

# Women's Experiences with Sex Position Decisions in Heterosexual Relationships in Ghana

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## Introduction

The paper is about Ghanaian women and men's cultural beliefs about sex positions and women's sexual agency thereof. In countries in Africa, dominant ideologies of masculinity are seen as a threat to women's practices of sexual negotiations. Based on the narratives of 20 women and 16 men in a suburb of Accra, the present study highlights Ghanaian women's sexual agentic capacity by investigating the factors that trigger women and men's sex position decision making in Ghana. Sex positions form important aspects of human sexuality and the study which is located in issues of gender, sexuality, and cultural beliefs brings to light knowledge on intimate partner relationships especially in relation to women's sexual and reproductive choices.

Sex positions are those positions that men and women perform during sexual intercourse. There are different sex positions and Hooper (2000), for example, illustrates several types of positions (such as the yawning position, the widely opened position, acrobatic position, erotic sculptures, the elephant posture, side-by-side, rear entry 'penetration', and so on) which women and men engage with during sex.

Sex positions stimulate sexual pleasure. Although a union between a woman and a man is intended as a source of procreation, it also provides a reliable means for the satisfaction of sexual desires (Amidu et al., 2011; McFadden, 2003). Studies (e.g. Bizimana, 2010; Carroll, 2007; Ratele, 2008) show that sex positions offer partners the opportunity to enhance sexual satisfaction. Sexual displeasure could create grounds for conflict or sexual discontent (Oniye, 2008), sexual risk (Fiaveh, 2014; WHO, 2006), and the exercise of sexual rights (McFadden, 2003; Oriel, 2005). Bizimana (2010), for example illustrated how *Kunyaza* as a sexual technique enables the genital erogenous zones of a woman to be stimulated to increase sexual pleasure based on the several sex positions it offers the partners involved. *Kunyaza* is a traditional sexual technique used in Central and Eastern Africa (e.g., in Burundi, Rwanda, the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Western Uganda and Western Tanzania), which has the reputation of triggering female orgasm during heterosexual encounters. The *Kama Sutra* also presents sex manuals indicating different sex positions and techniques that can be performed to enhance sexual pleasure (see Carroll, 2007).

Sex positions decisions are also contingent upon sexual beliefs and gendered power relations (Carroll, 2007; Jewkes & Morrell, 2010) with religion and marriage considered as the influence. Some women (e.g., married women) are perceived as less able to negotiate their sexual spaces (see Adomako Ampofo, 2006; McFadden, 2003; Pereira, 2003) than other women (e.g., unmarried women). Dominant masculinities that stress on male sexual dominance (e.g., men's sexual 'weakness' or 'unfaithfulness') and notions of a 'good' woman (e.g., should not deny

husband sex) and 'love' are perceived as means to suppress women's sexuality. Carroll (2007), for example, notes that in the context where sexual pleasure tends to be defined as a motivation for the kind of sex position employed, women tend to be subjugated, especially as they seek to ensure a male partner's fidelity or 'faithfulness'.

However, studies show that different cultures structure women's sexual agency differently and being male does not necessarily confer power over women's sexuality (see Butler, 2011; Connell, 1995; Cornwall & Lindisfarne, 2005; Howson, 2006). The authors argue that women draw on different forms of agentic strategies in negotiating hegemonic sexual practices. Thus, while hegemonic sexual practices can be a treat to women's sexuality, Fiaveh et al. (2014) and Howson (2006) note different versions of femininities and argue that 'protest' femininity is one of women's agencies in negotiating hegemonic masculinities. For example, a man's decision to discontinue an unwanted sexual practice is influenced by fear of being 'stripped' off his masculinity through loss of respect or being ridiculed as a result of a woman's protest by means of screaming or shouting to signal an unwanted sexual practice (Fiaveh et al., 2014: 10). Women also engage in 'protest' femininity by using the vagina to seek men's compliance to their sexual terms (Adomako Ampofo, 2007; Fiaveh, 2014). Thus, 'protest' femininity as an agentic strategy allows women to engage in a dialogical sexual encounter with men (Howson, 2006). However, we know little about how women portray themselves as active agents of sex position decision making. How do women portray themselves as active agents of sexuality in their reflections on sex positions decisions?

## **Method**

The study was exploratory in character. The population of interest were Ghanaians, 15 years and above, who had ever had sex, were residents of Madina, and willing to participate in the study. The reason for this is because this population consists of the dominant age bracket of people who report being sexually active in Ghana (GDHS, 2008). Within this population, interviewees were selected based on ethnicity, education, marital status, religion, and sexual activity. Interviewing these sub-groups also brought heterogeneity to the sample and diversity of beliefs and experiences in matters of sexuality.

Access to interviewees was in their homes and work places (based on appointment). Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used. Purposive sampling was used because of its effectiveness in identifying specific interviewees (Bryman, 2008). For example, there was the need to capture the experiences of different demographic groups such as the married and the unmarried, the employed and the unemployed, as well as variations in ethnicity, religion and sexual experiences. The interviewer approached potential interviewees (such as female artisans at work i.e., a seamstress) with the view of having a general discussion about young people's sexual behaviour. This approach was useful because in Ghana, adult women and men are willing to share their views on young people's sexuality, especially in relation to what they regard as the 'immoral' behaviour of the youth. We discovered that a good approach was for the interviewer to ask a female participant to share her views on young people's sexual behaviour and then redirect the conversation to focus on the participant's own sexual experiences.

We then employed snowballing to identify other interviewees who were willing to participate in the study. This method was appropriate because the study concerned a sensitive issue, sexual pleasure, for which we required the knowledge of persons who know those who would be willing to participate. For female interviewees in particular, the interviewer started each discussion with an oral vignette technique that problematised men's control over women's sexuality.

The central question was: what influences the sexual position you adopt during the act (probing for the choice of a sex position and for why)? The interviewees mentioned different kinds of sex positions, which were categorized into five main sex positions, namely *woman on top position*, *man on top position*, *side-by-side position*, *rear-penetration position*, and *standing sex position*. The reasons for choosing these five main categorizations are based on our assumptions that regardless of which positions partners are engaged in, a partner is either on top of another partner or vice versa, none of the partners are on top of each other, which we classify as partners lying *side-by-side* of each other (third category), or engaging in what is known as *rear entry 'penetration'* (fourth category, i.e., squatting or kneeling for sex e.g., the 'doggy' position), and *standing to have sex* (fifth category). Any other sex positions involve position variations.

Considering the non-random nature of the selection of participants, caution should be exercised in generalising the findings of this study.

## **Results**

Overall, 20 women and 16 men aged 22 to 79 years participated in the study. The age distribution shows that more than half of interviewees were under age 40, reflecting the comparatively the youthful age structure of Accra. With the exception of two interviewees who were pursuing full-time education, the rest were working. Twenty-two were Christian, 10 were Muslims and three did not belong to any religious faith. Sixteen were married. Thirty-three had attained at least some basic education except three. Sex position decisions were gendered and derive from differences in sexual awareness, power play over sexual pleasure or displeasure, and perceptions of fear.

### ***Sexual awareness***

The media (TV, radio, newspaper, and internet) and friends (hearsay) were the main sources of sexual messages for the majority of interviewees. Other sources of sexual knowledge include books (e.g., religious texts, fiction and love stories) and personal experiences. Women reported more access to the media than men did. In particular, younger women patronized media messages that discussed sexual matters than men and older women (those above 35 years). They patronized Telenovela films or Soap Opera and 'talk shows' (both local and foreign) that construct sexuality in relation to eroticism or romance or love. Others contain scenes of kissing and sexual messages that centre on 'real' men (e.g., loving and caring men/husbands, 'responsible' men, and 'good-looking' men). Messages also strengthened stereotypical sexual beliefs such as *men like too much sex* and *men lack sexual control*.

In terms of the nature of sexual beliefs, men (younger men in particular) perceived a relationship as necessarily involving sexual intercourse while women stressed that sex is about love, should ideally occur in marriage, and should be guarded. Expressions such as *I was brought up as a*

*decent [good] woman, I was not a spoilt girl, my parents were strict on us/me, I did not associate with bad friends, and I am the shy type* were some of the narratives that women and some men used in discussing sex and morality. Whereas to women, being pressured to have sex was forced sex, younger men perceived being pressured for sex is ‘proper’ masculinity because women only express love ‘openly’ to ‘real’ (e.g., *handsome*) men, and any man who refuses a woman’s request for sex is ‘stupid’ and weak<sup>4</sup>. This view is popularly expressed in the local parlance as *emaa pε marima w ɔ hu ɔfε* [Twi, meaning women ‘fall’ for *good-looking men*].

### ***Agency of sexual pleasure***

Both women and men indicated that their preference for a particular sex position is because of the pleasure they derive from engaging in that position. For women, sexual discomfort experienced through deeper penile ‘penetration’ or during their menstrual cycle trigger their refusal to have sex.

Being on top of a male partner makes some women have power to control the sexual pace. For example, some interviewees claimed that a “woman on top” position enables them to delay their partner’s ejaculation (what they referred to as ‘release’ or ‘come’) especially in situations where such partners tend to experience early ejaculation.

The women were not inhibited in any way regarding sex position decisions irrespective of their religious persuasions. *Memuna* a married Muslim woman who has ever divorced on grounds of relationship dissatisfaction indicated that though her current husband prefers being on top during sex (i.e., husband prefers man on top sex position), she does not, because that position makes her ‘*insignificant*’ during sex. Therefore, she mentioned that she negotiates for her preferred sex position, to be on top not only for pleasure (*I enjoy sex [have sexual pleasure] more when I’m on top*) but also for power and recognition (*in-charge*).

Adventure and fun were important as partners sought to explore varying sex position techniques for pleasure. Some interviewees reported that the ultimate aim of sex is for pleasure, hence the need to explore varying options to stimulate sexual desires and the pleasures of women in particular. Women and men were of the view that women do not like as much sex as men do hence the view that women’s interest in sex could be heightened by making sex more pleasurable. However, engaging a woman in difficult sex positions (e.g., standing sex position) could constitute grounds for her to refuse a man sex.

Marriage and steady relationship also explain women’s decision to engage a male partner in sex positions for adventure or for fun. From the perspective of some male interviewees, the ability to perform certain sex positions depends on the physical characteristics of partners such as how muscularly or athletic they look. Hence, some sex positions are most preferred with casual female sexual (unmarried) partners than a regular (married) partner in order not to give grounds to be refused. A male aged 73 years corroborated this:

You see there are some women who don’t like “too” [very] much sex just as some men. So you don’t worry them too much with theses difficult styles [sex positions]. They may not be willing to do them. Some of the styles [giggles] unless you get an outsider that you can have

this style with [standing and kneeling]. This one, man on top, can be with your wife. So this is what I usually do with my wife. (Uncle, divorcee, not religious).

The women, thus, draw on men's notion of women and sex to negotiate sex position decisions. Since men assume that women do not like too much sex as men do, women's agentic capacity in negotiating sex positions was aided by hegemonic assumptions of female sexual disapproval.

### ***Sexual fears***

Both women and men in our sample had sexual fears. The fears included 'bad' or unwanted sexual practices due to lack of sexual restraint, in particular, the choice of a sex position. Moral upbringing (with religion as an important factor) and sexual consciousness informed this view. Expressions such as *my religion forbids that* and *it's not good* were used to exercise sexual resistance through religious consciousness. With the exception of four interviewees (a woman and three men), the rest reacted negatively to anal sex and were of the view that anal sex is a 'bad' sexual practice. For the elderly (those above 35 years) in particular, moral upbringing informed 'conservative' sex positions (e.g., man on top position) and the need to exercise some restraint in sex whether one is married or not married.

Women used threats of sexual refusal in negotiating for sex positions. The women indicated that their men need vagina to have sex, hence, women used 'real' masculinity to negotiate their sex position preferences. *Sitsofe*, a married woman gives us some inkling of how she goes about her 'transactional' sexual negotiation strategies:

You see, mostly, he is the one in need of the thing [sex]. Me I can stay aaah without sex and nothing will happen to me. I only feel for it occasionally. So he knows this. He knows that I like this position or I don't like that position, so if he insists, I will just get up and go into the hall and leave him lying there. I have ever tried this before. He will come and beg me that "Let's go to bed, I will never try that again". (31 years, Christian).

Even for women who were blackmailed (e.g., threatened that the relationship would end) to have sex, they still managed to use the vagina to negotiate sex on their own terms.

Further, both women and men also shared fears about their reproductive health in relation to sex positions. Some sex positions (e.g., the doggy-style) were perceived as causing harm to the human reproductive sexual organs, especially to the uterus of a woman and the male testicles (e.g., the woman squatting or sitting on top). The *standing sex* position, for example, was seen as a risky sexual practice especially on men's sexual health as it can cause stroke. This perception was steeped in myths and misconceptions. Even for some men, some positions (e.g., woman on top sex) could have negative effects on their phallic competence, i.e., the inability to make a woman pregnant in future.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The study explored women and men's construction of sex position decision making and highlight women's sexual agentic capacity based on in-depth interviews with 20 females and 16 males.

Women were not willing to compromise on sex positions that could trigger unwanted sexual practices. Moral upbringing (cultural and religious) and health consciousness played an important role in the sexual practices among the elderly (40 years and above), women in particular. The moral influence on women's sexual behaviour was mainly through religious expressions such as "*my religion forbids that*" and "*it's not good.*" Both genders had conservative attitude towards some sexual practices (e.g., anal sex, and sex in a standing position) although women were more conservative than men were. Elderly women in particular deeply reflected upon their own moral beliefs in sex decision making and were more reluctant to explore varying sexual positions. In this regard, Van der Geest (2001) is perhaps right about *women's* sexuality in Ghana when he suggests that sex at old age is seen with a considerable amount of restraints.

The preference of sex positions depict power relations (Jewkes & Morrell, 2010) as a result of changing roles, i.e., from a *man on top* (male control) to a *woman on top* (female control). For some women, gaining 'control' during sex is a good feeling and a reverse of sex roles which enables them to negotiate their sexual pleasure and gender. Agency exercised through sexual resistance formed the basis for women's sex positions negotiations in this study. The findings show that although men do persuade women to engage in diverse sexual practices including engaging in sex positions, women know that 'real' men need the vagina to complement their penis, hence, women use the vagina to negotiate sex on their own terms. In most instances women are aware when they are being coerced or blackmailed into engaging in unwanted sexual practices, in that they know and understand the deception by men, and the idea of being forced into sex. Their response is a personal choice

Gender differences about sex misconceptions typify refusal attitudes towards certain sex positions. The willingness to perform certain sex positions or not derives, at least in part, from sexual myths and misconceptions related to beliefs that one could suffer from an ill health such as rheumatism or stroke as a result.

To conclude, the study contributes to views (e.g., Howson, 2006) that show that women draw on 'protest' (e.g. threat of sexual refusal) femininities in strategically negotiating sexual practices with men. Sometimes the 'protest' involves power for recognition or for sexual pleasure, at other times it is influenced by fears of reproductive health risks. There is, thus, the need to deconstruct stereotypes and misconceptions about women's sexuality and to address issues including fears that would make sex more pleasurable for women and men.

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