

Sexual Ethics in West African Communitarianism: A 21st Century Framework

Etika Seksual dalam Komunitarianisme Afrika Barat: Studi Kasus pada Abad ke-21

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Abstract

This research examines the tension between West African communitarian sexual ethics and contemporary individualistic approaches in addressing global sexual and reproductive challenges. Current human rights discourse often marginalises indigenous relational values, creating conflicts over marriage structures, gender roles, sexual identity, and reproductive autonomy that strain relationships and overlook communitarian wisdom. It demonstrates the relevance of West African communitarian personhood in addressing sexual ethical challenges facing contemporary societies. Using philosophical hermeneutics and analytical methods, the research interprets West African communitarian sexual ethics to reveal their particular and universal applications both within African contexts and globally. West African communitarianism offers a comprehensive framework combining relational and practical dimensions of sexual stewardship. This approach contrasts with individualistic models that prioritise personal autonomy over collective responsibility. Traditional West African sexual ethics emphasise communal oversight, intergenerational responsibility, and the interconnectedness of personal and collective well-being. The study identifies key principles, including collective sexual management, relational protocols for sexual expression, sexual restraint balancing community stewardship with individual autonomy, and intergenerational sexual responsibility. These principles address contemporary issues such as sexual violence, reproductive injustice, gender inequality, and relational breakdown. The research concludes that integrating West African communitarian sexual values with contemporary human rights frameworks offers a collaborative alternative to purely individualistic sexual ethics. This integration must remain grounded in indigenous communitarian systems to ensure participatory outcomes in addressing global sexual ethical challenges. Such collaboration recognises both individual rights and collective responsibilities, providing a more comprehensive approach than either framework offers in isolation.

Keywords: Sexual Ethics, Communitarianism, West African

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji ketegangan antara etika seksual komunal Afrika Barat dan pendekatan individualistik kontemporer dalam menangani tantangan seksual dan reproduksi global. Diskursus hak asasi manusia saat ini seringkali mengabaikan nilai-nilai relasional asli, menciptakan konflik seputar struktur pernikahan, peran gender, identitas

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seksual, dan otonomi reproduksi yang merusak hubungan dan mengabaikan kebijaksanaan komunal. Penelitian ini menunjukkan relevansi konsep kepribadian komunal Afrika Barat dalam menangani tantangan etika seksual yang dihadapi oleh masyarakat kontemporer. Menggunakan hermeneutika filosofis dan metode analitis, penelitian ini menafsirkan etika seksual komunal Afrika Barat untuk mengungkapkan aplikasi khusus dan universalnya baik dalam konteks Afrika maupun secara global. Komunitarianisme Afrika Barat menawarkan kerangka kerja komprehensif yang menggabungkan dimensi relasional dan praktis dari pengelolaan seksual. Pendekatan ini bertentangan dengan model individualistik yang memprioritaskan otonomi pribadi di atas tanggung jawab kolektif. Etika seksual tradisional Afrika Barat menekankan pengawasan komunal, tanggung jawab antar generasi, dan keterkaitan antara kesejahteraan pribadi dan kolektif. Studi ini mengidentifikasi prinsip-prinsip kunci, termasuk pengelolaan seksual kolektif, protokol relasional untuk ekspresi seksual, pengendalian seksual yang menyeimbangkan pengelolaan komunitas dengan otonomi individu, dan tanggung jawab seksual antar generasi. Prinsip-prinsip ini menangani isu-isu kontemporer seperti kekerasan seksual, ketidakadilan reproduksi, ketidaksetaraan gender, dan keretakan relasional. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa integrasi nilai-nilai seksual komunal Afrika Barat dengan kerangka kerja hak asasi manusia kontemporer menawarkan alternatif kolaboratif terhadap etika seksual individualistik murni. Integrasi ini harus tetap berakar pada sistem komunal asli untuk memastikan hasil partisipatif dalam menangani tantangan etika seksual global. Kolaborasi ini mengakui baik hak individu maupun tanggung jawab kolektif, memberikan pendekatan yang lebih komprehensif daripada yang ditawarkan oleh masing-masing kerangka kerja secara terpisah.

Kata Kunci: *Etika Seksual, Komunitarianisme, Afrika Barat.*

INTRODUCTION

West African communities have developed sexual ethics based on shared values and collective responsibility over many generations. These traditions offer both relational and practical approaches to managing sexual relationships that could address modern global challenges if properly understood and applied. The relational approach focuses on how individuals connect with their communities, recognising that personal sexual decisions cannot be separated from community well-being. This perspective views sexual relationships as part of a larger social fabric where individual actions ripple through the entire community, affecting relationships, social harmony, and collective identity. Menkiti (1984) describes this through collective and shared processes that shape personal identity through community participation, showing how individual development occurs within communal contexts.

Building on this foundation, modern scholars have expanded the relational framework to include multiple dimensions of human connection that work together in complex ways. Individual experiences, community expectations, and relational bonds create networks of support and accountability that help people handle sexual challenges. These elements interact constantly, creating dynamic systems where personal choices influence community standards and community values shape individual decisions. Ikuenobe (2006) explains how this integration includes individual, community and

relational elements working together to create balanced approaches to sexual responsibility.

The practical approach involves community ceremonies and rituals that guide sexual behaviour through concrete actions rather than abstract principles. These practices translate values into lived experiences, helping community members understand their sexual responsibilities through shared cultural events. Traditional ceremonies mark important transitions in sexual life whilst ongoing rituals reinforce community values and provide guidance for handling sexual challenges. Bujo (2001) documents how these ceremonial relationships between individuals and communities create structured approaches to sexual matters that combine spiritual significance with practical guidance.

Both approaches have strengths and weaknesses when used separately, creating incomplete understandings of sexual responsibility. The relational approach alone cannot fully explain how sexual responsibility works in everyday situations where people face specific choices and challenges. Understanding how people should relate to each other provides important guidance about general principles, but it does not always offer clear direction for particular sexual decisions when principles conflict or circumstances create uncertainty. Molefe (2019) notes that relational constituents prove insufficient in isolation to provide adequate comprehension of sexual stewardship because they lack practical mechanisms for applying relational insights to specific situations.

When we only focus on practical aspects, we often ignore how relationships affect sexual decisions and miss the social context that gives meaning to sexual choices. This creates a narrow view that treats sexual choices as simple individual matters without considering their social implications or the ways that community relationships influence personal decisions. Kelbessa (2020) demonstrates how this limitation occurs when sexual ethics is examined from the practical perspective alone, leading human sexuality relationships to be studied from an individualistic viewpoint at the expense of relational aspects that give sexual behaviour its social meaning.

Combining individual and community approaches to sexual ethics makes sense because sexual experience involves both personal desires and social relationships, but we need to examine carefully how community values shape sexual responsibility without overwhelming individual agency. The combination must be ethically grounded to

avoid simply merging different approaches without considering their implications or potential conflicts between individual rights and community expectations. Metz (2022) emphasises that this combination requires ethical interrogations to highlight the role of communitarian values in sexual stewardship whilst maintaining space for individual choice. This paper argues that solving sexual problems requires understanding how different peoples view relationships because the way societies organise their approach to sexual relationships fundamentally shapes how they identify, understand, and address sexual challenges. Societies that focus on individual rights will naturally use individual solutions to sexual problems, emphasising personal autonomy and choice. Meanwhile, societies that value community connections will use group approaches to solve sexual challenges, emphasising collective responsibility and shared decision-making. Matolino (2014) illustrates how these different orientations lead to fundamentally different approaches to addressing sexual ethical problems.

Many global attempts to solve sexual problems have failed because they ignore indigenous peoples who experience these problems directly and possess valuable knowledge about addressing them effectively. International policies often develop without consulting the communities most affected by sexual challenges, leading to solutions that do not fit local contexts or address actual needs. These communities have developed their own worldviews, relationship patterns, sexual values and ways of solving problems through generations of experience. Mbiti (1990) documents how these indigenous peoples possess communitarian worldviews, relational orientations, and indigenous ethical approaches to problems that confront them, some of which remain relevant for addressing sexual ethical problems confronting humanity.

Current sexual problems include sexual violence, gender inequality, reproductive injustice, relationship breakdown, sexual exploitation and identity conflicts that affect millions worldwide. Many solutions have been tried, but they often ignore community-based approaches that have worked for generations in West African societies. This creates a gap between global policies and local experiences, making solutions less effective than they could be if they incorporated indigenous wisdom alongside modern approaches.

To address sexual problems more effectively, this paper answers several questions: What causes sexual problems from a West African community perspective? What solutions have West African communities offered for these problems? How have West African traditions contributed to solving sexual problems whilst maintaining both individual well-being and community harmony? How can these traditional approaches work with modern human rights frameworks? This research will attempt to answer these

questions by examining West African communitarian sexual ethics and their potential contributions to addressing contemporary global sexual challenges.

DISCUSSION

Understanding West African Communitarianism as a Foundation for Sexual Ethics

West African communitarian personhood forms the bedrock of indigenous sexual ethics across the region, creating distinctive approaches to sexual responsibility that differ markedly from individualistic frameworks. This personhood concept views individuals not as isolated autonomous beings but as persons whose identity develops through relationships with family, community, and ancestral connections. Wiredu (1996) explains that among the Akan people of Ghana, the concept of *onipa* (person) only applies to individuals who demonstrate proper social relationships and communal responsibility. A person who acts solely for personal benefit without considering community impact is described as *onipa hu* - someone who appears human but lacks true personhood because they have severed their relational connections.

The relational dimensions of West African personhood create specific implications for sexual ethics that extend beyond individual choice or desire. Gbadegesin (1991) documents how, among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, sexual relationships are understood through the concept of *eniyan* - a fully realised person who embodies both individual agency and communal responsibility. Sexual behaviour that serves only personal pleasure whilst harming community relationships violates the principles of *eniyan*, making such behaviour not merely inappropriate but a fundamental denial of one's humanity. This understanding shapes how communities approach sexual education, with young people learning that sexual maturity involves accepting responsibility for how their choices affect others, not simply learning about sexual techniques or reproductive biology.

The interconnection between individual identity and community responsibility manifests differently across West African cultures but maintains consistent themes of mutual accountability and shared consequences. Nukunya (2003) describes how among the Ewe people of Ghana and Togo, sexual relationships are governed by the principle of *amenuveve* - collective harmony that requires individual actions to support community well-being. When someone engages in sexual behaviour that disrupts family relationships or community peace, they are said to have broken *amenuveve*, requiring community intervention to restore balance. This intervention does not focus solely on

punishing the individual but on healing relationships and preventing future disruption through education and ongoing support.

In Igbo communities of southeastern Nigeria, Kanu (2015) explains that the concept of *mmadu* (person) requires individuals to demonstrate *igwebuike* - collective responsibility where personal success depends on community flourishing. Sexual relationships that strengthen family bonds and community connections are celebrated through ceremonies and public recognition, whilst sexual behaviour that weakens these bonds requires community attention and restoration processes. The *umunna* (extended family group) plays a central role in guiding sexual relationships, providing advice for young people, mediating conflicts between partners, and ensuring that sexual relationships contribute to rather than detract from community stability.

Communitarian values shape sexual understanding and behaviour through established social structures that provide guidance, support, and accountability for sexual relationships. Rattray (1929) documents how among the Ashanti people of Ghana, the *abusua* (matrilineal clan) system creates networks of female elders who guide young women through sexual development and marriage negotiations. These women, known as *abusuapanin* (clan heads), possess detailed knowledge about sexual health, relationship dynamics, and family planning that they share through formal instruction and ongoing mentorship. Their guidance ensures that sexual relationships align with communal values whilst addressing individual needs and desires, creating approaches to sexual ethics that serve both personal fulfilment and social harmony.

The Hausa communities of northern Nigeria demonstrate how Islamic principles integrate with traditional communitarian values to create distinctive sexual ethics that respect both religious requirements and cultural practices. Smith (1959) explains that the concept of *gida* (household) extends beyond immediate family to include networks of relatives, neighbours, and community members who share responsibility for maintaining appropriate sexual behaviour. Marriage negotiations involve extensive consultation between families to ensure compatibility not only between individuals but between their social networks, economic circumstances, and community standing. Sexual relationships that threaten these connections require intervention from *malamai* (Islamic scholars) working alongside traditional *sarakuna* (chiefs) to address both religious and cultural dimensions of sexual responsibility.

Traditional expressions of sexual ethics across West African cultures reveal an understanding of how sexual relationships function within complex social systems that balance individual desires with collective needs. Sanneh (1989) documents how among the Mandinka people of Mali, Senegal, and Gambia, sexual ethics are expressed through *kuma* (words of wisdom) that connect sexual behaviour to community prosperity

and spiritual well-being. These teachings emphasise that sexual relationships generate energy that affects entire communities, making sexual responsibility a matter of collective concern rather than private choice. Young people learn these principles through storytelling, proverbs, and ceremonial instruction that prepares them for sexual relationships that will strengthen rather than weaken community bonds.

Case studies from contemporary West African communities demonstrate how traditional sexual ethics continue to function in modern contexts, adapting to new challenges whilst maintaining core communitarian principles. Fortes (1987) documents how in rural communities around Tamale, Ghana, traditional marriage customs have evolved to address concerns about women's education and economic independence whilst preserving communitarian approaches to sexual relationships. Young women now participate more actively in marriage negotiations, expressing their preferences and concerns, but these discussions still occur within family and community contexts that consider how marriages will affect extended networks of relationships. Similarly, Pittin (2002) describes how in villages around Kano, Nigeria, traditional Hausa marriage practices have incorporated modern legal requirements whilst maintaining communitarian oversight of sexual relationships. Community leaders now ensure that marriages comply with both Islamic law and Nigerian civil law, but they continue to emphasise how sexual relationships affect community harmony and economic stability. Marriage ceremonies include both traditional elements that celebrate community connections and modern elements that recognise individual rights, creating hybrid approaches that honour both traditional values and contemporary realities.

These examples illustrate how West African communitarian sexual ethics provide frameworks for understanding sexual relationships as fundamentally social phenomena that require community guidance, support, and accountability. Rather than viewing sexual ethics as primarily about individual choice or religious compliance, these traditions recognise sexual relationships as complex social processes that generate consequences for individuals, families, and communities. Gyekye (1997) argues that this understanding creates distinctive approaches to sexual education, relationship guidance, and problem resolution that could inform contemporary efforts to address global sexual challenges through more comprehensive and culturally sensitive methods.

The foundation of West African communitarian sexual ethics thus rests on recognition that sexual relationships exist within webs of social connection that give them meaning and significance beyond immediate personal satisfaction. This perspective offers alternatives to both purely individualistic approaches that ignore social consequences and purely authoritarian approaches that deny individual agency, creating space for

sexual ethics that honour both personal desires and collective well-being through ongoing dialogue, mutual support, and shared responsibility.

The Relational Framework of Sexual Ethics in West African Communities

The relational framework of sexual ethics in West African communities operates on the principle that sexual relationships exist within networks of social connection that give them meaning beyond individual satisfaction. Gyekye (1997) argues that West African sexual ethics ground themselves in the understanding that individual sexual behaviour directly affects community well-being, making sexual responsibility a shared concern rather than a purely private matter. This perspective challenges Western individualistic approaches that treat sexual relationships as primarily matters of personal choice.

Personal sexuality within this framework is conceived as a social phenomenon that emerges from community relationships rather than individual property or private expression. Wiredu (1996) explains that personal sexual identity develops through ongoing interaction with family members, community elders, and peer groups who provide guidance and accountability for sexual development. Sexual maturity is defined not simply as biological development but as social recognition of one's capacity to contribute to community reproduction and collective well-being. Menkiti (1984) argues that personhood itself is relational, developing through participation in community life and demonstrated commitment to collective prosperity. Sexual relationships that strengthen community bonds receive social approval, whilst sexual behaviour that weakens relationships requires intervention and restoration. This creates systems where sexual choices carry implications beyond immediate relationships, affecting family reputation and community harmony in ways that require ongoing dialogue.

Collective responsibility for sexual behaviour manifests through networks of elders, family representatives, and community leaders who share oversight of sexual relationships. Mbiti (1990) describes how these systems operate through consultation processes that seek solutions beneficial to all parties rather than imposing external authority. The collective dimension extends beyond immediate family to include neighbourhood groups, religious congregations, and occupational associations that create multiple layers of guidance and support. Ikuenobe (2006) explains that these networks provide accountability systems helping individuals maintain appropriate sexual behaviour whilst offering assistance when problems arise. Community oversight operates through established protocols that balance individual needs with collective requirements, creating frameworks that respect personal autonomy whilst ensuring sexual relationships contribute to community well-being.

Marriage and family relationships function as communal institutions rather than purely individual partnerships, establishing ongoing relationships between different families that create networks of mutual obligation. Ramose (2002) explains that marriage alliances affect community politics, economic cooperation, and social stability, making marriage selection a matter requiring extensive consultation. Sexual relationships within marriage are understood not simply as individual expression but as contributions to community reproduction and cultural continuity. Shutte (2001) argues that this institutional understanding creates frameworks where sexual responsibility involves consideration of how relationships affect children, extended family, and community bonds. Sexual relationships outside marriage are evaluated within the same relational framework, with communities guiding while maintaining expectations that sexual behaviour should contribute to collective stability.

Sexual consciousness develops through educational systems that combine practical instruction about sexual health with cultural education about relationship ethics and community obligations. Kelbessa (2020) describes how this education occurs through family instruction, peer learning, religious teaching, and community ceremonies providing ongoing guidance throughout sexual development. Sexual consciousness includes awareness of the interconnected nature of relationships and their implications for family harmony and spiritual well-being. Molefe (2019) argues that this consciousness requires ongoing attention to social context and willingness to adjust personal behaviour when it conflicts with community needs. Relational awareness involves understanding how sexual behaviour affects extended networks, including family members and future generations, creating responsibility to contribute to community guidance for others' sexual relationships.

The relational framework creates space for sexual ethics that honour both individual desires and collective needs through dialogue, mutual support, and shared responsibility. Metz (2022) explains that this offers alternatives to purely individualistic approaches that ignore social consequences and purely authoritarian approaches that deny individual agency. The framework recognises that healthy sexual relationships require both personal satisfaction and social support, seeking to optimise individual well-being and collective harmony simultaneously. This understanding provides foundations for addressing contemporary sexual challenges through approaches integrating individual protection with community support. Etieyibo (2017) argues that lasting solutions must address both personal healing and social transformation, creating comprehensive approaches that work on individual and collective levels to promote sexual well-being and community harmony.

Practical Applications of Communitarian Sexual Ethics

West African communities have developed practical systems for applying communitarian sexual ethics through ceremonies, rituals, and community-based interventions that translate relational principles into concrete actions. These practical applications demonstrate how traditional sexual ethics function in daily life, providing mechanisms for sexual education, relationship guidance, and conflict resolution that serve both individual needs and collective well-being.

Traditional ceremonies and rituals serve as primary vehicles for transmitting sexual ethics and establishing community expectations for sexual behaviour. Bujo (2001) explains that these ceremonies create structured opportunities for sexual education that combine practical instruction with cultural values, helping young people understand their sexual responsibilities within community contexts. Initiation ceremonies mark transitions from childhood to sexual maturity, establishing new relationships with community elders who provide ongoing guidance throughout adult sexual life. These ceremonial practices integrate spiritual, social, and practical dimensions of sexual development, creating comprehensive approaches to sexual education that address multiple aspects of human experience simultaneously. Hountondji (2002) argues that ceremonial instruction helps young people understand sexual relationships as sacred responsibilities that affect not only personal well-being but also community harmony and spiritual balance. The ceremonies establish ongoing relationships between initiates and community mentors who provide continuing guidance for sexual decisions and relationship challenges.

Ritual practices surrounding marriage negotiations and family formation demonstrate how communities apply relational principles to specific sexual decisions and relationship arrangements. Gyekye (1997) describes how marriage ceremonies involve extensive consultation between families to ensure compatibility not only between individuals but between their social networks and community connections. These negotiations consider how proposed marriages will affect existing relationships, economic arrangements, and social stability within the community. The ritual dimension of marriage formation creates public recognition of new sexual relationships whilst establishing community support systems for ongoing relationship maintenance.

Mudimbe (1988) explains that marriage ceremonies celebrate the joining of individuals within networks of family and community relationships that provide continuing guidance and assistance throughout married life. The ceremonies create formal obligations for extended family members and community associates to support the marriage and intervene when conflicts threaten relationship stability. Community-based approaches to addressing sexual problems reflect an understanding of how to balance individual

healing with collective restoration when sexual conflicts arise. Wiredu (1996) documents how West African communities maintain mediation systems that seek to understand the underlying causes of sexual problems rather than simply punishing inappropriate behaviour. These systems involve consultation with family elders, community leaders, and spiritual advisors who work together to develop solutions addressing both personal needs and community concerns. Conflict resolution processes typically begin with private consultation to understand individual perspectives and concerns before moving to family discussions that consider how sexual problems affect extended relationships. Shutte (2001) explains that these processes seek solutions that restore damaged relationships whilst preventing future conflicts through education and ongoing support. The approaches recognise that sexual problems often reflect wider social issues requiring community attention rather than simply individual intervention.

When sexual conflicts involve multiple families or threaten community stability, resolution processes expand to include neighbourhood representatives and traditional authorities who possess experience mediating complex social disputes. Ramose (2002) describes how these expanded mediation processes seek solutions that satisfy all parties whilst strengthening community bonds and preventing similar conflicts in the future. The processes emphasise restoration rather than punishment, focusing on healing relationships and rebuilding trust between affected parties. Integration of spiritual, cultural and social dimensions in sexual stewardship creates comprehensive approaches that address multiple aspects of sexual relationships simultaneously. Mbiti (1990) explains that West African sexual ethics recognise connections between sexual behaviour and spiritual well-being, requiring attention to how sexual choices affect relationships with ancestors, community spirits, and divine forces. This spiritual dimension adds depth to sexual responsibility by connecting personal behaviour to transcendent values and community heritage. Cultural dimensions of sexual stewardship involve maintaining traditions and practices that have sustained communities through historical challenges while adapting to contemporary circumstances.

Ikuenobe (2006) argues that sexual ethics must balance respect for traditional wisdom with recognition of changing social conditions, creating approaches that preserve valuable cultural insights whilst addressing new challenges and opportunities. This balance requires ongoing dialogue between generations to ensure that cultural traditions remain relevant and helpful for contemporary sexual relationships. Social dimensions of sexual stewardship involve understanding how sexual relationships affect community politics, economic arrangements, and social hierarchies that influence collective well-being. Menkiti (1984) explains that sexual choices can strengthen or weaken social bonds that support community cooperation and mutual assistance,

making sexual responsibility a matter of collective concern that requires community guidance and oversight. This social awareness helps individuals understand how their sexual decisions contribute to or detract from community harmony and prosperity.

The integration of these multiple dimensions creates holistic approaches to sexual ethics that address personal, relational, cultural, and spiritual aspects of sexual experience within coherent frameworks. Molefe (2019) argues that this integration offers more comprehensive approaches to sexual well-being than systems that focus exclusively on individual satisfaction, biological health, or legal compliance. The integrated approaches recognise that lasting sexual fulfilment requires attention to multiple aspects of human experience and community life.

These practical applications demonstrate how West African communitarian sexual ethics function as living systems that adapt to changing circumstances whilst maintaining core principles of relational responsibility and collective well-being. Metz (2022) explains that the practical dimension of these ethics provides tested mechanisms for addressing sexual challenges through community cooperation and mutual support rather than relying solely on individual resources or external authority. The applications show how traditional wisdom can inform contemporary approaches to sexual education, relationship guidance, and conflict resolution. The effectiveness of these practical applications depends on community commitment to maintaining the social relationships and institutional structures that support communitarian sexual ethics. Kelbessa (2020) argues that these systems require ongoing investment in community education, leadership development, and institutional maintenance to remain effective in addressing contemporary sexual challenges. The practical applications provide models for how communities can take responsibility for sexual well-being whilst respecting individual autonomy and personal choice.

West African Sexual Ethics and Contemporary Global Challenges

Contemporary global society faces mounting sexual challenges that traditional individualistic approaches have struggled to address effectively. Sexual violence continues to plague communities worldwide, gender inequality persists in intimate relationships, reproductive injustice affects millions of people, family breakdown creates widespread social instability, and identity conflicts generate personal suffering alongside community tensions. These problems persist despite decades of policy interventions, legal reforms, and international initiatives that focus primarily on individual rights and institutional solutions.

West African communitarian sexual ethics offer alternative frameworks that could complement existing approaches by addressing the relational and collective dimensions of these challenges that individualistic solutions often overlook. Rather than viewing sexual problems as isolated individual issues requiring primarily individual solutions, West African traditions understand sexual challenges as community problems that emerge from and affect entire social networks, requiring collective responses that address both personal healing and social transformation. Sexual violence represents one of the most pressing contemporary challenges where West African communitarian principles could provide valuable insights for prevention and response. Current approaches to sexual violence focus primarily on individual perpetrators and victims, often missing the social contexts that enable sexual violence and the community resources needed for comprehensive prevention and healing. Donnelly (2013) documents how legal and medical interventions, whilst necessary, frequently fail to address the social relationships and community conditions that contribute to sexual violence or support recovery from its effects.

West African communities traditionally understand sexual violence as a breach of collective responsibility that damages not only immediate victims but entire networks of relationships, requiring community intervention to restore social harmony and prevent future harm. This understanding creates different approaches to both prevention and response that emphasise community accountability and collective healing alongside individual support and legal justice. The principle of collective sexual management offers frameworks for preventing sexual violence through community education, social accountability, and shared responsibility that extends beyond individual behaviour modification to address social conditions and relationship patterns that contribute to violent behaviour. Metz (2022) explains that this principle creates shared responsibility for protecting vulnerable community members and addressing social conditions that contribute to sexual violence, including economic inequality, social isolation, and cultural norms that normalise aggressive behaviour. Rather than relying solely on legal punishment after violence occurs, communities take proactive responsibility for creating social environments that discourage violent behaviour and support healthy sexual relationships through ongoing education, peer support, and community oversight.

Community-based healing approaches for sexual violence survivors integrate individual therapy with collective restoration processes that address the social damage caused by violence beyond immediate trauma to individual victims. Freeman (2017) argues that these approaches recognise that sexual violence affects entire communities through damaged trust, fear, and social disruption, requiring healing processes that restore community solidarity alongside individual recovery. This understanding creates more comprehensive responses to sexual violence that address both personal trauma and

social healing, recognising that individual recovery occurs within social contexts that can either support or hinder healing processes. Gender inequality in sexual relationships represents another area where West African communitarian principles could inform contemporary approaches that have struggled to create lasting change despite decades of advocacy and legal reform. Current global strategies often focus on individual empowerment and legal rights without addressing the relational contexts and social systems that sustain gender inequality in intimate relationships and family structures. An-Na'im (2002) explains that lasting change requires transformation of social relationships and community values, not simply individual education or legal reform, because gender inequality is maintained through complex social systems that include economic arrangements, cultural expectations, and relationship patterns that extend far beyond individual attitudes or legal protections. West African communitarian approaches offer insights for addressing these systemic dimensions of gender inequality through principles that connect individual relationships to community well-being and collective responsibility.

The principle of sexual interdependence offers frameworks for addressing gender inequality through recognition that healthy sexual relationships require mutual respect and shared responsibility between partners, creating expectations that benefit both individuals and their wider communities. Gyekye (1997) describes how this principle creates expectations that sexual relationships should serve mutual flourishing rather than allowing one partner to dominate or exploit the other, because relationships that harm either partner ultimately weaken community bonds and collective well-being.

This understanding provides foundations for gender equality that connect individual rights to collective prosperity, creating motivation for change that extends beyond individual moral arguments to include community interests in maintaining healthy relationships and social harmony. The principle also creates accountability mechanisms through community oversight that can address gender inequality in ways that complement legal protections with social support and cultural change. Intergenerational responsibility creates additional accountability for how gender relationships in one generation affect opportunities and expectations for future generations, helping communities understand long-term consequences of gender inequality that extend beyond immediate relationships. Molefe (2019) argues that this principle helps communities understand how gender inequality in sexual relationships perpetuates social problems and limits collective potential across generations, creating motivation for change that considers both present justice and future well-being. Reproductive injustice affects millions globally through unequal access to reproductive healthcare, coercive population policies, reproductive rights violations, and social conditions that limit reproductive choices for individuals and families. These challenges require

responses that address both individual access to reproductive services and social conditions that affect reproductive health and decision-making. West African communitarian approaches to reproductive health traditionally integrate individual choice with community support, creating frameworks that protect personal autonomy whilst ensuring access to collective resources, guidance, and social support that enable meaningful reproductive choices.

The principle of collective sexual management creates shared responsibility for reproductive health that includes community investment in healthcare infrastructure, education, and support systems that ensure all community members have access to reproductive healthcare and education. Wiredu (1996) explains that this principle recognises reproductive health as a community concern that requires collective resources and shared commitment, because reproductive health affects not only individuals but entire communities through population dynamics, economic impacts, and social relationships that connect individual reproductive decisions to collective well-being.

This understanding creates frameworks for addressing reproductive injustice that combine individual rights protections with community responsibility for creating social conditions that support reproductive health and meaningful choice. Community oversight of reproductive decisions provides guidance and support for individual choices whilst protecting against coercive practices that violate personal autonomy through consultation processes that respect individual preferences whilst considering community resources and collective needs. Shutte (2001) describes how this oversight operates through dialogue and support rather than control or coercion, seeking to balance individual reproductive rights with community sustainability and collective well-being through processes that honour both personal autonomy and social responsibility. This approach offers alternatives to both purely individualistic approaches that ignore social constraints on reproductive choice and authoritarian approaches that violate personal reproductive rights.

Relationship breakdown increasingly affects contemporary societies through rising divorce rates, family instability, and social isolation that creates both individual suffering and collective challenges including economic instability, social fragmentation, and intergenerational trauma. West African communitarian approaches to relationship maintenance offer tested methods for preventing relationship breakdown and addressing conflicts before they become irreparable through community support and ongoing guidance that strengthens relationships and addresses problems early. The principle of relational protocols for sexual expression creates structured approaches to relationship communication and conflict resolution that help couples address problems

before they escalate into relationship breakdown through established processes for dialogue, mediation, and problem-solving. Ramose (2002) explains that these protocols provide frameworks for ongoing communication about sexual relationships that address changing needs and circumstances whilst maintaining commitment to relationship stability and mutual support through community guidance and accountability.

Community support systems for couples provide ongoing assistance for relationship maintenance that extends beyond immediate family resources to include neighbourhood networks, religious communities, and social organisations that invest in relationship stability as a community good. Mbiti (1990) describes how these systems create networks of guidance and assistance that help couples navigate challenges and maintain strong relationships throughout changing life circumstances, recognising that relationship stability benefits entire communities through stronger families, social cohesion, and collective resilience. Sexual identity conflicts arise in contemporary societies through tensions between individual identity exploration and community expectations, creating challenges for both personal development and social harmony that require careful navigation of competing values and interests. West African communitarian approaches offer frameworks for addressing these conflicts through dialogue and mutual understanding rather than forced conformity or complete individualisation, seeking solutions that respect both personal authenticity and community relationships.

The principle of sexual restraint and personal autonomy provides frameworks for balancing individual identity exploration with community relationships and collective well-being through ongoing negotiation and compromise. Menkiti (1984) explains that this principle recognises both individual rights to sexual self-determination and community needs for social stability, creating space for dialogue and mutual adjustment that seeks solutions serving both personal fulfilment and collective harmony through processes that respect different perspectives and interests. Collaborative integration with contemporary human rights frameworks requires careful attention to how West African communitarian principles can complement rather than replace existing approaches to sexual rights and protections, recognising that different ethical systems offer distinctive insights that can strengthen comprehensive approaches to sexual well-being. Mutua (2002) argues that effective integration requires dialogue between different ethical systems that seeks common ground whilst respecting distinctive contributions and perspectives, avoiding both cultural imperialism and relativistic paralysis through genuine engagement with different approaches to sexual ethics. The principle of collective sexual management can complement individual rights approaches by providing community mechanisms for implementing and supporting sexual rights protections through social accountability, community education, and collective

responsibility that address social barriers to individual rights. This integration creates more comprehensive approaches that address both individual protections and collective responsibility for creating social conditions that support sexual well-being and meaningful exercise of sexual rights.

Sexual interdependence principles can inform human rights approaches by highlighting the relational dimensions of sexual rights and the community resources needed for meaningful exercise of individual freedoms, helping rights advocates understand how individual protections connect to social transformation and collective well-being. Etieyibo (2017) explains that this understanding helps human rights advocates address social barriers to sexual equality and develop more effective strategies for social change that combine individual protections with community engagement and social transformation. Practical principles for global application include adapting West African communitarian insights to diverse cultural contexts whilst respecting local values and circumstances, recognising that effective application requires careful attention to how communitarian principles can function within different social systems, legal frameworks, and cultural traditions. This adaptation cannot involve simple transplantation of specific practices but requires understanding underlying principles and developing culturally appropriate applications that serve similar functions within different contexts.

Collective sexual management can be adapted through community education programmes, participatory policy development, and social accountability mechanisms that create shared responsibility for sexual well-being within existing institutional structures. These adaptations maintain the principle of collective responsibility whilst working within existing legal systems and social institutions, creating partnerships between community organisations, government agencies, and civil society groups that share responsibility for sexual well-being and social change.

Sexual restraint principles can inform approaches to sexual education and relationship guidance that balance individual autonomy with social responsibility through educational programmes that help individuals understand how their sexual choices affect others whilst respecting their right to make their own decisions. Kelbessa (2020) describes how these principles create frameworks for sexual decision-making that consider both personal desires and community impacts, providing guidance for individuals whilst maintaining respect for personal autonomy and individual choice. Intergenerational responsibility can be implemented through policy frameworks that consider long-term impacts of sexual and reproductive policies on future generations, creating accountability for how contemporary decisions affect future opportunities and challenges. This application encourages more sustainable approaches to sexual and reproductive health that balance present needs with future well-being through policies

that consider environmental impacts, social sustainability, and intergenerational equity alongside immediate individual needs and rights.

Balancing individual autonomy with community responsibility in modern contexts requires ongoing dialogue and negotiation between different values and interests that cannot be resolved through fixed formulas, but rather through ongoing processes of consultation, compromise, and mutual adjustment. This balance respects both individual rights and collective needs through collaborative problem-solving and shared responsibility that seeks solutions serving both personal fulfilment and community well-being through democratic participation and inclusive decision-making processes.

CONCLUSION

This examination of West African communitarian sexual ethics reveals sophisticated frameworks for understanding sexual relationships that could contribute significantly to addressing contemporary global sexual challenges. The research demonstrates that West African traditions offer distinctive approaches to sexual responsibility that balance individual autonomy with collective well-being through principles that have sustained communities across the region for generations.

West African communitarian personhood provides the foundational understanding that sexual identity develops through social relationships rather than individual self-determination alone. Among the Akan, Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, and other West African peoples, sexual relationships are understood as embedded within networks of family, community, and ancestral connections that provide meaning, guidance, and accountability for sexual behaviour. This relational conception creates frameworks for sexual responsibility that connect personal choices to community well-being, making sexual ethics a matter of shared concern. The relational framework demonstrates how West African communities integrate individual desires with community values through ongoing dialogue, mutual support, and shared responsibility. Personal sexuality operates within networks that provide structure for sexual development whilst respecting individual agency. Marriage and family relationships function as communal institutions that create networks of social support and collective investment in relationship stability.

Collective responsibility for sexual behaviour operates through sophisticated systems of community oversight that balance respect for individual privacy with recognition of social implications. West African communities maintain networks of elders, family representatives, and traditional authorities who share responsibility for guiding sexual relationships through consultation and consensus-building processes that guide while intervening when sexual problems threaten community harmony. The practical applications show how West African traditions translate wisdom into concrete

mechanisms for sexual education, relationship guidance, and conflict resolution. Traditional ceremonies create structured opportunities for transmitting sexual values whilst establishing ongoing relationships that provide continuing support. Community-based approaches integrate individual healing with collective restoration through mediation processes that understand underlying causes and develop comprehensive solutions.

West African principles offer valuable contributions to addressing contemporary global challenges, including sexual violence, gender inequality, reproductive injustice, relationship breakdown, and identity conflicts. The principle of collective sexual management provides frameworks for preventing sexual violence through community education and shared responsibility. Sexual interdependence addresses gender inequality by requiring mutual respect and shared responsibility between partners. Intergenerational responsibility fosters accountability for the impact of sexual relationships on future generations. The collaborative integration of West African communitarian values with contemporary human rights frameworks offers promising approaches for creating more comprehensive responses to global sexual challenges. This integration requires dialogue that respects both universal human needs and the distinctive insights that West African traditions offer, whilst seeking practical collaboration that serves individual well-being and collective prosperity.

The key insight from this research is that West African traditions understand sexual relationships as existing within social contexts that give them meaning beyond individual satisfaction. This understanding offers alternatives to purely individualistic approaches that ignore social consequences and purely authoritarian approaches that deny individual agency, creating space for sexual responsibility that honours both personal autonomy and community relationships. West African communitarian sexual ethics provide frameworks for addressing global sexual challenges through approaches that combine individual protection with community support and social transformation. The collaborative integration of these traditions with contemporary approaches offers potential for more effective responses to sexual problems whilst respecting the wisdom embedded in West African communitarian traditions and their continued relevance for contemporary sexual ethics.

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