‘You are not a real man until you have scored’ masculine discourses and teenage pregnancy

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ABSTRACT
Despite the implementation of sex education programmes directed at reducing teenage pregnancy in Namibia, the battle seems to be lost as it continues to increase annually. In the light of this challenge, this article aims at discussing the role masculine discourses play in teenage pregnancy during boy's conversations in the Kavango East region. Focus group discussions and individual (face-to-face) interviews were used to collect data. The study is underpinned by social learning theory to analyse focus group and individual (face-to-face) interviews data with adolescent boys aged 17–20 years in public secondary schools. The study reveals that the discourses about masculinity when boys meet plays a part in sexual relationship decisions which sometimes lead to impregnation. During these conversations, boys use the word ‘score’, which refers to impregnating a girl to tease those who are never impregnated. The authors suggest that traditional authorities should include topics about positive masculinity targeting boys who are the main perpetrators during community meetings.

Introduction
Studies on teenage pregnancy have mostly centred on adolescent girls, but little is known about the impact boy's masculine conversations have had on the phenomenon. Teenage pregnancy is one of the most serious educational and social challenges currently facing Namibia and has become the focus of much discussion and debate in Namibia among policy-makers and traditional communities. For example, the Kavango East region had the highest recorded incidents of teenage pregnancy among the five Northern regions, with 545 of all teenage pregnancies reported there during the three terms (January – December) in 2018 (Parliamentary Standing Committee on Human Resources and Community, 2018). According to United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2017) half of Namibian adolescents have had their first sexual experience when they reach the age of 17. During this first sexual encounter adolescent boys view it as a landmark step towards manhood and a positive expression of their masculinity (Holland et al., 1998). The landmark towards manhood might serve as a gateway for adolescent boys to prove that they are real men by engaging in risky sexual activities. Adolescent boys during conversations might share their sexual experiences with friends, which can entice others to experiment sexual intercourse.

The high rate of learner pregnancy has been a problem in Namibia for many years and although steps have been taken towards developing policies to address this issue; however, as of 2009, the number of learners affected by pregnancy remains all too high (Ministry of Education, 2010). The majority of these pregnancies have been reported as unplanned (Flanagan et al., 2013). Male characters are driven by their strong desire to romantically conquer (literally to conquer or
romantically convince), this will mean initiating a romantic or sexual relationship with a beautiful woman and sex being the ultimate goal (Singleton et al., 2016). Studies (Indongo, 2020; Naulseb, Kloppers, & Mitonga, 2017) conducted in Namibia found that the use of contraceptives, age at which teenage girls had first sex, education level and household wealth status played a significant role.

Therefore, this article intends to contribute to the study of teenage pregnancy placing it in the larger context of interrelated meanings, cultural beliefs and the assumptions and conceptions around it, strongly influenced by gendered dominant discourses of masculinity. Thus, current debates and theories surrounding teenage pregnancy in schools are central to understanding boys’ discourses about masculinity, which shapes their sexuality to interact in risky sexual activities. In addition, the discussion boys have about sexuality with their peers are influenced by the context they find themselves in. Not incorporating this discussion would mean that boys’ discourses are perceived as not being significant to teenage pregnancy. We argue that such an approach is unrealistic and tantamount to suicide.

Although the mentioned studies played a critical role in identifying factors that contribute to teenage pregnancy, boys who are the main culprits remain less targeted. Boy’s masculine discourses are vital in this paper in the sense that schoolboys’ narratives of the self may be influenced by cultural practices, beliefs, and structure in the society that they belong to (Burr, 1995). The article explores the ways in which boy’s discourses accommodate masculine sexual prestige messages during conversations with friends and perpetuate risky sexual activities and teenage pregnancy. It is vital to point out that after boys listen to these masculine conversations some are influenced and tend to propose to girls who consent into boyfriend/girlfriend relationship but end up impregnating the girl. It is also imperative to state that debates about teenage pregnancy should include negative masculine discourse, which promotes sexuality when addressing teenage pregnancy.

The article drew on Bandura’s theory of social learning to understand and analyse the boys’ masculine discourses that contribute to teenage pregnancy. Bandura’s theory of social learning is used to understand how boys imitate masculine identity and sexual behaviours, observed in their context, influence their discussions. The theory can also be used to understand the occurrence and recurrence of boys’ masculine discourses. Akella and Jordan (2015) reckoned that people learn new behaviours by watching others in a social situation, absorb it and then imitate that behaviour. Children pay attention to some of these agents of socialization and imbibe the behaviours exhibited (Edinyang, 2016). Akella and Jordan posited that an individual’s immediate social circle generates behavioural models, which become a source of imitating behaviour. The immediate social circle includes family, friends, teachers, neighbours and church groups (Akella & Jordan, 2015). These social groups transmit attitudes, views, and values that an individual can adopt and imprint (Akers & Sellers, 2004). Edinyang (2016) further pointed out that social learning theory explains how people learn new behaviours, values, and attitudes. For example, a boy might learn certain attitudes by listening to his peers and observe how those attitudes are put in practice. The social learning theory is particularly applicable to this article as it aids the understanding of how boys acquire gender roles deemed appropriate in society through reinforcement of gender-appropriate behaviour, which influences their discussions. This theory presumes that behaviour of masculinity and sexuality (such as male/female or heterosexual/homosexual) is observed in their environment (parents, peers) and then imitated.

**Methods**

**Design and sampling**

An exploratory qualitative design guided both random and purposive sampling techniques to recruit adolescent boys from a diverse group of schools in the Kavango East region of Namibia representing the rural and urban divides. The choice of this design is based on the strengths of established
qualitative methodologies and methods, permitting a flexible adoption of techniques (Percy et al., 2015). Pitney and Parker (2009) stated that qualitative inquiry is very humanistic in the sense that qualitative researchers have an interest in, however, individuals understand their experiences, what they believe concerning problems and the way their interactions with others influence these attitudes and values. As the overarching study aim was to gain an in-depth understanding of how boy's masculine discourses contribute to teenage pregnancy in Namibian schools, an exploratory qualitative study was deemed appropriate.

**Participant recruitment**

The study included interviews with 42 male learners who were selected to participate in the interviews at the seven schools where the study was conducted. The ages of the learners ranged between 18 and 20 years at the time of the interview. Most of the learners interviewed were drawn from secondary schools comprising both boarding (4) and day schools (3).

The formal ethical process was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University. Permission was also obtained from the Director of Education and school principals of the selected schools. Consent form was given to each participant to complete. The selection of adolescent boys was based on their willingness to participate, the completion of the consent form and availability to be interviewed.

**Data collection**

Seven focus-group interviews (with six participants per school) lasted approximately 1 hour per round (had two rounds), while the individual interviews with seven participants (one at each school) lasted for 1 hour. Both interviews were conducted by the first author in an available room at the school. The focus group and individual interviews were used as a way to triangulate the data to confirm credibility. An interview schedule was used during both the focus-group discussions and individual interviews to probe meanings around masculinity and impregnation.

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and translated where necessary. This study primarily represents the voices of adolescent males who were interviewed to understand boy's masculine discourses as a possible driving factor of teenage pregnancy.

Throughout the article, the identities of participants were protected by the use of pseudonyms. In addition to confidentiality being assured by the researcher, it was vital to establish group confidentiality amongst the participants themselves because sensitive issues were discussed. The participants were informed that they were not compelled to answer questions that they were not comfortable with and could withdraw from the sessions if they chose not to participate any longer.

**Data analysis**

As a researcher, the first author used different stages while analysing the content. Firstly, he patiently listened and perfectly wrote down all important information of the recorded interview data (which was raw) from the voice-recorder to a text format. He then transcribed the data by listening repeatedly to the recorded data in order to be familiar with the data and also to comprehend what the participants meant.

During the final stage, which involved categorization of the content, the first author began to create categories by condensing the extended meaning units. This was done to scale back the number of words without losing the content of the unit. During this process, themes and categories were identified.
Results

Findings are presented in three themes that speak to ways in which the community and adolescent boys understand and perceive teenage pregnancy as well as the impact of masculine discourses of teasing other learners, thus enticing them to engage in risky sexual activities.

Community discourse about teenage pregnancy

The participants in this study revealed that the discourses of boys were not only gendered but also framed in a normative, heterosexual discourse portrayed by the community. Community discourses were amongst the enduring structures shaping boys’ masculine discourses and perspectives on ‘being a man’. Prime amongst these were discourses that encouraged boys or men to prove their manhood by procreating in order to prove being ‘real men’. The assertion above is reflected in the participants’ responses below:

Especially also traditional ways, yaa, and those people who rely on tradition they will also tell you that now that you are a man. Now you have reached that stage of whereby you can be able to produce babies and the door is open for you and also influence others also who never impregnated girls because they will be hearing how he just did it. (Vadi,20, Ntjuve SS).

For Payet, grandparents teasing their grandchildren to prove their virility influenced boys to engage in risky sexual activities, as his remarks show: *Just there, let me say like our grandparents because your mother will not tease that much but your grandparent will say, aah, the whole night you just move around but there is nothing important you are doing, we are not seeing anything. Like here in the rural area elders want namesakes and sometimes they scramble for a new baby to be named after them*. That also contribute to teenage pregnancy (21, Njiiru SS F 2).

According to Asha at Mashwa Secondary school, some rural community members applauded those who impregnated girls with the hope that the unborn child might become a productive citizen in the future. Asha asserted that, *[M]ost of the boys when they impregnate a girl or people in the community will say who knows maybe the person I brought, aah, aah, will be a minister from our community, who know, maybe the baby is going to become a principal, something like that.* (Asha, 19, Mashwa SS).

Unlike his peers, Silva seemed to be one of those who intimated that some discourses by urban community members discouraged pregnancies among teenagers. He remarked, *…especially in the community people use to say many girls are getting pregnant and those babies are not having fathers again. Let’s say when they used to go night times at the bars, they get boyfriends and sleep with that person, might get pregnant and she will not know who impregnated her and rather keep quiet. So, community members are saying, no, you must know the guy with whom you are sleeping with and you must always use protection again.* (18, Mbahe SS, FG2).

The assertions above show that there were some variations between the urban/rural divide, on how they perceived teenage pregnancy.

Boys’ discourses on teenage pregnancy

Regarding boys’ discourses on teenage pregnancy, the findings reveal that many of the participants felt that having unprotected sex enabled them to impregnate girls and thereby demonstrate their masculine identity. The pressure to prove one’s virility with the aim of producing children took precedence over the need to use contraceptives to prevent pregnancy. Katlego’s narratives reveal this. He said, *[O]k, to start off, aah, what the boys say in the community, it depends to the cultures and traditional customs. In some cultures, the boy always praises the man that impregnated and have kids that, aah, that he is fertilized. So, in some cultures they may praise him but some cultures will not because he was still in school it was not good for him to impregnate someone.* (18, Lishuli SS).
Dogmatrix was of the opinion that boys, ‘... especially like your friends they will be proud of you because you will influence them especially for saying that my father is proud of me, proud of the way I impregnate those girls’ (20, Ntjuve SS). Another participant reckoned that boys felt proud about impregnating girls and stated that, ‘[S]tarting with friends, you will enjoy because it is the first time to have a kid but when your parents and your girlfriend’s parents come to meet to ask about the pregnancy there, you will have stress’ (Silva, 19, Mbahe SS).

In response to how the boys’ discourses have an effect on teenage pregnancy, one of the participants made the following comments:

‘Those discussions for example, we are four friends and two had scored (term used for impregnating) while the other two not, what will happen is that one of the two will tell the other that our friends scored we must also impregnate since the way they are talking about it seems like they are enjoying it.’ (Payet, 21, Njiiru SS, FG 1, 21/06/2018). He further asserted that, ‘... yes that can also motivate one because like I said previously if I already scored and I am praised that I am a man and my friends not, it will lead to others if they have girlfriends to feel they are not real man which will influence them to score especially here in rural areas.’ (Payet, 21, Njiiru SS, FG1, 21/06/2018).

When the participants were further probed about whether boys’ discourses about being a man motivated them to impregnate girls, their replies were unanimous, as follows:

Yes, definitely it contributes to teenage pregnancy, let’s say like if one has many girlfriends you just become an idol, people will admire you because among your children some might be doctors which makes you popular and when they elect a headman you also will be included, now when boys hear about that belief they will say, ooh, headman, me I will also try so that I become popular (Asha, 19, Mashwa SS).

The glamorization and the cultural expectation for one to be considered fertile through having a child seems to influence boy’s discussion about teenage pregnancy. It was further revealed that the discussions of boys once in a group played a role for others to impregnate, especially for those who were inexperienced.

On the question of whether boys’ masculine discourses contributed to teenage pregnancy in schools, one participant remarked:

Yaa (Yes), that is one important thing, I think it is also contributing very much to teenage pregnancy, boys, the way they discuss things, they don’t discuss positively but in a way of teasing each other’s and through that, for example, I can meet with a friend and start teasing him that I don’t know whether you had been with a girl but we never heard that you also gave a name to someone or somewhere. (Sadio, 20, Njiiru SS).

The fear to be ridiculed ‘weak’ by the group members during discussions coupled with the desire to prove that one is able to impregnate was seen by some participants of this study to contribute to teenage pregnancy. The respondents were therefore in agreement that discussions about maleness influenced those who formed part of the discussions to impregnate.

**Masculine discourse as a cause of teenage pregnancy in schools**

Participants of this study agreed that boys’ discourses played a role in influencing some boys to impregnate girls at school or in the community, as remarked below:

‘It does contribute because when we are in a group of boys we talk, we admire a certain girl maybe that girl is always showing off, she didn’t accept anyone among us, she refuses every time when she is proposed when we will be together, we will then agree that, that girl anyone of us whom she will accept to make sure that you impregnate her.’ (Katlego, 18, Lishuli SS). Katlego further reiterated during the second focus group discussions that, ‘[L]ike we said, how it contributes it makes boys through the discussion they have some will tease each other by saying that one is a “moffie” like that which might make someone to do it, Yaa (yes), eeh, that pressure from friends in order for you not to be called a “moffie” or teased.’ (Lishuli SS).
One of the fundamental dimensions in relation to masculine discourses from the data is that respondents agreed that masculine discussions amongst boys had contributed to teenage pregnancy. The data revealed that pressure from friends mocking those without girlfriends whenever boys had conversations resulted in others to engage in risky sexual activities. Put differently, there is a distinct sense from the data that if the participant’s identity as sexual beings are removed, their identities as men might be severely thwarted whenever he had conversations with his peers.

**Discussion**

While studies have identified risk factors such as individual level, demographic, socio-economic and reproductive health knowledge, and behaviour parameters to be determinants of teenage pregnancy (Indongo, 2020; Nauiseb, Kloppers, & Mitonga, 2017; United States Agency for International Development [USAID], 2011), this article highlighted the continued evidence of boy's masculine discourses as a possible cause of adolescent pregnancy.

**Community discourse about teenage pregnancy**

On the one hand, teenage pregnancy was seen as a marker of manhood and a way of giving birth to someone who would be a productive citizen, but others saw it as a contributor to fatherless children in the community.

This study established that the habits (attitudes, beliefs, disposition, and behaviour) of the community on male sexuality influenced boys in the community to impregnate girls. This was evident from participants who indicated that in some communities, especially in rural areas, boys were not expected to sleep alone (meaning without a girl). The practice, according to the participants in the study, encouraged them to find girls they could sleep with, which in turn might result in pregnancy. Another practice/belief pointed out by the participants, which led to them impregnating girls is when parents encourage them to get daughters-in-law who could help with household chores. Similarly, Edinyang (2016) said that in society, children are surrounded by many influential models, such as parents within the family. Edinyang (2016) further argues that children heed to some of these agents of socialization and imbibe the behaviours exhibited. The child who observes a certain behaviour frequently is expected at some point to imitate and reproduce said behaviour (Edinyang, 2016).

Participants of this study revealed that the glamorization and the cultural expectation for one to be considered fertile through having a child seems to influence boys' discussion about teenage pregnancy. Congruent with that finding, Krugu et al. (2017) stated that some participants became pregnant to prove their fertility and this highlights the way culture is shaping the dynamics of teenage pregnancy in northern Ghana. This study further revealed that discussions of boys once in a group played a role for others to impregnate especially for those who were inexperienced.

The participants of this study reported that parents’ beliefs and values that included that a man has to prove his virility by producing children could be seen as putting young boys at risk of impregnating. This was revealed by the participants who indicated that grandparents were the biggest culprits as they teased their grandsons who did not have a child by telling them that despite walking around the whole night they had nothing to show off. This, according to the participants, forced some boys to impregnate girls. It was further revealed that especially in rural areas (villages) elders scrambled for new-born babies to be named after them and boys in the community used that as reason to impregnate girls since the taking care of the baby will be left to the namesake who has to buy the clothes. In support of this finding, Burton and Meezan (2004) indicated that self-generated incentives may be affect-based, such as feelings of greater self-reliance, which may serve as an incentive for further behavioural reproduction.
Boys’ discourses on teenage pregnancy

Proving one’s masculine potency through impregnating blinded many of the boys in this community despite the availability of SRH (Sexual and reproductive health) programmes and their knowledge about the effects of HIV & AIDS. Boys in this study revealed that masculine discourses had an effect on teenage pregnancy. This, according to them, happened when in a group of four friends, two of them had impregnated girls, while the other two had not. Whenever the four friends meet, the boys who had impregnated girls would continuously talk about it until the others develop an interest and decide to also impregnate girls because they do not want to be belittled. The revelation is consistent with the social learning theory, which states that people observe characteristics of the models, their behaviour, and the aftermath of that behaviour, and then imitate them (Akers & Sellers, 2004). Mostly, the people with whom one is in immediate contact will become sources of imitations (Akers & Sellers, 2004).

The results of this study also indicate that boys’ discourses had an effect on teenage pregnancy in the following way: when their friends were praised for being a real man for impregnating girls some of those with girlfriends who were not pregnant felt they were not real man and this influenced them to impregnate girls. This is especially valid in rural areas. This, according to the findings of the study, affected inexperienced boys who did not know how to use contraceptives to prevent pregnancy as they normally did it flesh to flesh. Participants in the study further revealed that boys’ discourses about being a man motivated some boys impregnate girls as they idolized those friends with many girlfriends. Some were even motivated to impregnate girls thinking that one of the children might become medical doctors. In addition, Wight et al. (2006) in their study among youth in rural Northern Tanzania, observed that young virgin men were laughed at by those who have already engaged in sexual intercourse. This pressurizes young guys to provoke sex, to prove their masculinity. The assertions above are consistent with the findings of this study, which indicate that those that have not had sex before are almost coerced into having sex based on how their group of friends express themselves about their sexual experiences. Their desire to engage in sex based on these conversations has the potential to sidestep responsible sexual acts, which may have unintended consequences.

Masculinity discourses as a cause of teenage pregnancy in schools

The social learning theory especially, its tenet of observational learning occurs when an observer’s behaviour changes after viewing the behaviour of a model. Nabavi (2014) postulated that this theory is based on the idea that we learn from our interactions with others in a social context.

It was established that boys’ masculine discourses played a role in influencing some boys to impregnate girls at school or in the community. They pointed out that when they are in a group, they sometimes discussed certain girls each member was admiring, and if the girl was the type who always showed off they would strategise on how one of them would get her to agree to be in a relationship, but the aim would only be to impregnate her. These participants further revealed that during the discussions, those without a girlfriend or those that never had sexual intercourse would be teased or labelled as ‘moffies’, while those with girlfriends would be praised. The negative labelling made the other boys find girlfriends and engage in sexual activities so that, they would not be teased again. They even related their sexual experience and according to the participants that influenced others to experiment just to feel what it is like. It was also noted from this study that boys used words such as ‘score’ (impregnating) as a way to entice others.
Another revelation by the participants of this study is that during discussions, boys talked about the non-usage of condoms by reiterating that one must do it without a condom to feel the girl and that resulted in some boys not using a condom and contributing to teenage pregnancy. Consistent with this revelation, is a study by Habitu, Yale and Bisetegn (2018) which indicated that increased contraceptive non-use was found to have a statistically significant association with teenage pregnancy.

**Conclusion**

Against the backdrop of teenage pregnancy, this study highlights the importance of investigating how boy’s masculine conversation entices other boys to impregnate. The study demonstrates how they tease other boys in ways that both constrain and permit sexual agency. This they do by simultaneously accommodating and rejecting a conventional form of masculinity, which is acquiescent to male sexual entitlement. It is through their investment in pleasurable sex that they demonstrate their sexual prowess and in so doing validate the dominant assumptions that position men and adolescent boys as assailants of male sexuality. Much of the research on young male sexualities focuses largely on gender and sexual inequalities that perpetuate and reproduce active notions of masculinity. Such a framing does not allow for a comprehensive understanding of how boys masculine discourses put male youth at risk of impregnating. The use of language that is expressed here draws attention to these boys’ ability to assert power, which goes against familiar assumptions of men’s assertiveness in heterosexual relations. While there is evidence of resistance to peer pressure, the relative powerlessness of these adolescent boys remains ubiquitous. Ending negative masculine discourses that manifest in negative ways can contribute to the strategy of ending boys’ continued vulnerability towards sexual risk in Namibia. Schools can be a catalyst in this regard by offering sex education that engages with teenage boys, specifically drawing attention to their own attitudes, behaviours and practices that place them at risk. This is illustrated in ways in which having children feature prominently in the lives of these boys and has been identified as a factor that heightens vulnerability to peer sexual coercion and sexual risk. However, these boys are not simply victims of peers’ antics but acknowledge their own complicity and investment in joining the masculine discussions. Schools need to approach sexuality education in ways that bring attention to vulnerability and sexual agency as well as the persistent forms of gender inequalities through which boys’ vulnerabilities to masculine discourses become risky. Finally, promoting positive masculine discourse by engaging men and boys in order to realize the effect of risky sexual activities and reproductive health requires diverse partnerships, not only between programme implementers and researchers but also between those working on men and boys, parents and traditional authorities.

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