

Extended Abstract

The study investigates the complexities of female students' marginal lives and examines the heterodoxy of ways and means in which they, through their agency, attempt to survive and move beyond the meanings and frontiers of their conditions. Here, focus is on the high-risk liaisons among female students of Owerri town. These female students' activities are popularly known as *Mbomchi* (among students), while the male collaborators, most often total strangers, are called *Ndi-Ogo*, which literarily means 'in-laws'. This study is undertaken in the context of the co-presence of local and global social practices and imaginaries that not only shape these students, but are also shaped by them.

Mbomchi, a very much prevalent urban social factor with no abating signs, constitutes an expanding arena of sexual activity among female adolescents in Nigeria, but has received very little or no research attention. Its problematic nature stems from the agency of female students, which is also a product of societal deprivation, poverty and marginality. These activities involve a complex sexual networking and HIV high-risk liaisons between young female students and certain male collaborators. Among these female students of tertiary institutions, sex is seen as a vital activity for creative self-expression and necessary for survival. Thus, in a setting of economic decline, poverty and lack of promise, sex is seen by them as compensatory, a pleasurable escape from the reality of lives availed of little other physical gratification. However, the circumstances of *Mbomchi* make it very difficult for these students to refuse unsafe sex or properly negotiate safer sex. Thus, these students prefer 'risking death for survival'. The *Mbomchi* syndrome has, however, escalated in recent times due to worsening economic conditions in the country and in response to deepening household impoverishment.

This study is basically focused on the causes and socio-cultural contexts of *Mbomchi*; its mode(s) of operation; and the inherent implications for the participants. Three tertiary institutions were used for the study. These are: Imo State University, Alvan Ikoku College of Education, and the Federal University of Technology, all in Owerri, Imo State. The schools have a combined student population of about 93,000. Females constitute more than half of the populations. It employs an eclectic framework in the sourcing of its data. This framework ensured that the three basic purposes of this research – exploration, description and explanation – were achieved. Data was got through questionnaires, in-depth interviews (IDIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), direct observation and secondary sources. For the questionnaires, a sample size of 1,868 respondents were randomly selected (among female students of these institutions) for survey. In-depth interviews were conducted in order to

elicit necessary information from key-informants knowledgeable in the concerns of this study. The participants were selected from among female and male students, and “*Ndi-Ogo*” (the clients) who have pertinent knowledge and experiences for our purposes. In addition and in order to obtain a perspective different from that expressed by the ‘involved’, the general public – lecturers, parents and even lay persons – in the area of study were interviewed on their perception of the *Mbomchi* sexual activities in the society.

Focus group discussions were held to ascertain collective views and/or dissensions concerning the issues at stake and to comparatively assess the views of different age and sex groups. Particularly important here are issues bordering on the socio-cultural factors influencing the sexual activities and society’s contributions to the plight of the female students involved. The efforts of the society towards ameliorating the situation was equally be evaluated. There were ten FGD sessions in all (two in each of the schools studied and two in the wider society). Direct observation involved short-term close ‘associations’ and ‘socialisations’ with some of those being studied (both genders and groups). Similarly, some existing literature – books, monographs, articles, and other unpublished materials (such as dissertations and theses) – on the subject of study or related to it were also used. Information from both the observation method and literature was used in interpreting and analysing, by buttressing or refuting, information from the other sources.

The research was conducted in Owerri city in Southeastern Nigeria. Owerri is the city-capital of Imo State in Southeastern Nigeria. It is set in the heart of the southeast and currently has a projected population of about 565,470 (NPC, 1991). Owerri was a major pre-colonial settlement of a group of the Igbo stock, and further developed into a popular township and administrative center in colonial times. In 1976, with the creation of Imo State from the former East Central State, it became the state capital. This status led to further rapid development in the area. Owerri has a high concentration of tertiary institutions dotting various parts of the small city. Such important educational institutions in Owerri include the Imo State University, the Federal University of Technology, Alvan Ikoku College of Education, the Federal Polytechnic, the Michael Okpara College of Agriculture, and the School of Nursing.

A major source of curiosity about Owerri is the overwhelming concentration of hotels in the town. The curiosity lies in the fact that Owerri is basically a civil servant town lacking any meaningful industrial or commercial setups, and yet possesses about the highest concentration of hotels in the southeast of Nigeria. Indeed, hotel business (or the “hospitality” industry) is the fastest growing business in the city. This has significant

implications for our study. Another interesting dimension to this is that every weekend (from Friday evening to late Sunday or early Monday morning), these hotels located in different parts of the city are fully booked. This also has implications for the thriving of *Mbomchi* in the city, as these young female students are the ready ‘raw materials’, as one respondent puts it, used in these hotels.

Finally, this paper shows that it would be a gross mistake to conflate prostitutes with female students practicing *Mbomchi* and also markedly distinguishes the activity different from the notorious “Sugar Daddy” phenomenon prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa.