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VIRGINS AND THE QUESTION OF ABORTION: AN AFRICAN RELIGIO-PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This work explores the interconnectedness between virginity and abortion bearing in mind the African religio-philosophical perspective. While adopting the method of critical analysis, it avers that the question of virginity in traditional African culture has been eroded by the Western invasion of Africa. In traditional African society abortion was alien to the people as a result of the high value placed on virginity. This brings to question whether the brideprice of a virgin is higher than that of a non virgin and it also shows the extent to which a non virgin bride could boast in the presence of her husband. More specifically, the rate of abortion in contemporary African society is a neglect of the sacredness of life inherent in African culture and the traditional values in Africa such as virginity. Hence, it is argued in this work that to solve the problem of abortion there is need to keep an eye on the traditional view of virginity which is a sense of dignity, pride, and purity in traditional African culture. Through series of arguments and counter-arguments, this work submits and project the idea that virginity is a veritable tool and a bedrock for resolving the problem of abortion in contemporary society.

Introduction

African culture is a tapestry of diverse cultures and traditions which deeply influence sexuality reproduction. Within these cultures and traditions, the concept of virginity and abortion play a significant role. This article explores the interconnectedness of these two concepts and how they are shaped by traditional beliefs, cultural norms and how contemporary societal dynamics has played down the enviable tradition of virginity in African culture.

Virginity deeply engraved in African cultural and societal framework has been a marker of purity and moral standing particularly for women. Although the importance has varied significantly across different cultural groups; these traditional views influence modern debates on reproductive rights particularly abortion.

Abortion is a widely debatable issue with divergent views but which are often grouped into prochoice and prolife schools of thought. Though the legalities, permissibility and access to safe abortion differs across the continent which has led to high rates of unsafe abortions contributing to maternal mortality and morbidity. The practice of abortion is widespread as a result of so many factors ranging from unintended pregnancies to societal pressure and poverty.

In this work a comprehensive overview of virginity, abortion laws and policies across African countries and the effect on the society at large will be divulged. By critically analyzing the historical, philosophical, religious and cultural perspective in both abortion and virginity, the study seeks to show the complexities surrounding these issues and the need for a nuanced understanding of their interconnectedness.

This article explores the cultural, social, economic factors that contribute to the complex interplay between virginity and abortion in Africa and also contribute to a more refined understanding of the challenges faced by women in Africa advocating for improved access to healthcare, comprehensive sexual education and a greater respect for women's reproductive rights.

Virginity in the African Context

Virginity is one of the many cherished values in African society that has been eroded by Western civilization. Virginity for women in African societies holds significant cultural and social importance

which is deeply intertwined with traditional beliefs and customs and ultimately, influencing women's decision regarding abortion.

According to Ogbagearan(2019), a virgin is referred to as *OmotevoOghor* in the Urhoboculture of Southern Nigerian and virgins played several roles in the society. There are various practices and traditional customs associated with virgin in the African society

As said earlier, virginity is viewed as marking purity and honor particularly for women. It is seen as testament to her family honour and moral integrity. Among the Zulu people residing in south eastern Kwazulu-Natal province, there is a virginity testing carried out to check if the hymen is intact although it is not full proof as different women have different shapes of vaginal openings and hymens. Ladies found to be virgins are celebrated and even given certificates (Oyedokun 2024)

In some West African communities, virginity testing is done to ascertain a young woman's purity before marriage. This may involve physical examination often conducted by an elderly woman in the community. Such rituals are intended to ensure that the bride is a virgin which is crucial for maintaining familial and societal honor (Durojaye 2023) and also will influence the bride price and marriageability.

In many cultures in Africa, a higher bride price is requested for a virgin bride. Among the Urhobos of Southern Nigeria, a virgin bride and her mother are showered with gifts like expensive wrappers and other things of monetary value. In the culture of Shona of Zimbabwe, if the bride was a virgin, the groom pays a cow as a gesture of gratitude. In Hausa of Northern Nigeria, the groom's family will send gifts of money and kola (Ademiluka 2023). This economic aspect reinforces the societal pressure on young women to remain virgins until marriage. There was also the tradition whereby on the wedding night, a white sheet is placed on the bed for the couple to engage in sexual intercourse then the white bedsheet was brought out stained for all to see. This was a very common practice among many cultures in the western part of Africa.

Social and Cultural Implications

The social and cultural implications of virginity are profound. In African society, the expectation to be a virgin shapes the behavior and expectation of young women. The pressure to remain a virgin until marriage has led to significant psychological stress and encourages women to engage in abortion

in order to hide or cover up the fact she is not a virgin. Women who lose their virginity before marriage often face severe stigma and ostracism impacting their social standing and marriage prospects.

This societal pressure also affects men who are often expected to marry virgins and may face ridicule if they do not. The emphasis on virginity perpetuates gender inequality, reinforcing the notion that women's value is tied to their sexual purity while men's sexual behavior is subject to less scrutiny (Arnfred 2004). Virgins are believed to play significant roles in the cultural setting in Orhuworhun community in the Niger Delta region, virgins decide whether a person chosen to be king is suitable or not.

In Ghana, there is a ritual or customary servitude where virgin girls are sent to shrines to atone for the supposed crimes of their family members. Also "in the olden days, the view that virgins were sacrificed to pacify angry gods was corroborated and stressed by one traditional leader interviewed overtime, the priests decided not to kill the girls but keep them mainly to work on shrine lands, do the priest housekeeping and serve as sexual partners" (Owasu 2023).

The diverse social and cultural implications of virginity have directly impacted on attitudes towards abortion. In many African societies, abortion is considered a taboo subject often associated with shame, stigma and moral condemnation. This stigma is particularly employed when it involves a woman who lost her virginity before marriage which is further seen as a transgression against cultural norms and societal expectations further isolating women who seek such services.

Virginity in Contemporary African Society

Modernization, urbanization and the influence of global media have introduced new perspectives on sexuality challenging traditional beliefs and norms. "In contemporary African society, the concept of virginity is evolving. While traditional beliefs and practices still hold sway in many areas, globalization, education and exposure to different cultures are leading to shifts in attitudes. Urbanization and increased access to information are challenging traditional norms and providing young people with alternative perspectives on sexuality and gender roles" (Caldwell 2000).

Although virginity had high social implications and significant implications in the past in most African societies, it has zero or no consequence in today's society; it can be said that the value

of virginity has diminished. "In contemporary African society, the concept of virginity is undergoing significant transformation due to the influences of globalization, education and changing social norms. While traditional beliefs regarding virginity as a marker of purity and moral integrity persist especially in rural areas, urbanization and exposure to diverse cultural perspectives are reshaping attitudes" (Amadiume 2005).

Virginity is more influenced by religious values in African society than cultural values although the idea is similar, the consequences are less which gives grounds for society today to easily abuse it. "Educational opportunities and access to information have empowered many young African women to question and redefine their roles in the society" (Tamele 2011). The tension between modern and traditional values create a complex landscape for young women navigating their sexual identities.

In contemporary times, it is now argued that a woman's sexuality is her own business and it is up to her to decide whether to maintain or lose her virginity. It is stated that the decision should be one of freewill, an individual choice and not based on the fear of societal norms or consequences. "Telling a young woman to maintain her virginity is not giving her the autonomy to decide and feel good about herself. Women need to be empowered, but in order for them to be empowered, it is important to eradicate particularly myths about women sexuality, reproduction and culture". Brown (2006).

The influence of contemporary perspectives is not uniform across the African continent. In many countries, the cultural importance of virginity remains deeply entrenched, reinforced by religious beliefs and social structures. Public health initiatives have played a role in maintaining virginity during abstinence campaigns and addressing HIV/AIDS epidemic. This reinforces traditional values and increases the stigma of those that do not conform to the idea.

The diminishing value of virginity in modern society is one of the reasons for high sexual immoralities and abortion rate in the society today. As contemporary African societies grapple with the pressures of traditional values and modern influences, the cultural significance of virginity often impacts women's reproductive choices including the decision to seek an abortion.

Abortion Discourses in Africa

Discourses on abortion are basically divided into two camps. The pro-choice and the pro-life arguments with both camps divided over the permissibility of abortion. However, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologist, defines abortion as the intentional termination of a pregnancy before the fetus can live independently outside the mother. It usually involves procedures such as surgical abortion or medical abortion (ACOG, 2022). Abortion definitions are also shaped by the social and cultural norms which further influence reproductive rights and abortion services.

Abortion in Africa is a complex and diverse tapestry reflecting a range of cultural, religious and political influences. While some countries have liberal abortion laws, others maintain stringent restrictions often rooted in religious and moral convictions. It is a very common practice in the African continent. "The proportion of all pregnancies in Africa ending in abortion each year is estimated at 15% in 2010-2014 and has changed little since 1990-1994" (Guttmacher 2018).

Nigerian feminist scholar Ife Amadiume posits that "the struggle for women's reproductive rights in Africa is a battle against deeply engraved patriarchal structures that dictate control over women's bodies and autonomy" (Amadiume, 2015). In many African countries, dominant religious beliefs like Christianity, Islam etc, strongly influence public opinion and policy. These often frame abortion as normally unacceptable, contributing to the widespread stigma and limited access to safe abortion services. Women seeking abortion usually face significant social ostracism and legal repercussion, underscoring the urgent need for delicate discussions and policy reforms that will address the implication of abortion in Africa.

Overview of Abortion Laws and Policies in African Countries

In the last two decades statistics has shown that an estimated 8.2 million induced abortions occurred each year in Africa. And this is a significant increase from the 4.6 million annually four decades ago. According to research conducted by Guttmacher Institute (2017)

the annual rate of abortion for the region is an estimated 34 per 1,000 women of reproductive age (15–44), and remained more or less constant between 1990–1994 and 2010–2014 ... The regional abortion rate is roughly 26 per 1,000 for married women and 36 per 1,000 for unmarried women.

Africa is the world region with the highest number of abortion-related deaths, this shows how much it is practiced despite the fact that abortion is not permitted in most African countries. Abortion in East Africa poses a serious health problem, although abortion laws in East Africa vary, abortion is usually

restrictive with most countries permitting such practice under specific circumstances such as to save the life of the mother or in cases of rape and incest. Guttmacher Institute (2017), states that over 90% of abortion in East Africa are unsafe, underscoring the urgent need for legal reforms and improved access to safe abortion services.

The Kenyan constitution (2010) allows abortion if in the opinion of a trained health professional there is need for emergency treatment or the life or health of the mother is in danger. However, the penal code criminalizes abortion under other circumstances creating legal ambiguities that complicate access to safe procedures (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2017).

Ugandan abortion laws are among the most restrictive in East Africa. It criminalizes abortion except to save the life of the mother. Tanzania also maintains the same restrictive laws, although the Ministry of Health's National Adolescent Reproductive Health Strategy (2018-22) has acknowledged the need to address unsafe abortions and improve reproductive health services for adolescents (Ministry of health, Tanzania 2018), the barriers of abortion still persist.

In Northern Africa, countries generally have restrictive abortion laws shaped by Islamic cultural and religious norms that view abortions as largely unacceptable. In Egypt, abortion is illegal except when the mother's life is at risk. "Similarly in Morocco, abortion is only permitted to save the mother's life and women seeking abortion outside these parameters face legal repercussions reflecting the country's conservative cultural and religious landscape" (Harrak 2009).

In contrast to the north, South Africa has one of the most liberal abortion laws on the continent which is greatly influenced by post-apartheid commitment to human rights. "The choice of Termination of Pregnancy Act (1996) allows abortion on demand up to 12 weeks of pregnancy and under certain conditions up to 20 weeks. This legislation was a significant departure from the restrictive apartheid era laws and was grounded in the principles of bodily autonomy and reproductive rights" (Guttmacher Institute 2017). Botswana and Namibia have similar abortion laws that permits the practice only in cases of rape, incest or threats to mother's health.

Abortion laws in West Africa are generally restrictive and only permitted under specific circumstances in Nigeria, "the only criminal code applies to the southern states while penal

code applies to the northern states. Both codes impose severe penalties for illegal abortions, contributing to a clandestine practice and high rates of unsafe procedures" (Bankole et al 2006).

Ghana has a more liberal approach compared to other West African countries while Senegal is highly restrictive with abortion only permitted to save the life of the mother. The restrictive laws are one of the factors that deeply influence and contribute to the high level of abortions in the African continent.

Although, the report of Guttmacher institute may not be too statistically significant today since its almost a decade that research was done. This work through interactions with some respondents on the field revealed that most abortions in Delta state and by extension Africa are purely as a result of the neglect of the cult of virginity in the pre-colonial times. The survey questions were aimed at targeting the cause of the incessant procurement of abortion by youths in the Oshimiri in Delta. The questions included why is abortion frequent among women/girls in Oshimiri? What are the factors that contribute to the procurement of abortion in Oshimiri? Do you think abortion is unsafe and should it be criminalized? Responses to these questions and more revealed that majority of the respondents were of the opinion that abortion is mostly common among unmarried women/girls and that if virginity before marriage is sustained then abortion will be reduced in Oshimiri.

Religious and Ethical Perspective of Abortion in Africa and Societal Attitudes and Stigma

"African religion permeates every facet of life so fully that it is not easy or possible to isolate it" (Mbiti, 1991). Like Mbiti stated, the religious and ethical perspective of abortion has greatly shaped abortion policies and public opinion. Predominantly, African societies are deeply rooted in religious belief which plays central roles in the moral and ethical framework of each community. Most religions practiced in Africa regard abortion as morally unacceptable. They usually see it as a violation of the sanctity of life.

In many African cultures, the ability to bear children is greatly valued. Ethically, the debate on abortion is also intertwined with cultural values that emphasize fertility and motherhood. The intersection of religious doctrine and ethical consideration creates a complex environment on issues surrounding abortion. For African Christians, abortion is greatly discouraged. It is viewed as murder; it devalues and destroys family life. Indigenous countries like Kenya and Zambia with strong protestant influence oppose abortion and believe that sanctity of life is from conception.

From the point of Christian ethics, scholars uphold that abortion is a transgression against divine will. The Sharia law heavily influences the laws and attitude towards abortion. “For instance, in Morocco and Egypt, abortion is largely prohibited except to save the mother’s life, reflecting a conservative interpretation of Islamic ethics” (Berer, 2017). Indigenous African religions contribute greatly to the ethical discourse on abortion, fertility and continuation of family line is very important, the ability to bear children is seen as a vital aspect of a woman’s identity and social status. So, abortion is seen as a disruption to the natural order and community’s continuity. “For example, among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, traditional beliefs hold that life begins at conception and terminating a pregnancy is considered as affront to the ancestral spirits and the community's future” (Adeoye, 2005).

In the Bini culture, the worth placed on children clearly depicts their stand on abortion. “For the Bini as with virtually all African societies, the love and care for children extend beyond the nucleus family”. Osemegwie (2022). This goes on to show that it is believed that children belong to the community and not only the nuclear family.

Okonufuaa (2003) states that the ethical arguments against abortion often revolve around the perceived duty of women to bear children and contribute to the lineage. This cultural emphasis on fertility can lead to significant social ostracism for women who seek abortions, making it a complex ethical issue intertwined with gender roles and societal expectations”. The ethical view on abortion is still based and greatly influenced by their culture, religion and beliefs systems.

African societies generally make policies based on these systems. With major policies, religious and cultural beliefs in the African society widely consider abortion as morally and ethically wrong, it is not surprising that women who engage in such practice are greatly stigmatized in the society. The stigma associated with abortion often deters women from accessing safe abortion services. “In many African societies, cultural norms prioritize fertility and motherhood, viewing child bearing as a central aspect of a woman’s identity and social status. This cultural emphasis on fertility contributes to the stigmatization of abortion, as it is seen as an ejection of a woman’s primary role in society. As a result, women who seek abortions are often perceived as deviating from societal expectations leading to social ostracism and discrimination” (Izugbara, 2015). As indicated, the stigma and attitude faced by women who engage in abortion are deeply rooted in their religious and cultural beliefs system.

The crossroads between discussion in virginity and abortion in Africa

The intersection between the discussion on virginity and abortion is quite complex because the practice of one could lead to the extinction of another. Virginity is a symbol of purity and moral integrity. This cultural emphasis places pressure on women. When unintended pregnancies occur, the fear of social ostracism and family disgrace can drive them to seek abortion which is usually done under unsafe conditions.

According to Okonofua (2003), “the ethical and moral dilemmas surrounding abortion with African cultures are deeply influenced by religious teaching and traditional beliefs. Many African communities adhere to strict religious doctrines that condemn both premarital sex and abortion. This creates a dual pressure on women, who must navigate the moral imperatives of maintaining virginity while facing the harsh judgments and potential legal repercussions of seeking abortion”.

Among the different practices and cultures in African society, virginity practice is one of the cultural norms influencing the practice of the cultural norm influencing the practice of abortion and abortion policies in Africa. This cultural norm affects the decisions surrounding abortion especially in young women.

In western Nigeria, the loss of virginity outside marriage carries great consequence and social stigma. “In Ogidi, the pressure to remain a virgin until marriage is immense, leading to secretive sexual behaviors among adolescents. When unintended pregnancies occur, the fear of social ostracism and familial disgrace often drives young women to seek abortions” (Renne 1993). This further shows the crossroad between the need to maintain virginity and the desperate measures taken to avoid the consequences associated with premarital sex.

The fear of stigmatization and cultural consequences often lead women, especially young girls of adolescent ages to seek out unqualified practitioners who perform unsafe abortion on them. “The fear of losing their perceived purity and the consequent social ostracism drives many young women in Cato Manor to seek abortion when faced with unintended pregnancies” (Sacho, 2003).

Izugbara (2015) posits that the societal demand for maintaining virginity until marriage leads to secretive and often unsafe abortion practices among young women. In many African societies, the strict adherence to religious and cultural doctrines that condemn premarital sex and abortion creates

an environment where women in fear of being judged seek abortion secretly risking their health and lives.

Some traditional practices such as virginity testing found in some African societies are used to ascertain a young woman's virgin status, failing such tests usually result in severe consequences. A study by El-Gibaly *et al* (2002) highlights that in Egypt, the cultural and religious expectations surrounding virginity significantly impact women's decisions regarding abortion with many opting for unsafe procedures to avoid social stigma. The cultural norms in northern Africa emphasize the importance of virginity due to strong Islamic and traditional influences. Women who face unintended pregnancies are driven by fear of disgrace to seek abortions.

Even in Muslim regions of west Africa such as Senegal and Mali, the emphasis on chastity, modesty and prohibition of marital sex creates an environment where deviation from this norm leads to severe stigmatization. Women and young girls often seek abortion to avoid shame. Agadjanian (2001) found that in these regions, the cultural and religious imperatives to maintain virginity significantly influence abortion decisions with many women resorting to unsafe methods due to fear of stigma and retribution.

Virginity does not only impact the practice of abortion negatively, these practice can result in lower rates of premarital sex which in turn can reduce the number of unintended pregnancies and subsequently, the practice of abortion. Practices such as virginity testing promotes abstinence among young women which can indirectly contribute to the reduction in the need for abortion.

Some communities have initiatives focused on promoting abstinence and virginity until marriage as a means to improve reproductive health outcomes. A report by the Population Council (2009) on youth reproductive health programs in sub-Saharan Africa indicates that abstinence education has been effective in reducing premarital sexual activities and unintended pregnancy in certain communities. The intersection of virginity and abortion creates a complex environment between traditional, religious, social values and the struggles of women that struggle to meet these expectations.

The cultural and societal emphasis on maintaining virginity until marriage significantly influences abortion practices in African societies. The fear of stigma, cultural and religious condemnation contribute to several factors that drive women to seek abortion especially unsafe abortion.

Summary and Recommendations

Virginity holds significant cultural and social importance in African society. There are several practices such as virginity testing, initiation rites that further emphasize the importance of virginity practice. Virginity is often used to mark integrity, purity, and bring great social status in African society. This usually affects young women as it influences their marriage prospects, social status and reputation. The viability for women not to keep their virginity until marriage has severe consequences, so the pressure to conform to these norms can lead to anxiety.

Although the traditional views on virginity still hold, contemporary African society is changing due to globalization, education and westernization. Virginity is not practiced regularly like before in contemporary times. Abortion is a regular practice in Africa; although there are several societies, unsafe abortion is regularly practiced among African women. Abortion laws in African society vary significantly and are usually influenced by the culture or religion of the particular country. It ranges from highly restrictive to more liberal policies. The legal landscape is influenced by colonial legacies, religious beliefs and sociopolitical dynamics.

In African society, religious beliefs, like Christianity, Islam and indigenous faith play a crucial role in shaping the societal attitudes towards abortion. It is majorly viewed as unacceptable and contributes to the stigma of those that engage in such practices. The cultural emphasis placed on virginity can directly influence abortion. As a result of fear and social stigma, unintended pregnancies out of wedlock lead to significant pressure which often drive women to engage in abortion, usually unsafe abortions to preserve their reputation.

Maintaining the appearance of chastity is paramount in African society which encourages women especially young adolescents to engage in risky behavior to avoid social consequences of being perceived as sexually active.

With the intricate relationship between virginity and abortion, in the African context, there are several recommendations to address the health, social and cultural challenges associated with these practices. One of the issues associated with abortion is the restrictive laws. Government should consider revising restrictive abortion laws, to ensure women have access to safe and legal abortion services. These reforms should be in line with international human rights standards focused

onprotecting the health of women. Comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education is ofparamount importance in African society. Most adolescents usually end up with unplannedpregnancies when experimenting sex. It should be added to school curricula and communityprograms. This education should also address the religious and cultural dimensions of bothvirginity and abortion and also dispel several myths and misconceptions thereby fostering asupportive and understanding environment for women.

It is crucial to change social attributes towards virginity and abortion. While it is important torespect cultures and traditions, women's health and rights are very essential. Community basedsupport systems should be established to provide counseling and assistance to women facingreproductive health challenges. Rather than stigmatizing those that engage in such practices likeabortion, the community should be more sympathetic and accepting. Investing in the proper andcorrect healthcare infrastructure and facilities in African societies will help give women access toquality health services. Post-abortion care services should also be provided to assist those whoengage in unsafe abortion practices.

Continuous research and data collection are necessary to understand the evolving dynamics ofvirginity and abortion in African societies. Data driven approach will ensure that policy makingand program development are in line with the needs of women.

Conclusion

In exploring the relationship between virginity and abortion in African society, it has becomeevident that these practices are greatly influenced by cultural, religious and social dynamics. Thetraditional emphasis placed on virginity shapes attitudes towards sexuality and reproductivechoices which include abortion. The intersection of virginity and abortion reveals that culturalnorms, societal pressure and religious practices help in shaping women's reproductive decision.

The stigmatization or premarital sex and practice of virginity often push women towards unsafeand clandestine abortions to maintain the image of purity. Legal and policy reforms focused on human rights can help protect the right to health andautonomy. Investing in healthcare and training that ensures safe and legal abortion services willhelp reduce the incidence of unsafe abortions. Public awareness campaigns that address thecultural and religious dimensions of virginity and abortion are

also key in dispelling myths, reducing stigma and promoting more empathy towards women's health. Community engagement and education will also help in transforming societal attitudes.

Ultimately, the path forward involves integrating legal, educational and community based strategies. By looking into cultural pressures surrounding virginity and the stigmatization of abortion, African societies can create an environment where women's health and rights are prioritized and protected. Africa countries through collective effort can pave the way for a future where women can be empowered to make informed and free reproductive decisions.

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