

Sociocultural beliefs and sexual activity among postmenopausal women in an urban community in Ibadan, Nigeria.

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Abstract

Background: Sexual activity after menopause is often considered to be a taboo in some Nigerian societies and the attendant problems are currently assuming public health importance. However, few studies done on Nigerian women have brought to the forefront many sociocultural beliefs about sexual activity after menopause. The study therefore examined sociocultural beliefs and sexual activity of postmenopausal women.

Methods: A cross-sectional study was conducted among 514 postmenopausal women aged 40 to 65 years. An interviewer-administered questionnaire was used to obtain data on sociodemographic characteristics, attitude to sociocultural beliefs regarding sexual activity and current sexual activity of respondents. Chi-square test and logistic regression were used to test for associations and determine predictors of outcome variables.

Results: The mean age of the respondents was 54.0 \pm 5.6 years and the mean age at menopause was 47.3 \pm 4.4 years. Overall, 54.3% agreed with at least one of the stated sociocultural beliefs. Among those who currently had partners, 68.4% and 30.7% reported pre and postmenopausal sexual activity respectively. The significant predictors for cessation of postmenopausal sexual activity were no formal education (O.R = 4.1, 95% C.I from 2.0 to 8.3), supportive attitude towards sociocultural beliefs (O.R = 5.6, 95% C.I from 3.4 to 9.4) and older age group (O.R = 4.1, 95% C.I from 2.4 to 7.0).

Conclusion: Sociocultural beliefs adversely affected postmenopausal sexual activity among these women, which has implications on the partners seeking alternative sexual partners with the attendant problems of sexually transmitted infections /HIV. Educational interventions targeted at changing these erroneous beliefs should be developed.

Keywords: Sociocultural beliefs, postmenopausal women, sexual activity

Résumé

Contexte: L'activité sexuelle après la ménopause est souvent considérée comme un tabou dans certaines sociétés nigérianes et les problèmes qui en découlent sont en train de prendre en compte l'importance de la santé publique. Cependant, peu d'études réalisées sur les femmes nigérianes ont porté à l'avant-garde de nombreuses croyances socioculturelles concernant l'activité sexuelle après la ménopause. L'étude a donc examiné les croyances socioculturelles et l'activité sexuelle des femmes ménopausées.

Méthodes: Une étude transversale a été réalisée chez 514 femmes ménopausées âgées de 40 à 65 ans. Un questionnaire administré par un intervieweur a été utilisé pour obtenir des données sur les caractéristiques sociodémographiques, l'attitude à l'égard des croyances socioculturelles concernant l'activité sexuelle et l'activité sexuelle actuelle des répondants. Le test chi-carré et la régression logistique ont été utilisés pour tester les associations et déterminer les prédicteurs des variables de résultat. **Résultats:** L'âge moyen des répondants était de 54,0 \pm 5,6 ans et l'âge moyen à la ménopause était de 47,3 \pm 4,4 ans. Dans l'ensemble, 54,3% étaient d'accord avec au moins une des croyances socioculturelles déclarées. Parmi ceux qui avaient actuellement des partenaires, 68,4% et 30,7% avaient déclaré une activité sexuelle pré et post-ménopausée respectivement. Les prédicteurs significatifs pour la cessation d'activité sexuelle post-ménopausée étaient l'absence d'éducation formelle (OR = 4.1, IC 95% de 2.0 à 8.3), attitude de soutien à l'égard des croyances socioculturelles (OR = 5.6, IC 95% de 3.4 à 9.4) et groupe d'âge plus âgé (OR = 4,1, IC à 95% de 2,4 à 7,0).

Conclusion: Les croyances socioculturelles ont eu une incidence négative sur l'activité sexuelle post ménopausique chez ces femmes, ce qui a des implications sur les partenaires qui cherchent des partenaires sexuels alternatifs avec les problèmes de transmission d'infection sexuelle / VIH qui en découlent. Des interventions éducatives visant à modifier ces croyances erronées devraient être développées.

Mots-clés: Croyances socioculturelles, femmes ménopausées, activité sexuelle

Introduction

Menopause is currently receiving global attention due to a progressive increase in life expectancy. About 15-30% and 5-8% of the population are postmenopausal women in the industrialized and developing countries respectively [1] with an increasing trend in developing nations.

The health of women within the reproductive age group is currently a source of significant concern. The challenges faced by women in this age group are further worsened by the culture of silence that envelops reproductive health matters. Women who eventually survive the childbearing years go on to face yet another challenging phase of their lives. As women age; they experience both physical and sociocultural challenges that may hinder the attainment of optimal health. Just as there is a need to focus on women of reproductive age; there is also a need to ensure that the health needs of older women are met [2]. Apart from medical problems associated with the menopause, women are also likely to have feelings of insecurity and low self esteem which may be compounded by sociocultural beliefs about sexual activity after menopause passed down from hand to hand [2].

Menopause is defined as the cessation of the normal monthly menses as a result of the normal decline in ovarian function. It is a time in a woman's life when menstrual period ceases and the ovaries permanently stop releasing eggs. Menopause is said to be complete when a woman has experienced amenorrhoea for 12 consecutive months. Usually, age of onset varies from 47 years to about 55 years; however, in rare cases, menopause can occur in the early 30s and sometimes as late as the 60s [3].

Menopausal symptoms experienced by women vary, many notice no symptoms other than a gradual cessation in their periods while others suffer from a myriad of symptoms; as these menopausal symptoms vary among women, so also do the sociocultural beliefs associated with sexual activity and menopause [3].

Sociocultural belief is the acceptance by the mind that something relating to or involving cultural and social factors is true or real, often underpinned by an emotional or spiritual sense of certainty.

Across various cultures, a lot of sociocultural beliefs exist regarding postmenopausal sexual activity. In Bolivia, menopausal women are of the opinion that sex should be less frequent or not engaged in at all after menopause [4]. Among the Hausas of Northern Nigeria, postmenopausal women gain physical freedom from confinement (Purdah, a practice imposed on them when they are married,

whereby the women are restricted indoors and if they must go out then, they must be veiled from head to toe), while in some other cultures, menopausal women are stripped of their identity, as they are no longer seen as women and they are denied the right to have sexual intercourse [4].

In a study on Nigerian women, sociocultural beliefs about sexual activity after menopause were brought to the forefront as many of their respondents opined that having sexual intercourse after menopause would lead to possible chronic stomach pain for women and "weakness of manhood for men". Postmenopausal women who still wanted to have sexual intimacy were considered sex maniacs [5].

Another study conducted in Ibadan revealed that attitudes to menopause were generally positive as the majority of respondents saw menopause as a naturally physiologic process. However; there is some misinformation that menstruation is cleansing and thus the absence of this cleansing process would increase the propensity for sexually transmitted diseases when postmenopausal women have sex [6].

Several other sociocultural beliefs and wrong notions about sexual activity after menopause have been revealed. Some women maintained that sexual activity after menopause would likely lead to death of the woman; while some others believe that having sex after menopause could contaminate the man's sperm, thereby preventing him from being able to impregnate another woman; it was reported that many of the natural physical changes associated with old age including body weakness, loss of eyesight and urinary incontinence are attributed to sexual activity after menopause [5].

Adekunle *et al* documented that the cessation of menstrual flow was associated with the likelihood of acquiring diseases following intercourse in the erroneous view that the menstrum drains away impurities. For these women, sexual life ended with the menopause due to the cultural belief stipulating abstinence at menopause [7]. How much influence these beliefs have on sexual activity of postmenopausal women can be further revealed by indepth research. This study examined these sociocultural beliefs and sexual activity among post menopausal women in Ibadan North East LGA, Nigeria.

Materials and methods

Study area

The study was carried out in Ibadan, the capital of Oyo State in Nigeria. Ibadan is an urban city with a projected population of 3.5 million people [15]. Ibadan municipality is made of five local government

areas, namely, Ibadan North East, North West, South East, South West, and Ibadan North, each consisting of several health wards. Ibadan North East which was used for the study, has 12 health wards and health care facilities.

Study population

All women aged 40 to 65 years, who had not menstruated for 12 consecutive months and who resided within the selected areas were enrolled in the study, provided they gave their consent to participate.

Study design

This study is a community-based, cross-sectional descriptive study. Data were collected from women to determine socio demographic characteristics, attitude to socio cultural beliefs regarding sexual activity and current sexual activity of respondents.

Sampling technique

A four-stage sampling technique was used for data collection. Ibadan North East has 12 political ward. In the first stage, a political ward was selected using simple random sampling.

In the second stage, street and household listings were obtained with the assistance of local government staff and immunization tour guide officers and 10 streets were selected through simple random sampling. In the third stage, 50 households with at least one postmenopausal woman were selected using systematic random sampling. In the fourth stage, in each household, one postmenopausal woman aged 40-65 years was selected through balloting and was interviewed using the pretested questionnaire.

Instruments

A semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect data on the respondent's characteristics. Information was obtained on sociodemographic variables, attitude to sociocultural beliefs regarding postmenopausal sexual activity and current level of sexual activity of respondents. Menopause status was assessed based on responses to the questions about whether or not they had menstruated in the preceding 12 months and if not, the age at menopause. A five-point Likert scale was used to score attitudes of the respondents to the selected sociocultural beliefs: Total obtainable attitudinal scores ranged from 0 to 11. The score for each item decreases from 5 to 1 with strongly agree having the highest score and strongly disagree having the lowest score. By indicating any of these five possible options for each item, the respondent provides her attitude to each

sociocultural belief. Scores of 0 to 5 and 6 to 11 were rated as nonsupportive and supportive attitudes respectively. Current level of sexual activity was assessed based on responses to the questions on frequency of sexual activity before and after onset of menopause. To validate the study instruments, they were translated to Yoruba, the local language, and back translated to English and then pretested outside the ward selected for the study.

Data collection

Four research assistants were employed after three days of training to assist the researchers in data collection. To ensure that the data gathered were of high quality, one of the researchers (a community health physician trainee) was in the field with trained research assistants throughout the period of data collection.

Data analysis

Data gathered were entered into SPSS 15.0 software package. Chi square test was used to test for association between variables of interest. Logistic regression was performed on variables found to be significantly associated against the outcome variable (cessation of postmenopausal sexual activity). The level of statistical significance was set at $P < 0.05$.

Ethical Issues

Ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Ethical Review Committee of the Oyo State Ministry of Health.

Results

Socio-demographic characteristics

A total of 522 women were potentially eligible to be interviewed. Eight of the proposed respondents were not available (due to travel, hospitalization, or being missed at home on two consecutive visits). Consequently, 514 respondents (98.4%) constituted the study population. The mean age of the respondents was 54.0 ± 5.6 years and the mean age at menopause was 47.3 ± 4.4 years. Most of the respondents 403 (78.4%) were married, 453 (89.2%) were of Yoruba ethnicity, and the majority 369 (71.8%) had formal education. The details of sociodemographic characteristics of respondents are shown in table 1.

Attitudes towards socio-cultural beliefs associated with menopause and sexual activity

The women agreed with the following sociocultural beliefs regarding postmenopausal sexual activity: menopause makes a woman biologically manlike (61.7%), sex after menopause is evil (54.8%), causes

Table 1 : Socio Demographic Characteristics of the respondents

	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Age Group</i>		
Below 50 years	116	22.6
Above 50 years	398	77.4
<i>Age at menopause</i>		
40-44	215	41.1
45-49	224	42.9
50 and above	83	16.0
<i>Marital Status</i>		
Married	403	78.4
Single/Never married	43	8.3
Widowed	68	13.2
<i>Level of Education</i>		
No formal Education	145	28.2
Primary Education	157	30.5
Secondary Education	116	22.6
Tertiary Education	96	18.7
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
Yoruba	453	88.0
Igbo	44	8.6
Hausa	10	2.0
Others	7	1.4
<i>Husband's Level of Education</i>		
No formal Education	106	26.4
Primary Education	105	26.0
Secondary Education	99	24.5
Tertiary Education	93	23.1

Respondents' attitude to postmenopausal sexual activity

Mean attitudinal score was 4.1 ± 3.2 with a little above half of the respondents being against postmenopausal sex (54.3%) and agreed with at least one of the stated sociocultural beliefs (Table 4), while the remaining (45.7%) were supportive of postmenopausal sex.

Association between postmenopausal sexual activity and some variables

Among those who currently had partners, only 30.7% reported postmenopausal sexual activity. Significantly higher proportions of those with no formal education (78.6%), those aged ≥ 50 years (69.9%) and with supportive attitude towards the sociocultural beliefs (83.8%) reported cessation of postmenopausal sexual activity ($p < 0.05$).

Predictors of cessation of post-menopausal sexual activity

On logistic regression, the significant predictors for cessation of postmenopausal sexual activity were no formal education (O.R = 4.1, 95% C.I from 2.0 to 8.3), supportive attitude towards sociocultural beliefs (O.R = 5.6, 95% C.I from 3.4 to 9.4) and older age group (O.R = 4.1, 95% C.I from 2.4 to 7.0).

Table 2: Respondents' attitude to socio-cultural beliefs associated with menopause and sexual activity

Variable	Agree n (%)	Don't know n (%)	Disagree n (%)
Sex after menopause transmits curses to oneself	186(36.2)	134(26.1)	194(37.7)
Sex after menopause is evil	282(54.9)	93(18.6)	139(27.0)
Sex after menopause transmits curses to children	15(2.9)	129(25.1)	370(72.0)
Sex after menopause indicates promiscuity	223(43.4)	97(18.6)	194(37.7)
Sex after menopause transmits curses to partner	60(11.7)	144(28.0)	310(60.3)
Having sex after menopause will cause swollen abdomen from accumulated semen	260(50.6)	129(25.1)	125(24.3)
Having sex after menopause makes one sick	255(49.6)	141(27.4)	118(23.0)
Having sex after menopause will cause blindness	99(19.3)	172(33.5)	243(47.3)
With menopause, a woman can no longer enjoy sex	206(40.1)	186(36.2)	122(23.7)
Women are less sexually attractive after menopause	317(61.7)	159(30.9)	138(26.8)
Women are more sexually attractive after menopause	122(23.7)	79(15.4)	233(45.3)
Onset of menopause makes a woman to be like a man biologically	186(36.2)	134(26.1)	118(23.0)

swollen abdomen due to accumulated semen (50.6%), makes one sick (49.6%), indicates promiscuity (43.4%), and women are less sexually attractive after menopause (41.8%). Overall, 45.7% agreed with at least one of the stated sociocultural beliefs and the mean attitudinal score was 4.1 ± 3.2 .

Discussion

The study identified various socio cultural beliefs associated with menopause and sexual activity as well as socio demographic and socio cultural factors that influence postmenopausal sexual activity. For many women, menopause is considered synonymous with the time women no longer see their monthly

Table 3: Respondents characteristics and post menopausal sexual activity

Variable	Post menopausal sex		Chisquare/ fishers exact	P value
	Yes	n %		
<i>Age (years)</i>				
< 50	69 (59.5)	47 (40.5)	32.600	<0.001*
50 and above	121 (30.1)	277 (69.9)		
<i>Attitude to sociocultural beliefs</i>				
Not Supportive	152 (54.5)	127(45.5)	8.346	<0.001*
Supportive	38 (16.2)	197(83.8)		
<i>Religion</i>				
Christianity	140 (43.5)	182 (56.5)	16.807	<0.001*
Others	47 (25.3)	139 (74.7)		
<i>Ethnicity</i>				
Yoruba	150 (33.1)	303 (66.9)	24.312	<0.001*
Others	40 (65.6)	21 (34.4)		
<i>Marriage Type</i>				
Monogamous	128 (43.0)	170 (57.0)	11.583	0.001*
Polygamous	51 (27.6)	134 (72.4)		
<i>Educational status</i>				
Formal education	160 (42.8)	214 (57.2)	19.932	<0.001*
No formal education	30 (21.4)	110 (78.6)		
<i>Occupation</i>				
Skilled	23 (65.7)	12 (34.3)	12.671	<0.001
Semiskilled/Unskilled	161 (35.5)	293 (64.5)		

* $P < 0.005$ **Table 5:** Adjusted predictors of cessation of postmenopausal sexual activity

Variable	Odds ratio	95%CI	P value
<i>Marital status</i>			
Married	1.411	0.237-2.545	0.125
Others (ref)			
<i>Age (years)</i>			
50+	4.109	2.432-7.231	<0.001*
<50(ref)			
<i>Family setting</i>			
Monogamous	0.665	0.412-1.073	0.095
Polygamous (ref)			
<i>Educational status</i>			
No formal education	4.138	2.067-8.357	0.001*
Formal education (ref)			
<i>Ethnicity</i>			
Yoruba	3.213	0.323-3.950	0.319
Others (ref)			
<i>Occupation</i>			
Skilled	1.198	0.578-3.775	0.934
Semiskilled/Unskilled (ref)			
<i>Attitude to socio cultural beliefs</i>			
Supportive	5.620	3.409-9.438	<0.001*
Non supportive (ref)			

* $P \text{ value} < 0.05$

period and can therefore no longer get pregnant [5]. It is difficult to make comparisons with other studies because views on menopause and sexual activity vary from culture to culture. A woman who belongs to a culture that perceives menopause as symptom free may not experience menopausal symptoms related to physical changes in midlife such as hot flushes and depression. These women may pass through the menopause without difficulties.

In this study, the mean age at menopause was found to be similar to other numerous studies conducted in different parts of the world which showed that the mean age at menopause largely lies between age 45-57 years. [7-9,16,].

Generally, more than half of the study population agreed with at least one of the socio-cultural beliefs and this may be due to the fact that there is a strong interplay between cultural beliefs and how a woman views the symptoms associated with menopause. As reported by McMaster *et al*, there is a strong indication that menopause is not regarded as negative in some African cultures as it is in most Western countries [10]. Subsequently, women who see menopause as a medical condition have more negative perceptions of menopause compared to those who view it as a life transition or a symbol of aging [11].

More women in this study perceived menopause as a normal event and this is consistent with previous findings which showed that women regarded menopause as a normal physiological event [9].

About one third of the respondents reported post menopausal sexual activity, this finding may be indicative of the beliefs and attitude of the respondents to the issue as reflected in the decrease in frequency of sexual activity pre and post menopause. It may also be due to separation or spouse/partner death as about 21.5% of the study population were either separated or widowed. Correspondingly, earlier studies in Ibadan and Ile-Ife reported a prevalence of post menopausal sex of 27.42% and 42% respectively [7, 8].

The study observed a decrease in post menopausal sexual activity with an increase in age and age at onset of menopause. More women less than 50 years of age reported post menopausal sexual activity compared to those 50 years and above. Women 50 years and above were four times more likely not to engage in post menopausal sexual activity. This may be due to the fact that there is reduced libido with onset of menopause and with increasing age. Also a higher proportion of women whose age at onset of menopause was below 50 years

of age reported having post menopausal sexual activity compared to those whose age at menopause was 50 years and above. This finding agrees with a similar study in the United States where a high proportion of women whose age at menopause is between the ages of 45-54 years were more sexually active compared to those that fall between the ages of 56-64 years [12]

As expected, a higher proportion of women that were married also reported having post menopausal sexual activity compared to those in other categories. Also, those in monogamous unions had a higher proportion engaging in post menopausal sexual activity compared to those in polygamous unions. This higher number of respondents who were married and in monogamous unions may be due to the fact that their spouse/partner is still alive or that they are in stable unions and do not have to share their spouse/partner with someone else. A previous study in Benin, Nigeria also identified death of spouse, separation and the presence of younger co-wives who could satisfy their husbands better as factors that affect postmenopausal sexual activity [9].

A higher proportion of Christian women reported having postmenopausal sexual activity compared to those of other religions. A study in the northern part of Nigeria indicated that postmenopausal women are no longer classified as women and are hence allowed to leave the puddah if they had been confined to it in the past [13]. Also, in this same study, it was highlighted that Muslim postmenopausal women are free to participate in all religious activities as opposed to menstruating women who cannot participate in the obligatory prayers and fasting during menstruation [13]. A higher proportion of women from other ethnic groups reported having post menopausal sexual activity compared to those of Yoruba ethnicity. More respondents who had formal education and whose husbands had formal education also reported having post menopausal sexual activity compared to those with no formal education.

Respondents with no formal education were about four times more likely to have stopped engaging in sexual activity compared to those with formal education. This finding points out the importance of education in issues of sexuality and this is in keeping with another study which showed an association between education and attitude to sex [14].

There were significant associations between postmenopausal sexual activity and religion, level of education, marital status, as well as family type (monogamous versus polygamous). This is similar to various studies in Nigeria and the United States [9,13,14,16].

Limitations

This study faced certain limitations which should be acknowledged. It was difficult to verify some of the information given by the respondents. There was also recall bias as some of the respondents' could not remember clearly what happened during and after the menopause. Their responses may also have been influenced by socio cultural beliefs about privacy of sexual issues peculiar to our environment. However, this study was able to provide some baseline information that supports the existence of sociocultural beliefs and its association with postmenopausal sexual activity.

Conclusion

This study identified the different sociocultural beliefs associated with menopause and sexual activity among post-menopausal women. Furthermore, women's attitudes to socio cultural beliefs on menopause and sexual activity were also highlighted. Socio cultural beliefs influenced these women regarding postmenopausal sexual activity and this may have far reaching effects on their partners as they may seek alternative means of solving this problem. This finding has a great implication on family life and health as the partners of these women with these beliefs may seek alternative sources of sexual gratification thereby being at risk for sexually transmitted diseases and HIV.

Recommendation

Women generally, and postmenopausal women in particular should be encouraged to speak out regarding sexual issues and ask for advice from the health personnel, instead of suffering in silence. Educational interventions targeted at changing these erroneous beliefs should be developed and made available to women groups across communities. This will help to dispel the myths surrounding menopause and sexual activity.

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