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Rethinking the Need for Comprehensive Sexuality Education in African School Contexts: A Collaborative Self-Study

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Abstract

Even though sexuality is an important aspect of humanity, talking about issues concerning sexuality is still taboo in many communities. Different religions and colonial structures banished African sexuality rituals and rites of passage in many communities because they were believed to be pagan. This wholesale erasure of sexual traditions created spaces in which the good was thrown out with the bad. That legacy has created many challenges in modern-day society, which could be addressed by comprehensive sexuality education. Therefore, a group of master's and doctoral students from contexts where sex talk is taboo were invited to join a funded project to conduct research on gender and sexuality in education. This paper presents a collaboration between the students and their supervisor in rethinking the need for comprehensive sexuality education in African contexts. A round-table discussion was used to generate data for this qualitative, critical, collaborative self-study. The findings highlight several societal challenges that provide a basis for the urgent inclusion of comprehensive sexuality education into curricula across schools and communities. We argue, from the findings, that maintaining the taboo status of sexuality issues does not

serve anyone. It is like hiding our head in the sand even as our whole body is exposed. Thus, the study has implications for teacher education and community development projects towards equitable societies with healthy sexual lives.

Keywords: comprehensive sexuality education, equity, gender-based violence, identity construction, taboos

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Introduction

Human sexuality is a highly complex phenomenon involving how we act, feel, and think (or not) sexually. It changes over time in relation to our physical body maturation and to the political economy and culture in which we live and relate to others (Weeks, 2003). It involves the interaction of nature and nurture in unpredictable and often misunderstood ways (Rubin, 1993). In most African countries, political and religious leaders frequently argue that African sexuality is distinct from Western or Arab sexuality and exists as a distinctive and singular phenomenon in ways that promote harmful stereotypes. This is because historically meaningful rites of passage and home-based culturally embedded sexuality education were largely destroyed during colonial times; the advent of colonial rule accorded more importance to formal education in contemporary African societies. Despite this, school-based sexuality and human reproductive health education are neglected and often contested as taboo subject areas (Khau, 2024). These issues highlight the need for context-specific sexuality education in schools and communities to address young people's budding sexualities and the inherent challenges.

Unequal gender norms in cis-normative patriarchal communities create challenges for women and girls whose voices are silenced, sexualities policed, and access to sexual and reproductive health and rights services denied (Epprecht, 2000; Guma, 2001). In Southern Africa, gendered traditional beliefs and customs that privilege men and boys are employed by communities to position women and girls as inferior to men and boys. This has led to an increase in the numbers of women and girls living in extreme poverty globally, with most of them living in southern Africa. In addition, environmental crises due to climate change exacerbate the challenges posed by unequal gender norms, thus increasing women and girls' vulnerability to marginalisation and gendered violence (Shepard, 2016). Poverty and marginalisation place women and girls at greater risk of unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Young women and girls are pushed to the periphery of society by the intersection of age and gender, thus positioning them at greater risk of gender and sexual violence (Wiebesiek, 2021). As children, they must respect their elders, obey them, and not challenge their demands or expectations (Khau, 2021). Patriarchy

also demands of women and girls to respect men and boys, creating a situation where they cannot challenge beliefs and rituals that negatively affect their lives. Jewkes and Morell (2011) argued that constructing women and girls as subordinate to men and boys perpetuates their disrespectful and violent treatment. It also allows men and boys to monitor women and girls' sexuality and access to sexual and reproductive health services, making them vulnerable to sexual exploitation, unwanted pregnancies, and STIs.

Cultural and religious norms construct sex, sexuality, and sexual violence as taboo subjects, thus enabling the normative silencing of victims and witnesses. This norm promotes gender and sexual violence because victims are blamed and shamed while perpetrators become irrepressible (see for example Anwar et al., 2018; Shepard, 2016; Wiebesiek, 2021). Research evidence indicates that one in every three women in the world has experienced one form of violence in her lifetime. Women and girls become easy targets of such violations because of intersecting systems of oppression and discriminations such as age, gender, geographic location, race, social class, and sexual orientation (Connell, 2005; Crenshaw, 1991; Sabik, 2021; Tamale, 2006, 2014).

Gendered power relations and patriarchal structures create spaces in which rates of gender and sexual violence, teenage pregnancies, and health problems for women and girls are high (Khau, 2021). Driving change in educational institutions and communities requires new paradigms and novel approaches for transformation. This demands new ways of being and doing, a non-linear theory of change, and paradigms related to complexity and intersectionality. It is therefore imperative for teachers and teacher educators to constantly engage in creative and innovative ways to transform learning and teaching organically and systematically towards inclusive and equal communities.

This article aims to engage in timely conversations about the role of quality education in championing health and human rights for all through sexuality education within the African continent. We aim to respond to the question: "What makes comprehensive sexuality education necessary in African school contexts?" The aim is to understand the different schooling contexts and the ways in which sexuality education could become a transformative tool such that the taboo status of sexuality can be deconstructed.

Literature

According to Connell (1997), patriarchy is characterised by male centredness, male domination, male identification, and obsession with control. Thus, it reinforces structural violence against women and girls by emphasising discriminatory gender roles that limit women and girls' capabilities and exclude them from full participation in economic and political activities. Limiting women and girls' access to resources

perpetuates male domination by enabling male superiority over females and undervaluing any qualities perceived as feminine. A key feature of patriarchy is the normalisation of male violence against females, thus positioning women and girls as vulnerable non-agentic subjects of male domination. Transforming community discourses around gender and sexual violence requires such communities to address sexuality issues in open and non-pathologising ways through comprehensive sexuality education.

Even though sexuality is a key component of humanity, its expression is forbidden, and practice demonised by communities (Khau, 2021). The taboo nature of sex and sexuality in many African communities creates fertile ground for exploitation of the powerless or the marginalised whose position is on the periphery of society (Fonner et al., 2014). Researchers have concluded that eradicating the culture of gender-based violence requires comprehensive sexuality education because that provides youth with information about their sexual and reproductive health and rights (Haberland & Rogow, 2015; UNESCO, 2018) as well as benefiting them in several ways. For example, young people who are exposed to age-appropriate and accurate knowledge of their sexual health and reproductive rights through comprehensive sexuality education tend to have a better understanding of sex and sexuality, delay sexual debut, and those who are sexually active engage in safer sexual practices (Hanass-Hancock et al., 2018). This makes it easier for young people to stay in school and complete their education (Fonner et al., 2014).

Gender-based violence is a violation of human rights based on unequal power relations and gender norms within societies. In patriarchal communities, the violations are perpetuated by hegemonic masculinities (Connell, 1987) that are the ideal form of masculinity in many communities. Although gender-based violence is mostly enacted on women and girls by men and boys, it can also be expressed on anyone in a community. Harmful gender norms in patriarchal communities drive the scourge of violence directed at women and girls, and the normalisation of violence and underlying inequalities (Jewkes & Morrell, 2011).

Gender and sexual identity constructions in communities, especially constructions of hegemonic masculinities and femininities, produce expectations that can lead to expressions of violence towards those closest to the perpetrator if they are not met. Some African cultures premise hegemonic masculinity on sexual prowess, leadership, being a provider and protector, and being emotionless. Within this construction, women and girls are seen as properties of their male relatives, thus creating a mentality of male entitlement over women and girls’ bodies (Khau, 2007). Men and boys, therefore, aspire towards these hegemonic constructions. Those who are unable to attain these masculinity constructions usually express their perceived inadequacy in violent ways.

Socially constructed norms of femininity and expectations are also produced in society regarding what it means to be a good woman or girl. Young women and girls are taught to value their virginity and give it up

as a gift to their husband upon marriage, while young men are often encouraged to engage in sexual relationships at an early age to demonstrate their manhood (Mfeka-Nkabinde et al., 2022). This double standard enables men's sexual entitlement over females, while also policing their bodies and sexualities (Khau, 2007).

The literature presented here has highlighted the challenges posed by lack of relevant and context-specific sexuality education due to the mystery that still shrouds it even today in African communities. To understand the importance of culture, tradition, and history in directing our current steps towards social change in the future, we decided to use the theory of Sankofa. This is discussed in the next section.

Theoretical Framework

We felt that the Sankofa theory was the best tool to enable us to make meaning of our data. Temple (2010, p. 128) explained that the word Sankofa is from the Akan tribe in Ghana, which comes from the saying, *se wo were fi na wosankofa a yenkyi* [it is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten/it is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind]. Other African communities have the same belief and saying, as exemplified by Sekese (2002, p. 170), who pointed out that the Basotho of Lesotho have the saying *thebe e seheloa holim'a e ngoe* [we need to fashion our daily lives on what has worked before].

Indigenous philosophies often provide solutions that enable people to reconstitute their fragmented past (Temple, 2010). They help in rethinking and reinterpreting the taboo nature of sexuality and comprehensive sexuality education in African education institutions. Using the Sankofa theory allows for an understanding and critique of society's pathologising of sex, and shaming those who talk openly about it. It helps dismantle the structures that enable the blaming of victims of sexual and gender-based violence in society by interrogating the contexts, perspectives, spaces, and systems that collude to privilege the masculine while oppressing women and girls in communities.

Felder (2019) argued that Sankofa recognises and centres the experiences of historically marginalised people in multiple contexts, and provides an opportunity to look back into history to identify the inhibitors of justice so that society can move forward with socially just ideals. Sankofa allows researchers and communities to touch base with the past, and to gain the best out of history's offerings to enable society to move forward at their full potential. Slater (2019) also pointed out that through Sankofa theory, we can reclaim and revive whatever beneficial past practices have been forgotten or lost. According to Slater (2019), Sankofa insights encourage people to understand that both the good and bad from the past have shaped who they have become—and enables them to embrace all experiences.

Sankofa theory is relevant in this article because we believe that learning from the past is the best way to move forward in terms of embracing and celebrating human sexuality with the aim of transforming "taken-for-granted ways of thinking and doing into best practices" (Hervie, 2013, p. 2). Society has created structures and discourse that pathologise sex, blame those who are open about their sexuality, shame and silence the victims of sexual and gender-based violence, and discriminate and persecute subordinate groups in society. Thus, these structures and constructs can be transformed and deconstructed by others who are willing to change their ways of being and move forward with best practices learnt from the past (Kissi, 2018).

Methodology

We decided to work qualitatively within a critical paradigm, using a collaborative self-study design. The use of collaborative self-study was intended for us to explore ways of improving our provision of sexuality education in different African countries. Self-study was described by Leedy and Omrod (2005) as an inquiry-oriented approach that is personal, reflective, collaborative, and constructivist. Samaras and Freese (2006) and LaBoskey (2004) stated that a self-study is an effective method for examining, understanding, and improving one's teaching methods and practices. We chose a collaborative self-study for our research because it offered us the promise of a professional learning strategy that could help us become better practitioners in sexuality education.

The critical paradigm was suitable for this research study because it allowed us to explore suitable strategies for changing the status quo in sexuality education. One pillar of critical worldview is that research has a reform action agenda that could change participants' lives, the institutions they live and work in, or even the researchers' lives (Taylor & Medina, 2013).

Context and Sampling

The data for this paper emanate from a bigger project titled East and South African-German Centre of Excellence for Educational Research Methodologies and Management (CERMESA), funded by the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD) with support from the Federal Foreign Office. The aim of the project was to advance and expand excellent and innovative educational research on methodologies, instruction, and management strategies for African contexts. CERMESA has four major programmes that run concurrently, namely, Research Programme, Academic Programme, Capacity Building Programme, and Teachers Professional Development Programme. Postgraduate students at master's and doctoral levels were funded to work on research in the following themes: pedagogies and

education research methodologies in African contexts, community schools and engagement for social development, education for sustainable development, languages, Indigenous knowledge, and arts.

The co-researchers and participants for the study reported in this paper were DAAD-funded master's and doctoral students from Moi University in Kenya and Nelson Mandela University in South Africa, together with their supervisor. The students came from different African countries such as Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Malawi, and Nigeria. They worked within the theme of pedagogies and education research methodologies. All of their studies had focused on gender and sexuality education because their supervisor, `Mathabo (first author), wanted to build a critical mass of scholars and educators who could address these sensitive topics. Thus, all participants were research students who had graduated with degrees in gender and sexuality education under `Mathabo's supervision. The sampling was purposive because the students had the necessary skills and information regarding the phenomenon under study (Lassonde & Strub, 2009).

Data Generation

Mathabo organised a round-table discussion with the students during the 3rd CERM-ESA International Conference held at Moi University from 2–4 October 2023, with the theme, The Future of Educational Research in African Contexts. The roundtable was aimed at bringing to the fore reflections on why sexuality education is necessary in different African contexts, foregrounding participatory and transdisciplinary approaches geared towards social change. As teacher educators and teachers, we explored spaces in which sexuality education becomes a necessity in our different teaching contexts, such that we could change the taboo notions of sex and sexuality. `Mathabo was the discussant, and the students were round-table participants. The question that guided the round-table discussion was: "What makes comprehensive sexuality education necessary in African school contexts?"

The discussion was recorded and transcribed. The transcription was analysed thematically to get an understanding of the need for sexuality education in African school contexts. The guiding question for the roundtable was used as the theme under which the data are discussed.

Data Presentation

This section presents data from the round-table discussion, based on the guiding question. Thus, the data are presented under the theme, the need for comprehensive sexuality education.

The Need for Comprehensive Sexuality Education

In discussing the need for comprehensive sexuality education in schools, the participant co-researchers argued that there is dire need for sexuality education. Simon stated that issues of sexuality were dealt with informally in the past, and the oral traditions were passed from generation to generation. He however, pointed out that there has been a lot of silence around sexuality issues in modern times due to the influence of Western colonial practices:

> With changing modern times and Westernisation, there's been a lot of silences on issues on sexuality and we have seen in education that lots of issues are hidden. So, in my perspective, I think it is important for African schools to re-think and to re-teach sexuality education even within the informal sector.

Simon added that it is important to address sexuality education in schools, especially for young learners in primary schools because they might not understand their bodies and identities. This, according to Simon, creates a challenge where the young ones become vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse:

> In one of the schools in my county, there was this young girl who was being sexually abused by her uncle. One of the teachers realised that something was wrong with the child and asked the child about her home situation. The child responded that her uncle always asks her to suck his “lollipop” when they were alone at home. When asked about the lollipop, the child said that her uncle kept it in his pants. This was painful to witness because the child was not aware that what was happening to her was abuse. The fact that she used a name that could mean something else made it difficult for adults to believe that she was being abused.

Simon also argued that the statistical evidence highlighting child sexual abuse in communities shows the importance of having comprehensive sexuality education in schools. The challenge Simon identified was:

> You know that lot of children are abused by those people who . . . you know, people who are close to them. They take advantage because the children are not aware of their sexuality. So, if maybe we teach those children issues of their sexuality and their reproductive health, we would reduce those sexual abuse cases. It would also reduce the incidence of gendered bullying of non-conforming children in schools.

Continuing the discussion was Jacob, who also argued for the importance and need of gender and sexuality education in schools. Jacob belongs to the Maasai community, and has first-hand experience of the challenges of a pastoralist community regarding issues of gender and sexuality. He highlighted that:

> When I talked to the women teachers when doing field work for my master’s degree, I found that even educated women were afraid of talking about gender and sexuality issues. They said that in

> their marriages, they are just there to procreate, to give birth, and pass customs from one generation to another. With comprehensive sexuality education, I think the women would feel free to address their sexuality as subjects of sexual pleasure not just objects.

From Jacob's discussion, one can deduce that sexuality education is important in every stage of life. The assumption in many communities is that adults know their bodies and identities, that they understand their sexual bodies. However, this is not the case. Therefore, it is crucial that comprehensive sexuality education be available for all people at the right level for their age and understanding. Looking at the phenomenon of sexuality from young children's perspective, Lily joined Simon's point of view, adding:

> We have to sensitise the learners about their bodies. We have to really teach them about their bodies such that in an event where they face issues in the community, like when Simon mentions the issue of lollipops, they know what to do. The question is: "Is it really a lollipop that you are talking about?" When these children are harassed out there by the big people or the elders, we should teach them that it is okay to come and report to their parents and their guardians and tell those who are close to them about what happened to them. We should ensure that our learners are aware that they're talking about their body. They're actually talking about what happens to them. So, it's good to protect them while they are still alive, rather than maybe . . . um . . . protecting yourself from talking to them and actually destroying the futures of these young people. So, the learners should be given age-appropriate information. They should be told what is important to them at that particular age so that they can navigate issues of sexuality amongst as themselves. It's actually good to have some of the information coming from them. It's good for them to have a voice.

Lily continued, pointing out that teachers must also be true to themselves and learn who they are as sexual beings. They should be able to understand that they teach children in their classrooms. By understanding themselves, the teachers would be able to work ethically with children in class without sexualising them. To showcase this point, Lily explained:

> Assuming you are in class and . . . uh . . . you have a student that is not sitting well, you are a male teacher . . . and our girls in their short dresses . . . so, you're looking at them and maybe instead of correcting them and telling them to sit properly you've already seen a woman before you. So, you know, we have that idea that teachers themselves should actually know who they are when they are in their classrooms; that they are teachers! They are adults. They must be aware that they are actually addressing children. They're actually part of the future of these children by moulding them—making them realise that they must speak up for themselves, they must protect themselves, and that they have to be assertive about issues to do with them. So, it's actually important to teach

> sexuality education instead of gambling with the lives of these young people. It's important to tell them the truth and, as I said, using age-appropriate information.

On the other hand, Ann's concern was about the misconceptions that young people are socialised into in their societies. She argued that there is need for sexuality education to address the misinformation that is happening amongst youth:

> We need to teach sexuality education because we must deconstruct the various misconceptions that our students hold. In the societies and the cultures students come from, there are lots of misconceptions regarding sex and sexuality.

To provide evidence for her argument, Ann referred to her master's study, which focussed on Kikuyu male teachers' constructions of masculinity:

> I just want to show you the various misconceptions that are out there in society, that if we do not teach our students, they are just going to learn to take everything they are hearing and seeing out there as true. For example . . . uh . . . uh . . . during that study, I was exploring the . . . uh . . . the teaching of sexuality education within the HIV and AIDS programme in Kenya from the perspective of the Kikuyu male teachers. My participants made drawings that depicted some very serious issues that we have in the society—issues that we must address, issues that we must teach our students such that they do not learn from them. I'm talking about the constructions of masculinity. I was looking at the notions and ideals and expectations of being man according to the Kikuyu community—like, how do you see yourself as a man and what is the social expectation of being man? I focus on one major finding that was masculinity and sexual prowess. According to these Kikuyu male teachers, men are supposed to be sexually experienced and knowledgeable about sex. So, one drawing that was made by one participant was the drawing of a rope. He said that, like a rope, he was able to tie anything. In his explanation, he said that as a man he sees himself as a rope because he can approach any lady, and according to him, there is no lady who could refuse him or decline him. So, that was . . . uh . . . his perspective. Another participant made a drawing of King David in the . . . uh . . . Bible. According to that participant, he sees himself as King David and indeed, he had several wives and concubines. Another participant made the drawing of a horse. He said that as a man, one should have several sexual partners.

Ann was also of the idea that comprehensive sexuality education across the curricula in communities could address the patriarchal structures that position women and girls as objects of desire but not as subjects:

> As a wife, in the Kikuyu culture, you are taught that the husband only comes home to you; but he belongs to the community. He belongs to the society. Faithfulness is expected only from women or

> wives. They are supposed to keep it cool in a relationship, that is, not sleep around or demand sex. The man is the only one who is allowed to decide on the conditions in which sex happens.

Ann's comments show that female sexuality is policed and repressed within patriarchal communities, while male sexuality and sexual prowess are celebrated. This, according to Ann, is because of the taboo nature of sexuality in many African communities, which creates fertile ground for people to believe myths and misconceptions. Such beliefs also allow for victims of sexual violence to be shamed, while the perpetrators become invisible.

Regarding the need for comprehensive sexuality education, David was concerned about children with special needs. He argued that in a community that is unequal, people always look down on the other. Thus, in our communities, people look down on those with special needs and disabilities. To support his point, David said:

> We need to define sexuality by first answering this question: "Are people with special needs sexually active?" They need to be educated on their bodies and sexuality. They are crying out, "Empower us with the correct scientific knowledge," like all members of society. Children with special needs are the most vulnerable in society. They are most susceptible to myths and misconceptions, and vulnerable to being taken advantage of sexually. Communities also need to be empowered with knowledge and the right attitude towards their sexual identities because, at the end of the day, whether one is living with a disability or not, there is need for knowing how one's body works. Teachers also need to be taught how to address issues of sexuality in the classroom. Unless we are all empowered to teach each other factual information, we are all doomed. We must be empowered with knowledge so we can enjoy our sexuality and not fear it.

Lastly, Violet highlighted the value of comprehensive sexuality education in relation to unplanned or unwanted teenage pregnancies. Violet's concern was on the life trajectory of the young mother who usually gets left behind to raise a child, while the father continues with life as usual:

> We don't want to talk about pregnancy. We don't want to talk about fertility, but it is what our children are exploring on their own with different misconceptions. This exploration is making them get pregnant at a time that they are not supposed to be getting pregnant and, at the end of the day, we are losing a big investment in education because we are not realising the numbers that began school. They're not completing. They can't be retained in school because they have gotten pregnant because of unprotected sex. So, we need to gain the boldness to speak about sexuality in schools, and address children's body changes so that sexuality education becomes an intervention that can help us prevent teenage pregnancies and social issues over the world. Teenage pregnancy is

> affecting the big investment that we are putting into education in African countries, and we may not be in position to achieve education for all if we are still burying our heads in the sand.

The concern raised by Violet is true for other contexts outside Africa. Teenage pregnancies rob governments of their investment in education, while also robbing female youth of a chance for a better livelihood. Thus, based on this argument, it is reasonable to argue for sexuality education as an intervention strategy. Violet had this to offer:

> We need to reflect on who we are, where we come from, and what made us who we are today. We need to re-learn from our past and deconstruct modern ways of being so that we can borrow from good practices of the past to shape tomorrow. Sexuality education and life skills education can be used as interventions against teenage pregnancy. It is through comprehensive sexuality education that we have topics that deal with life skills, self-awareness, self-efficacy, decision making, and consent. Otherwise, how is the girl going to know that she is making a wrong decision? How is she going to know that playing with uncle's lollipop is actually playing with a tool of fertility, a tool that could get her pregnant? They have to know their body parts and the functions of each part. So, if we do not open up and break the barriers of speaking about sexuality, then we will still have many societal issues to solve such as gender-based violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, and STIs, which could have been addressed through comprehensive sexuality education.

The data presented in this section has highlighted several reasons why comprehensive sexuality education is necessary in African societies. We have highlighted several structures and spaces that create inequalities, vulnerabilities, and risks. These intersect to disadvantage and marginalise women and girls and other minority groups.

Discussion

From our discussion of the guiding question, we all presented different situations in our lives, which provided evidence towards the need for comprehensive sexuality education in schools and communities. The data presented have shown that even though sexuality is a fundamental component of humanity, it is denied and policed, forbidden, and demonised (Khau, 2021). The findings also show that these attitudes towards issues of sexuality are because of the positioning of sex and sexuality as taboo subjects, thus creating spaces in which gender-based violence becomes rife (Fonner et al., 2014). Through our engagement in this reflection of our practices as sexuality education practitioners, we have concluded that the culture of gender-based violence could be eradicated using comprehensive sexuality education because it provides youth with information and facts about their sexual identities and rights (Haberland & Rogow, 2015; UNESCO, 2018).

Violet addressed the issue of teenage pregnancies, which is worrisome for parents and governments across the world. The data have shown that there is need for comprehensive sexuality education to address this societal problem. The evidence from our discussions shows that young people who have been exposed to age-appropriate and context-specific knowledge about their sexual health and reproductive rights through comprehensive sexuality education tend to have a better understanding of sex and sexuality, delay sexual debut, and those who are sexually active engage in safer sexual practices (Hanass-Hancock et al., 2018). This makes it easier for young people to stay in school and complete their education, thus helping governments to get good returns on their investment in education (Fonner et al., 2014).

David addressed the challenge of abuse directed at people living with disabilities and special needs because of their vulnerability, while Simon and Lily discussed the vulnerability of young children who often get violated by those who are supposed to care for them. Additionally, Jacob and Ann addressed the abuse directed at women and girls through patriarchal structures in communities. These examples highlight the prevalence of gender-based violence in patriarchal communities that construct sex talk as taboo and prize hegemonic masculinities (Connell, 1987). While gender-based violence is mostly enacted on women and girls by men and boys, it can also be expressed on anyone in a community. Harmful gender norms in patriarchal communities drive the scourge of violence directed at women and girls, and the normalisation of violence and underlying inequalities (Jewkes & Morrell, 2011).

The co-researchers have shown that constructions of gender and sexual identity in communities produce expectations that lead to expressions of violence towards those closest to the perpetrator. Jacob and Ann presented evidence from the Maasai and Kikuyu respectively, regarding the construction of masculinity through sexual prowess. The celebration of male sexual prowess positions women and girls as objects of male desire, not as subjects of sexual desire and pleasure. Young women and girls are taught to value their virginity and give it up as a gift to their husband upon marriage, while young men are often encouraged to engage in sexual relationships at an early age to demonstrate their manhood (Mfeka-Nkabinde et al., 2022). This double standard enables men’s sexual entitlement over females, while also policing their bodies and sexualities (Khau, 2007).

This has been lamented by Wolf (1997) who argued that most sexuality discourses are devoid of female sexual desire and pleasure. In such communities, women and girls are expected to be “good” by not having any sexual desire nor enjoying sex. Thus, deviations from this construction often lead to violence (Jewkes & Morrell, 2011). Within this construction, men and boys become entitled to women’s and girls’ bodies and sexuality (Khau, 2007). Without proper sexuality education in schools and communities, these issues could prevent the achievement of the following goals: good health and wellbeing, quality education,

gender equality, and reduced inequalities. Without the achievement of those four goals, the other United Nations goals would be near impossible to achieve.

We, therefore, believe that the focus on formal sexuality education in schools is important, but it should not be achieved at the expense of local gender and sexuality traditions, which have been successful in the past. The Sankofa theory allows us to take along seeds from the past to use in the present and future. As stated by Temple (2010), not everything from the past is bad. In addition, Slater (2019) argued that we become who we are because of our past. Therefore, even in issues of gender and sexuality, it is good to remember that the current status quo was informed by historical events that could be deconstructed to create socially just communities.

Conclusion

In this article, we have presented a timely conversation about the role of quality education in championing health and human rights for all through comprehensive sexuality education in the African continent. We responded to the question “What makes comprehensive sexuality education necessary in African school contexts?” Through our responses, we gained an understanding of the different schooling contexts in which we work, and the ways in which sexuality education could become a transformative tool towards the disruption of sexual taboos and the deconstruction of sexuality. We presented different scenarios from our lived experiences to highlight the challenges posed by a lack of factual sex talk in schools and communities.

We, therefore, propose that comprehensive sexuality education is an imperative in African school contexts towards sustainable livelihoods and communities. We feel that it is important for teacher education institutions to take up the baton and lead the way by training pre- and in-service teachers on comprehensive sexuality education. Trained teachers could provide important facts and information to the learners in their classrooms so that the learners have the right information and skills to make informed sexual choices. This would cascade into communities where people would become aware of their rights and responsibilities regarding gendered and sexual identities.

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