

# (Re)claiming African Women's Sexual Agency: Male Circumcision and Women's Pleasure

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*... the dangerous tropes of coloniality that distort our understanding of African societies, cultures, bodies, institutions, experiences, social relations, and realities. She unsparingly and compellingly advances the analytical power and emancipatory possibilities of decolonial feminism.*

(In reference to Tamale's recent work *Decolonization and Afro-Feminism* (2020: 2).

## Abstract

One submits that, arguably, in the African context, there has been a preoccupation with a black African female sexuality that is characterised by unequal relations, violence, and power asymmetries. Women are more often than not, portrayed as seemingly powerless and submissive, with little agency in relationships and little regard for their (own) sexual pleasure preferences. Thus, African women's bodies and sexualities are one of the tropes one can operationalise to approach the complex and multiple entanglements of oppression and suppression which is itself, one key entanglement of decoloniality. In this paper, we view coloniality as a power that imposes alien values and expectations, including values and expectations relating to women's sexual pleasure.

This small qualitative study is a modest contribution to a wider exercise in reclamation in the context of black women's sexual realities. It is a thick qualitative study that provides an exploration of the perceptions of sexual pleasure and preferences of young black African university-going women in

the context of male circumcision and female pleasure. In keeping with Tamale, we agree that decoloniality cannot be divorced from African women and gendered bodies. African women's bodies and sexualities are one of the means by which colonial and patriarchal power has distorted our understanding of African identities and sexualities. This study is in turn empirical and primarily 'thickly descriptive'; it explores the young women's experiences of sexual pleasure, allowing a window into black African women as sexual beings with levels of agency. As part of a larger study, this paper focuses on the experiences of the women, as shared by them and refrains from a theoretical overlay to allow the respondents' voices to take centre stage. To this end purposive sampling was used, and the study comprised a small and intimate sample community of black African university-going women aged between 18 and 25 years who self-identified as having sexual experiences with both circumcised and uncircumcised men. Individual semi-structured interviews were used to garner rich narratives from the participants. The focus of the paper was to provide an excavation of in-depth qualitative insights, and provides the material for future researchers to engage with around coloniality, no less in the context of scholarship that often obscures African women's sexual pleasure preferences.

**Keywords:** sexual pleasure, male circumcision, foreskin, sexual scripts, sexuality, decoloniality, agency, black African female sexuality

## Introduction

African sexualities, or more specifically, African female sexualities have been instrumentalised, colonised and controlled by a number of different machinations and discourses. These have been both internal and external, including a crosscurrent of external Western colonial ideologies which have spawned neo-colonialisms that continue to perpetuate through incarnations in contemporary culture, customs, traditions and attitudes. This "congealing of sexual morality" as Tamale (2014: 150), puts it, becomes deeply imbricated in how the bodies, sexualities and sexual agency of African women 'ought to be'. We submit that an excavation of women's desires and agencies regarding what *they* construct as pleasurable, is part of the exercise in *reclaiming* a sexual citizenship that has suffered different permutations of colonisation. In this paper, we attempt to do this through capturing insights from women in the

context of their pleasure-seeking behaviour with circumcised male partners. These ‘pleasure seeking ‘sharings’ or insights gathered can be construed as candid counter narratives from women who see themselves as active agents in their sexual identities and pleasure desires in the context of circumcised male sexual partners.

Studies on male circumcision reveal that males favour circumcision because it has been thought to prevent sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV, in addition to being perceived as enhancing male sexual pleasure during intercourse (cf Bailey *et al.* 2002; Kebaabetswe *et al.* 2003; Scott *et al.* 2005). Bailey *et al.* (2002: 35) explored male circumcision and how it is linked to sexual pleasure; they concluded by stating that “from the women’s perspective, again there was no consensus as to whether the circumcised or uncircumcised penis was preferred in terms of conferring sexual pleasure”. While there are indications anecdotally that appear to link male circumcision and sexual pleasure, scholars persist in viewing male circumcision as irrelevant to sexual pleasure, claiming that “what matters is the longing the two have for each other and the art of doing it” (see Bailey *et al.* 2002: 35). Other researchers highlight the ‘unpredictability’ of sexual pleasure for women as varying and depending on “whether the women are menstruating, menopausal, exhausted, and has [have] had foreplay” (Peltzer *et al.* 2014: 6). Brovard is cited in Peltzer *et al.* (2014) as arguing that sexual pleasure is variable, contextual and unpredictable, urging researchers to conduct more in-depth analyses.

Against this backdrop, this exploratory paper is part of a larger study and in turn sets out to probe some of the underlying motivations that underlie young black African university female students’ preference for circumcised male sexual partners.

## **Methodological and Theoretical Framework**

The study utilised the qualitative research approach, defined as research that uses open-ended questions, semi-structured, and in-depth individual interviews as a primary means of data collection (see Babbie and Mouton 2001). Simply put, qualitative research is “a form of systematic empirical enquiry into meaning” (Shank 2002: 5). The interviews sought to elicit insights into the women’s experiences of sexual pleasure with their male partners. The advantages of using qualitative research methodologies include the flexibility

to pursue 'unexpected' ideas that emerge during research as well as the leeway to study symbolic dimensions and social meanings (Bryman *et al.* 1988). Rubin and Babbie (2013: 56) contend, "Interpretive researchers believe that the best way to learn about people is to be flexible and subjective in one's approach so that the subject's world can be seen through the subject's own eyes". Cohen *et al.* (2011) suggest qualitative research in studies of this nature, facilitate in-depth, intricate and detailed understanding of meaning, actions, non-observable as well as observable phenomena, attitudes and behaviours.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants; this sampling technique was chosen as it enabled the study to be intentional in the selection of participants, ensuring that particular requirements for the study were met. Participants were recruited by means of an invitation poster displayed at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Howard College) campus clinic and at other sites on campus. The principal researcher thereafter collected contact details of those who expressed interest in participating in the study and followed-up to establish their willingness and to gain informed consent. Participants selected for the study were between 18 and 25 years of age. The principle researcher's close proximity to the research site was convenient and the researcher was able to schedule the interviews according to the participants' preferences.

The study comprised eight (n=8) purposively sampled female participants, all black African. This is what Crouch and Mckenzie (2006) would regard as a 'small sample size'. Crouch and Mckenzie (2006: 492) suggest that in research consisting of 'small sample sizes', participants should not be referred to as a 'sample' because they are not drawn from a "target population" as the only thing sampled in this regard are "variants of a particular social setting" (Crouch & Mckenzie 2006: 493). That said, 'sample' sizes in qualitative studies are, for the most part, small in comparison to those in quantitative studies. The small sample size was valuable as it allowed the researchers to build close and trusting bonds with participants confiding that sharing and discussing topics construed as 'taboo', was experienced as liberating. The women thus confided many details of themselves that they otherwise would have only shared amongst immediate friends. While some (although not all), of the women did not mind their names being used, in the paper care is taken to ensure that pseudonyms are used throughout when sharing the participants' narratives.

The use of semi-structured interviews facilitated the 'conditions' necessary for the collection of rich and thick data. An audio-recording device

was used with the participants' permission. During the interviews, participants communicated in either isiZulu or English. They also communicated through 'code switching' (switching from English to isiZulu and back). This was not a problem as the principal researcher was fluent in both languages.

The tenets of African Feminism, were important guiding principles. African feminism as a theoretical prism, challenges the legitimacy of the socio-cultural structures holding women sexually subjugated, and trenchantly interrogates African (constructed) histories and so-called values, which marginalise the narratives of women's experiences in their totality (cf. Gbowee 2011). Salo (2001), in conversation with Mama positions it as, signalling a negation of oppression and a move towards the emancipation of African women. Most importantly, African Feminist thinking recognises the heterogeneity of African women as having complex and plural identities. Simply put, it "recognises the deeply political act of advocating for women's rights" (Ahikire 2006: 7). Lewis (2001) asserts that African feminists have a collaborative allegiance to the critical analysis of gender discourses in the African continent. Discourse does not exist in an intellectual vacuum or outside of a constructed social reality and Social Constructionism helps shed light on the ways in which groups and individuals in society contribute to the social production of knowledge, perceptions and reality (see Berger & Luckmann 1966; 1991).

## **Findings**

### ***Theme: Sexual pleasure and enjoyment preferences: 'sexual pleasure is what holds and binds a relationship'.***

As mentioned, the women communicated that being able to discuss the otherwise seemingly 'taboo' issues of their sexual pleasure with researchers, was experienced as liberating on some levels. The women were thus open and felt free to share and respond to questions once familiarity and trust was established.

In replying to the initial question about their thoughts and feelings regarding what they felt about circumcised men, participants had this to say:

*"He is circumcised, and the sex is good, very good".*

**Thobile**

*"He is circumcised, and he does a great job. Weeeh!"*

**Phindile**

*"He is circumcised, and another thing about circumcised men is that the sex lasts longer and it fulfils the purpose, if I can say [it] like that".* **Nomvula**

These exclamations appear to 'eulogise' the sexual exploits of the circumcised men for their ability to 'guarantee' sexual pleasure to the women. The women praised the men for possessing great sexual virility and, more importantly, for providing them with (expected) sexual pleasure.

*He is circumcised, and I'm getting the things since he is circumcised and he knows how to do the things (sic). He has good sexual pleasure skills, and he is pressing all the right buttons at the right time.*

**Nomasonto**

Nomasonto 'bragged' that her 'main man' is circumcised. She made this distinction as she talked about the few concurrent relationships she was in at the time, but remarked that these were 'nothing serious' as she was just 'having fun', and some of the men were just 'friends with benefits.' Because she had not had sex with all of them yet, she could not ascertain their circumcision status, with the exception of the 'Xhosa one' (as she put it), whose circumcision 'status' she knew as he was 'culturally obligated' to be circumcised, she said. She nevertheless felt that her 'main man' was pressing all the right buttons.' As Nomasonto was talking, the enthusiasm with which she articulated herself and more importantly, the boldness and confidence she exhibited were very apparent. She went on to say:

*For me, the first thing that is important is the pleasure, so as soon as that aspect goes down, I am gone, and I really do leave relationships which are not sexually fulfilling to [for] me. I cannot tolerate bad sex, what if you catch feelings and you want to marry me, and the sex is not great? We can talk all we want, but sexual pleasure is what holds and binds relationships together. People who stay in bad sexual relationships are stupid, or they don't want to accept reality.*

**Nomasonto**

A sexually permissive culture is cited by Akintola *et al.* (2012) as typifying university life, characterised by sexual freedom from any punitive and restrictive measures. The manner in which Nomasonto asserts her sexuality demonstrates the unrestrictive/ unrestricted expressed sexuality within the university setting. University culture is often written about as being largely characterised by so called promiscuity. However, women like Nomasonto reveal their own agency in freely choosing the pleasure of multiple partners and thus step outside the constructed social injunctions of ‘being promiscuous’. The above statement is corroborated somewhat by Ajidahun (2017) who probed the relationship between university lifestyle and the supposed promiscuous (sic) behaviour exhibited by female students. In her study, she attributes female students’ promiscuity to the university environment which is characterised by what she claims as, profound freedom, lack of parental supervision and lack of institutional policies restricting cohabitation among male and female students and ‘free sex’. She further posits that the university environment stimulates newly enrolled undergraduate female students’ sexual desires. She claims that “This is because it gives them the opportunity to be free from parental monitoring” (Ajidahun 2017: 118). Specifically focusing on so called female students’ promiscuity (sic), is of course grossly biased and one sided and exonerates male students who indulge in similar pleasure seeking behaviours and buys into both geometries of patriarchal regimes as well as inherited colonial understandings of the sexualities of black women.

A scrutiny of the arguments presented by Adijahun (2017) unveils perpetuation of colonial readings of woman and female sexuality and suggests that female sexuality is socially constructed within the African societies, and that it needs constant surveillance and policing. We are reminded that there are cultural connotations and construal that ‘normalise’ colonial readings of female sexuality that have attached and accrued to understandings of African women’s sexuality.

In Adijahun’s cohered understanding, female sexuality is limited to procreation and the fulfilment of men’s sexual desires. She further suggests the need for improved communication between the university and the parents of female undergraduate students by “providing adequate information to parents about the whereabouts of their wards, especially female undergraduate students” (Ajidahun 2017: 121). According to her, this strategy will “curb the activities of girls who abscond from school to meet men in far places for reward money” (Ajidahun 2017: 117).

McFadden (2003: 1) counters Adijahun (2017) and argues that the pervasive repression of the erotic and sexual inclinations of women has contributed to the fusion of women's sexuality and procreation in a hetero-normative social and cultural environment, and that this degradation is sustained by constant cultural monitoring, which has contributed to the silencing of what she terms "our feminist sexual memory and instinct". This silencing is deafening and as Coetzee and du Toit (2017) point out the silence wrought on black sexuality in the guise of colonialism that extends in contemporary regimes of globalization, has also many histories and cultural connotations.

Coetzee and du Toit write,

*The colonising agent deprived the black sexual subject of agency in order to make him/her pliable for a series of penetrative attentions which either virginised or hypersexualised him/her. These penetrative attentions and actions (phallic in their overall orientation) were central to the project of colonialism (2017: 214).*

Aspects of this virginised, colonial and patriarchal profile can be perhaps seen in the manner in which young women entering universities are constructed and perceived. Black African women attending universities in KwaZulu-Natal often come from rural homelands and peri-urban townships within the province. Many have been subjected to 'mechanisms' (deemed cultural), arguably designed to monitor and restrict their sexual expression. So, upon entering the university environment, these women seize the opportunity to 'step out of' (they shared) 'the sexually suffocating spaces' created by their home environments. The university ultimately functions as 'the way out'. To that end, the suggestion by Ajidahun (2017) that universities should carry the responsibility of "guarding (sic)" the women's sexuality by "providing adequate information to parents" (Adijahun 2017: 121) regarding their newly acquired sexual independence is unsympathetic, to say the least.

### ***Theme: Oral sex preferences: '... doing the blow job'.***

On this particular aspect, the participants had this say:

*When having oral sex, you cannot give me your uncircumcised thing [penis] (laughing) to put in my mouth. The uncircumcised one limits*



*you, for me, you can't give me your thing [penis] and think I'm going to put it in my mouth. No, hell no! Nomathemba*

The irritability in Nomathemba's voice was evident as she talked about how sexual pleasure was limited by an uncircumcised penis. She rejected the possibility of performing oral sex on an uncircumcised man and raised her voice considerably towards the end of her statement as she roared: "No, hello no!" After venting her fury, she laughed hysterically. She continued, "Girl, don't even get me started again; it is non-negotiable, full stop!" Other participants, Naledi and Nomasonto, expressed similar sentiments to that of Nomathemba as:

*Oral sex with an uncircumcised man is something I would never do, even on my death bed. Nomasonto*

Naledi shook her head slowly, and her face was stern as she said the above words. Her face was reminiscent of a bad sexual encounter she had with an uncircumcised man, and that experience apparently 'left a bad taste in her mouth' (no pun intended). There was a similar change of mood as Nomasonto expressed her resentment towards an uncircumcised penis, which denied her (she said) the pleasure of oral sex. Asked to shed more light, Nomasonto just shook her head and said:

*You won't understand; I can't even begin to describe it. Nomasonto*

Oral sex involves an individual's use of their mouth, lips and tongue to stimulate the sexual organs of their sexual partner. Pitts and Smith (2008: 315) state that "oral sex occurs before vaginal intercourse", and the most common reasons for engaging in oral sex among their respondents included pleasure, the need to improve one's relationship with the partner and lastly, because of its popularity amongst . The popularity of oral sex seemed evident study as the respondents mentioned it without being prompted. This is true for Nomvula whose face lit up as she stated:

*For a person who is circumcised, you even get addicted to doing the blow job, (laughs) so it's much nicer and the man who is not circumcised you just get irritated and pissed [angry] to see that the penis has this skin and you just see that I cannot do a blow job, I cannot suck this man. Nomvula*

She clicked her tongue to show her aggravated distaste at the thought of having to “suck” the penis of an uncircumcised man. Furthermore, Nomvula’s mention of getting “addicted” to practising oral sex suggests that even though she may be conferring sexual pleasure on him, it is, for her, a mutually gratifying experience, as she did not express any hesitance or reluctance to perform it on a circumcised partner. Most of the female respondents reported engaging in oral sex prior to having sexual intercourse and others further reported engaging in oral sex in their most recent sexual encounters and thus regarded the practice as ‘part and parcel’ of their sexual pleasure. Based on the findings of their study, Bossio *et al.* (2015) thus also suggest a clear preference for circumcised penises for not only penetrative sex but for oral sex as well. Nomathemba, Naledi, Nomasonto and Nomvula described how an uncircumcised penis hugely encumbered the fulfilment of all their sexual pleasures and desires. They preferred a circumcised penis as it enabled them to enjoy oral sex. However, these participants fell short of explicating what exactly it was that made the uncircumcised penis an object of so much rage, ridicule and exasperation. However, Thobile and Phindile filled this gap as they openly confided what exactly it was that made the uncircumcised penis sexually repulsive and limiting to oral sex. They said:

*In terms of giving head or a blow job [oral sex], you know like the foreskin is disturbing with an uncircumcised man because of it hanging and it's like loose and stuff. [This is] Unlike a circumcised man where there is no foreskin to like ... you know. **Thobile***

*It's just that with oral it's a bit stinky when you are not circumcised, you know... so no oral [sex]. With the circumcised one, you can explore with oral sex. **Phindile***

Thobile shared that she detests the presence of the foreskin, arguing that it is a hindrance that hangs loosely that it ‘disturbs’ the whole sexual act. Phindile dismisses the uncircumcised penis as the culprit that smells particularly unpleasant and is thus repulsive. Social constructionists aver that one’s understanding of reality derives from interpersonal relationships and interactions. This positions the participants’ understandings of oral sex within the wider university context where social interactions seem to also contribute to the popularity of male circumcision in university sexual scripts and sexual culture.

## ***Orgasm Preferences***

*Yes, girl, an hour straight, [he will] turn you back and forth, back and forth I'm telling you (laughing), and it is possible mama I'm telling you. But not like an hour straight ... like he [an uncircumcised man] will reach orgasm, wait five minutes then turn you over and then again wait five minutes and turn you back (laughing) and they have tricks, they have tricks to not reach orgasm faster also, like some of them they will smell socks ... smelly socks, you know. I don't know what it does to their mind, but it just takes them away from the situation, and then they go [on for] longer. **Nomathemba***

These words are reflective of Nomathemba's sexual experiences with her uncircumcised ex-boyfriend. She portrayed him as having had a variety of strategies to avert premature ejaculation. She mentioned that he would sniff a 'smelly sock' to distract himself just as he was about to ejaculate, to trick his mind into thinking about something unrelated to sex. This method was reportedly popular among uncircumcised men, who are (claimed by the women as being) prone to premature ejaculation.

Nomasonto and Nomvula expressed a clear preference for circumcised men. In this regard, they shared stories about experiencing pain during sex with uncircumcised men, adding that it was a struggle for them to maintain an erection necessary for vaginal penetration.

*Sex with a person [man] who is circumcised is much better [than with an uncircumcised man] ...pleasure wise and from my experience, I don't reach orgasm with the uncircumcised [man], there is pain and all these other deterrents. **Nomasonto***

*[A] Circumcised man enables me to reach orgasm more quickly and frequently, and I think it's because it's easy for it to turn on for me and then you are most likely to enjoy whatever he is doing. **Nomvula** The uncircumcised one had less stamina and didn't last very long during sex, and it was always one round per night and then the next one the next morning. However, the circumcised partner has stronger strokes and lasts until you reach orgasm and can go up to five rounds a time. **Naledi***

Naledi asserted that what prevented her from experiencing an orgasm with an uncircumcised man, was his lack of stamina and inability to maintain an erection during sex. She further described how he could always only manage just 'one-round' at night and another the next morning, when the uncircumcised man would not have experienced such exhaustion and needed a night's sleep to recover,

With circumcised men, however, there 'were stronger strokes', which lasted long enough for Naledi to experience an orgasm as well. Overall, the ability to reach an orgasm was central to enhancing happiness and relational satisfaction in her sexual life.

### ***Condom-use Preference***

Regarding the women's preferences in terms of condom use, the participants had this to say:

*Eish, you see now with protected sex that's a very important one, girl. You know for me to have unprotected sex we have to reach that stage first, and secondly, we have to go check HIV, we didn't check STIs, but we did check HIV in [at] Rosemary Clinic in town when we started doing [having] unprotected sex, you know yah. For me, you have to reach that stage. Basically, I protect myself often but once it gets to a certain level and we are cool with each other, to [the point of] even me talking about the topic of 'now let's go check for HIV' (whispering dramatically) because you know some guys [men] are offended (gradually raising voice). They say: 'Why? Why? Do you think I'm sick?' (Imitating an aggressive male voice) They are so sensitive these guys, the black ones yey, the Zulu guys hhe! 'Do you think I'm sick, huh? When you look at me, do you think I'm sick? Huh?' then they say 'Angiguli mina, angiguli mina' you see, so you have to reach a certain stage even to involve those topics you know, but before then, [use] protection mamma. Nomathemba*

Nomathemba's account implied that even though she uses the condom 'often', having sexual intercourse with a man with a condom, is subject to certain conditions. She reiterated that there is a certain stage or level which the relationship should reach before discussions on the abandonment of the con-

dom can be tabled, regardless of whether the man is circumcised or not.

Young female informants in MacPhail and Campbell (2001: 1620) contended that trust was what instigated non-use of condoms in ‘steady’ relationships, further arguing that: “for a ‘steady’ partner to insist on condom use is seen as indicating a lack of respect and trust”. Nevertheless, Nomathemba was not the only one who reported using condoms ‘often’, Thobile shared a similar narrative; however, her justification differed slightly as she did not attribute this ‘often’ use of condoms to either a development in trust or having ‘reached a certain level.’ Rather, she related the following:

*I use protection often, and there is no difference between a circumcised and uncircumcised man because they are wearing protection, and it is covering the same thing.* **Thobile**

Thobile noted that having sex with a circumcised or an uncircumcised man when a condom is used is the same as was not an issue as the penis was covered anyway. Nomvula, Nomasonto and Fikile all reported using the condom ‘sometimes,’ regarding it as a huge inconvenience, especially when having sex with a circumcised man as his ‘sexual potency’ is diminished. They insinuated that the condom makes him ‘get heated easily,’ resulting in early ejaculation; whereas the uncircumcised man can sustain a prolonged ejaculatory latency time with the use of a condom.

The current study contradicts the assertions by Shair *et al.* (2012) who portrayed women as passive victims of male dominance, struggling to negotiate safer sexual practices. Conversely, the women in this study were active and willing participants in decisions related to the non-use of condoms. Quite often, studies highlight the behaviour disinhibition exhibited by men after male circumcision but the studies fails to recognise the ways women contribute to their own health-related risks. In the citation below, Phindile casually expressed her distaste for condoms, indicating that she uses them in the ‘first round’ and abandons them subsequently. She said:

*I use protection in the first round and then [during] the other rounds, we leave it. There is a difference if you are not circumcised and using protection because [of] having the foreskin here and at the same time, it [there] is the condom – I then can’t feel anything, for real now. I don’t like using a condom.* **Phindile**

The participants in the study displayed clear signs of risk compensation with circumcised men as they mentioned that uncircumcised men were perceived to be not only unhygienic but also carriers of infection, insinuating a possible HIV positive status as well. On the other hand, the circumcised men were perceived as being disease-free, and the women expressed being able to relax and just enjoy themselves as their risks of contracting HIV were reduced. They even incorrectly assumed that the infections were eliminated as a result of circumcision. Humphries *et al.* (2015) identified the causes of potential risk compensation among youths as arising from an overestimation of the preventative health measures conferred on them by male circumcision, giving rising to the perception that circumcision was a licence to indulge in multiple concurrent sexual relationships without the use of condoms, with a greater degree of freedom.

Similarly, Nkosi (2008: 141) asserts that if male circumcision continues to be viewed as a 'natural condom' and therefore guarantees protection from HIV infection, this could be detrimental, especially for women in these contexts as this belief could lead to increased resistance to condom use, leading to even higher rates of HIV infection and unplanned pregnancies. He concludes by postulating that even though "circumcision may have a role in HIV prevention; it is not a natural condom" (ibid). Nonhlanhla and Naledi expressed ambivalence and negative feelings towards the use of condoms, just as the participants alluded to above. The same is true for her uncircumcised partner, which contradicts the negative perceptions she expressed towards uncircumcised men, citing questionable health status. Naledi refrained from using condoms with her circumcised partner because his erection 'doesn't last long' during sex. Their contentions were as follows:

*I normally use protection, but it is not always – even with the uncircumcised ones; it was not all the time. There is, however, a difference if the guy is circumcised and if he uses protection because his penis gets heated easily and he doesn't last very long [before ejaculating], and with the uncircumcised [man], he can really last long when using condoms compared with the circumcised ones.*

**Nonhlanhla**

*The circumcised guy doesn't last long during [sex] when using a condom, however the uncircumcised guy can go on for a while [but]*

*the former may even sometimes struggle to maintain an erection with a condom. Naledi*

The responses cited above demonstrate that Nonhlanhla and Naledi are viewed as epitome of women who have externalised the threat of HIV infection. They seem to have adopted the stance of invulnerability towards the disease, assuming that it is unlikely to affect them. They may feel this way, perhaps because they are young and tend to characterise the disease as common among older people. Closson *et al.* (2018) argue that within the South African context, the reduction in condom use has become prevalent among particular age groups because “sexual scripts of condom negotiation may be more influenced by collective gender roles and social norms than individual’s perceived agency in decision-making” (Closson *et al.*, 2018: 676). While it is not the purview of this paper to study high risk and potentially dangerous behaviours, the researchers probe these critical issues within the wider study.

### *The ‘Constructed’ Preference*

*With an uncircumcised guy, you initially think that his penis is big because of the foreskin and it hangs. On the other hand, when it comes to the circumcised one you can just see his thing [penis], and there are no deceptions, and you have an accurate preconceived notion of how much you are going to enjoy sex with him. Phindile*

In the narrative above, Phindile constructs the foreskin as deceptive, creating the illusion that the penis is bigger than it is. She mentions that it is only upon closer inspection that one realises that this, in fact, is not the case. Whereas if the foreskin had not been present, she would be able to get ‘an accurate notion’ of what to expect. Asked whether the large penis meant that she would enjoy herself more, Phindile sat silently for a while, pondering, then after some time, she said: ‘No, not necessarily so. It just depends on how the guy does his thing’. After some time, she elaborated:

*No, the foreskin, it’s like extra skin, you see, so that skin it makes it look bigger, but if you look closer, you see that no, there’s nothing here this man’s thing [penis] is not that big. Another thing is, I don’t*

*like to say that if a person has a small penis, I won't enjoy myself more because you know they say that 'size doesn't matter', but the big one is nice, it's just my opinion. Phindile*

It became clear, as she explained, that her initial reluctance to comment on whether the penis being big meant that she would enjoy herself more was because she simply found herself contradicting her personal preference as she went against the constructed notion of the 'size doesn't matter', even though to her, size did matter. Nomathemba, on the other hand, constructed the foreskin as a 'turn-off' the sight of which is aesthetically displeasing. She remarked:

*But nje (just) with the uncircumcised guy I think the foreskin is just a turnoff, no, no, no, (laughing) it's just a turnoff, shame. Nomathemba*

Her dismissive attitude was evident in her tone as she repeatedly said, 'no, no, no'. Nomathemba and Phindile perceived the foreskin as deceptive and aesthetically displeasing, bringing to the fore the notion that the preferences of the women are heavily informed. In this vein, Allan (2018) maintains that the North American media frequently construct the foreskin as 'bad' and 'ugly' which essentially depicts an aesthetic view of what is 'pleasing' and 'not pleasing' to the eye, regarding the presence or absence of the foreskin. Furthermore, an aesthetically pleasing penis (one without the foreskin) is often presented in pornographic magazines, videos and films as well as sex manuals and guides. All these representations contribute to the social construction around the foreskin, which is understood by some to be an unpleasant sight. Nomvula, Thobile and Nomasonto constructed the uncircumcised penis as a symbol of impurity and a source of discomfort as it collects and traps dirt under its foreskin and furthermore, upon penetration, it rubs violently against the vaginal walls. They contended that:

*If you are uncircumcised, the foreskin, it collects dirt, it is unhygienic...the foreskin... rubs of roughly (sic) if you are uncircumcised, there is more [too much] friction. Nomvula*  
*[The] Uncircumcised one you know the rubbing of the foreskin, it's very unpleasant and uncomfortable, especially when you have to think about the dirt trapped in-between, yeah it's very disturbing. Thobile*



Corroborating the assertions by the participants are Bailey *et al.* (2002) who contend that the circumcised penis was perceived to be able to penetrate smoothly without any hindrances and friction, whereas the foreskin was further perceived as causing tearing during sexual intercourse, which therefore curtails sexual pleasure. Furthermore, Bailey *et al.* (2002: 35) mentions that the female respondents in their study stated that: “the intact foreskin caused the man to have trouble entering the vagina, often necessitating help from the women and sometimes causing trauma to her labia and outer vagina”. Moreover, their respondents perceived uncircumcised men as unhygienic and susceptible to disease and infection, stating, “The uncircumcised get more infections because the foreskin can keep secretions and germs which later develop into infections” (2002: 34). Nomasonto echoed the sentiments of both Nomvula and Thobile as well as the respondents in Bailey *et al.* (2002) as she mentioned the foreskin as ‘rubbing off roughly’ to explain that it scrapes the walls of the vagina as it is not smooth and causes excessive friction, especially if the woman is not well lubricated. She had this to say:

*The foreskin keeps moving and scraping the vaginal wall and causing pain and sometimes [causes] bleeding if you are not really lubricated.*  
**Nomasonto**

## **Conclusion**

Women’s sexuality and more especially African women’s sexuality may not be what people immediately associate with decolonisation. However, the gendered face of decolonisation is very much a reality and an excavation of women’s sexual narratives is thus an imbricated part of the larger polyvocal decoloniality project. This empirical paper is a modest attempt to add to the literature collating the experiences of young African women and the sexual materiality of Black African female bodies, sexualities and agency have been colonised in multiple ways, by outside or hegemonic Western discourses, but also, arguably, by internal, patriarchal, structural socio-cultural realities that seek to apply particular and so-called acceptable normative scripts to black women and to their sexual agency. This exploratory paper has excavated qualitative experiences among young black African women attending university that delved into their sexual experiences and sexual pleasure

preferences. The paper was based on the premise that the issue has not been afforded the necessary attention, especially in the context of male circumcision and female pleasure and that the bulk of the studies on male circumcision have tended to focus on male sexual pleasure. The paper revealed the assertiveness with which the women in the study expressed their sexualities and their pleasure preferences. The paper also shone a light on structural suppression of black African women's sexualities by categorising them as 'promiscuous'. In referring to the oppressive regimes of 'colonial modernity' Lugones says,

The colonising agent deprived the black sexual subject of agency in order to make him/her pliable for a series of penetrative attentions which either virginised or hypersexualised him/her. These penetrative attentions and actions (phallic in their overall orientation) were central to the project of colonialism. This perspective addresses the violence of various forms of silencing (which in most cases are signs of panic) visited on black sexuality both within the context of colonialism and within processes of decolonisation.

While the study is delimited and the sample is small, the rich narratives (of which only a sample have been offered in this paper), allow a 'dive' into a candid sharing of African women's voices that speaks to sexual citizenship and to a larger reclamation project that seeks to make African women more visible and more audible in the literature on sexuality and women's sexual pleasure.

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