual desire was more frequent among male inmates ( $X^2 = 4.31$ ,  $p = 0.04$ , O.R = 3.37, 95% C.I O.R [0.86; 12.8]) but was not associated with the inmates' age ( $X^2 = 3.35$ ,  $p = 0.19$ ) or marital status

( $X^2 = 0.27$ ,  $p = 0.6$ ). Wet dreams (46.2%) and watching others' nakedness (25.0%) were among the most reported means by which the inmates manifest their sexual desire (Table 2).

**Table 2:** Means by which Inmates Express Sexual Desire

Forms of expression	Frequency (%) (n = 132)
*Masturbation	9 (6.8)
*Watching others' nakedness	33 (25.0)
*Exposure of genitals to others	4 (3.0)
*Wet dreams	61 (46.2)

\*Multiple responses

When the respondents were asked on how they cope with sexual urge in the prison, it was observed that majority relieved their sexual urge through anal sex (72.0%) and masturbation (69.7%). The least method reported was through oral sex (1.5%) as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3:** Perceived Strategies for Relieving Sexual Desire in the Prison

Ways of satisfying sexual urge	Frequency (%) (n = 132)
*Masturbation	92 (69.7)
*Stimulating each other's genitals	42 (31.8)
*Inserting fingers/objects in each other's anus	27 (20.5)
*Inserting fingers/objects into each other's vagina	4 (3.0)
*Anal sex	95 (72.0)
*Oral sex	2 (1.5)
*Wet dreams	37 (28.0)

\*Multiple responses

### **Sexual violence among prison inmates**

Within the month preceding this study, there were 21 cases of sexual violence involving 16 victims, thus arriving at a prevalence of 10%. The forms of violence reported included: attempted anal sex 3 (14.3%), forceful insertion of finger/object in the anus 5 (23.8%), rape 3 (14.3%) or forceful fondling with genitalia 9 (42.9%). All the victims of sexual violence were younger inmates that were 15 – 34 years old. However, sexual violence was not associated with the sex of the victim ( $X^2 = 2.69$ ,  $p = 0.10$ ). Most of the inmates interviewed 135 (84.4%) reported that cases of sexual violence were reported to the prison officials.

## **Discussion**

Majority of the inmates studied were male, and expectedly they had more sexual desire than their female counterparts. Although there are several opinions as to whether the male or female has the stronger desire, sexual desire has been described as an existential need which is universal for all gender and leaves a person with an emptiness that is usually fulfilled through a desired gender<sup>13</sup>. The universality of this need was noted in this study as the desire was expressed by inmates irrespective of their age, gender or marital status. The restrictive nature of most prisons limits the options available for satisfying this crucial need and often necessitates formation of previously undeveloped or new means of satisfaction. Of such is sexual violence as was noted to be the most prevalent form of expression among the inmates studied. Other subcultures which may evolve to satisfy sexual needs include masturbation which was practiced by more than half (55.6%) of the inmates. Although this study did not explore existing partnerships among the inmates, formation of different forms of partnership over time have also been noted to characterize many prisons with the nature and extent of such partnerships depending on sex roles already developed before confinement and physical or social standings within the prison<sup>14</sup>.

The non-fulfilment of the sexual desire may culminate in sexual abuse/ violence as was noted in some of the inmates. Eleven point nine percent (n=19) of the inmates reported that they had been sexually abused at one point in time. Some experienced forceful fondling of genitalia or insertion of object into anal orifice and others attempted or actual rape.

Although the issue of sex in prison remains an underdeveloped and under researched, this study confirmed that it does occur in prisons. For non-consensual sex, inmates, whether male or female and guards often use sexual assaults to silence, oppress, or control. Although the reported frequency in this study is similar to what was reported in Oklahoma (14%)<sup>15</sup>, it is much higher than what was noted in state and federal correctional facilities in the United States of America (4.5%)<sup>16,17</sup> but lower than what was observed in some Midwestern states (22.0%) in the US<sup>18</sup>. These assaults in prisons have been

noted trigger a cascade of psychological, physiological, social and sexual problems to present with symptoms such as intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, anxiety, avoidance behavior, depression, distorted male-female relationships and interrupted eating and sleeping patterns<sup>19,20</sup>. These symptoms are often difficult to deal with in the prison environment and may continue when prisoners are released, often playing a role in reoffending<sup>18</sup>. The risk of transmission of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections are also increased during such assaults.

About a third (35.0%) of the inmates studied was married. The sexual and emotional deprivation resulting from incarceration affects not only the offending partner, but even the spouse is negatively affected and may find it difficult to retain the marriage while the partner is incarcerated, often leading to marital disharmony and divorce. Data obtained from the prison officials confirmed that the Nigerian Prison law had no provisions for temporary furloughs either to satisfy sexual desires or as a form of incentive for both married and unmarried inmates. Although there have been controversial debates on the use of conjugal visits and home furloughs<sup>20</sup>, it was noted in some prisons to have significantly lowered the rates of sexual harassment or abuse among inmates. Prisons in five states in the USA that permitted conjugal visits were studied and the rates of sexual assault and rape were fewer than prisons that prohibited conjugal visits. The researchers believed that homosexual activities which increase the spread of AIDS and sexual violence can be attenuated in prisons given appropriate policy initiatives<sup>21</sup>.

Although incarceration in Nigerian prisons is meant to be correctional, it is important that governing authorities recognize existential needs of inmates and help them to maintain a level of health that does not dehumanize them. It is intended that the findings of this study would raise awareness among stakeholders towards revising our prison laws, enacting laws against prison rape or any form of sexual victimization and exploring the practice of family visits or furloughs as practiced in some countries. The authorities of the prisons would need to train prison staff to prevent report and possibly manage sexual assaults when they occur. Future studies would aim to explore relationship patterns in prisons, the influence of

length of stay in prison on sexual orientation and identity possible effects on the spouse/family.

## Competing Interest

We (the authors) declare that we have no competing interests.

## Authors' Contribution

Umar M. Lawan is the Principal investigator, conceived the idea and lead the data analysis and report writing process. Gboluwaga T. Amole and Muhammad J. Shuaib were responsible for data collection, and participated in data analysis and report writing. All authors have met the requirement for authorship, and all have read and approved the final manuscript. The authors also believe that the manuscript represents honest work.

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