

# Disparity in Number of Partners and Marital Fidelity as Reported by Couples in Nigeria

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## Abstract

Marriage in a typical patriarchal society like Nigeria tends to subordinate women to male authority. Mutual faithfulness is expected among couples even in polygynous unions. Many individuals engage in premarital sex, as such creating a gap requiring some adjustments upon marriage. The adjustments are more dramatic for women, as may be demanded by cultural norms expected of the new role of wife and mother, irrespective of having had active premarital sexual lives. Marital infidelity is a highly contentious issue in Africa. Infidelity from a dyadic perspective has not received adequate attention in sub-Saharan Africa. There still exists a sexual double standard around marital infidelity that makes it more socially acceptable for men than women to engage in sex outside of the marital dyad. Research has found that married women are at risk for HIV primarily because of their husbands' infidelity, and wives have little control over this risk, which is not lessened by their own fidelity. Research on concordance between couples have been more on issues relating to family planning, desired family size among others. There is very limited research on issues of deception and fidelity among married couples. This paper examines the situation of transparency on the part of the husband and wife to one another on the issue of number of partners they are involved with. The paper also examines the level of sexual fidelity among couples in Nigeria. The paper found that, there is more transparency between couples in polygynous unions than those in monogamous unions. Infidelity is lowest among the poorest couples. The consequences of infidelity on our quest as a country to reverse the trend of HIV is better imagined than experienced. There is the need to create more enlightenment and awareness on the need for transparency and mutual fidelity among couples. This is to ensure the health of the spouse and the well-being of the entire family. The health of the spouse not engaged in infidelity may be endangered resulting from sexually transmitted infections that may be contracted, and the well-being of the family is likely to be worsened when there will be the need for medical care and resources that should have been utilized for other family needs will go to cater for the health needs of the unfaithful partner.

**Keywords:** Disparity, Fidelity, Couples, Partners

## 1. Introduction

Marriage had long been the instrument of disciplining sexual behavior and of women's subordination, a subordination found in the Bible and used by theologians to describe human relationships of obedience to God—the wife was to the husband as humanity was to God (Brock, 2003). Marriage in a typical patriarchal society like Nigeria tends to subordinate women to male authority (Abegunde, 2014). Religion and culture mostly guide the marriage institution. A typical Christian marriage is monogamous in nature and should be devoid of infidelity. The same may not hold among adherents of the traditional religion, where there are no limitations on the number of wives a man can have, whereas in Islam, men can marry as many as four wives provided such a man is able to fulfill the expectations of loving and providing for the wives equally (Abegunde, 2014). Nevertheless, mutual faithfulness is expected among couples even in polygynous unions.

Individuals expect to draw emotional gratification from their marriage and marital sexual fidelity is a key symbol of the bond that marriage creates between a man and a woman (Wardlow, 2007). Whenever either the husband or wife engages in extramarital sexual relations denies the other party the gratification derivable from the marriage institution. The fact that many individuals engage in premarital sex (Smith, 2010), creates a gap requiring some adjustments upon marriage. The adjustments are more dramatic for young women, who have absorbed changing ideas about sexuality, marriage, and gender equality as may be demanded by cultural norms expected of the new role of wife and mother, irrespective of having had active premarital sexual lives (Smith, 2010).

Studies have shown that the prevalence of married men's participation in extramarital sex in Nigeria is well documented (Karanja 1987; Orubuloye, et. al., 1997; Lawoyin and Larsen 2002; Mitsunaga et al. 2005). Extramarital sex was not limited to the less educated and wealthy men, but there were certainly more professional and wealthy men who were faithful to their wives (Hirsch et al 2007). Marital infidelity is a highly contentious issue in Africa (Schatz, 2005; Scorgie et al., 2009, Conroy, 2013). Infidelity from a dyadic perspective has not received adequate attention in sub-Saharan Africa and remains a strong area of contention among couples in Africa. There still exists a sexual double standard around marital infidelity that makes it more socially acceptable for men than women to engage in sex outside of the marital dyad (Conroy, 2014). Nigeria is

a society where men (and to some extent women) still implement a system of gender inequality that allows men much more autonomy after marriage—including a powerful double standard about infidelity (Smith, 2010). The understanding that a typical Nigerian woman has is that her sexuality belongs to her husband and his patrilineage, as such the society expects her to be faithful to her husband. The society, the families and husbands often make married women to feel that as persons they are above all, wives, and mothers, and that their sexuality, their mobility, and their social and economic agency are circumscribed by the fact of their marriage (Smith, 2010).

Beyond worries of HIV infection, one important consequence of marital infidelity on health is intimate partner violence (IPV) (Conroy, 2014). Some men do engage in extramarital sex because they do desire some novel sexual experience from extramarital lovers that they thought may be inappropriate to request from their wives who are good wives (Smith, 2010). Research has found that married women are at risk for HIV primarily because of their husbands' infidelity, and wives have little control over this risk, which is not lessened by their own fidelity (Wardlow, 2007).

Research on concordance between couples have been more on issues relating to family planning, desired family size among others (Miller et al, 2001, Becker et al, 1998). There is very limited research on issues of deception and fidelity among married couples. The reality is that the act of infidelity is often a secretive act by one party to the other partner. The Nigerian society allows for a man to be married to many wives, but the opposite is not allowed.

Underlying a more rigid structure of gender roles for women after marriage is the fact that, despite many changing ideas about sexuality, marriage, and gender relations, both men and women still view marriage and parenthood as the sine qua non of a life well lived (Fortes 1978, Smith 2001). The institution of marriage comes with the expectations that the man and woman that gets into the marriage institution would be open and transparent with one another. This may not hold partly because the society frowns at engagement in extramarital relationship. For some, the love they have for their wives means that they would not be able to face them if they were unfaithful (Hirsch et al 2007). This again confirms that infidelity is not encouraged by the society and this may be part of the reasons why the husband may not be transparent to the wife on the number of partners he is having or make known to her, his extramarital life. This paper examines the situation of transparency on the part of the husband and wife to one another on the issue of number of partners they are involved with. The question is more about the husband and wife having knowledge of the number of partners the other is involved with. While the wife may not be involved with many partners, it may be healthy for her and her husband for her to be aware of the number of partners her husband has. The paper also examines the level of sexual fidelity among couples in Nigeria.

## **2 Data and Methods**

The data for this paper was derived from the Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey [NDHS] 2013, accessed with permission from the Measure DHS Program website. The NDHS2013 is the fourth survey of its kind, it is a cross-sectional nationally representative survey that used a stratified three-stage cluster design based on the sampling frame the list of enumeration areas (EAs) prepared for the 2006 Population Census of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. A detailed description of the sampling procedure was reported in the NDHS 2013 report (National Population Commission (NPC) and ICF International 2014). The DHS provides insightful information on demographic and socioeconomic characteristics at both household and individual levels. The survey used three questionnaires which were based on the internationally accepted model questionnaires but were modified to take cognizance of Nigeria's requirement: The Household Questionnaire, the Woman's Questionnaire, and the Man's Questionnaire. The questionnaire for the Woman and the Man was directed at those age 15-49, but the men were selected in every second household in the NDHS 2013 sample. There was no household from which more than a man and a woman were selected. The Couple data was specifically used for this paper.

### 3 Findings

Table 1: Background characteristics of Husbands and wives

	Husband		Wife	
	Percent	Number of Couples	Percent	Number of Couples
<b>Age</b>				
15-19	0.2	17	10.0	854
20-24	3.7	319	19.3	1,653
25-29	13.0	1,108	26.7	2,278
30-34	18.9	1,618	19.7	1,685
35-39	22.4	1,918	15.2	1,300
40-44	20.6	1,761	7.0	602
45-49	21.1	1,806	2.0	175
Mean Age in years	36.86		28.60	
<b>Education</b>				
No education	31.7	2,709	45.5	3,891
Primary	22.6	1,931	20.4	1,746
Secondary	31.1	2,662	26.6	2,272
Higher	14.6	1,245	7.5	638
<b>Religion</b>				
Catholic	7.9	673	7.1	603
Christian	31.1	2,658	32.5	2,781
Islam	59.2	5,060	58.8	5,025
Traditionalist	1.3	108	0.9	80
Other	0.5	48	0.6	58
<b>Number of unions</b>				
Once	62.3	5321	89.9	7685
More than once	28.6	3125	9.0	769
No response	1.2	101	1.1	93
<b>Fidelity in Last 12 months</b>				
Faithful to Spouse	94.4	8071	97.8	8358
Not faithful to spouse	5.6	476	2.2	189
Total	100.0	8,547	100.0	8,547

Source: NDHS 2013

Table 1 shows the distribution of couples by selected background characteristics. The average age of the husbands is about 37years while the wives are on the average 29years. More than three-fifths of the husbands are at least 35years old, while at least three-quarters of the wives are below 35years. The husbands have attained on the average higher level of education than the wives. The proportion of wives without education is higher than the proportion of husbands without education. The reverse holds for those without any formal education.

About 59 per cent of the husbands and wives are followers of the Islamic religion, while about 39 per cent are Christians. There are couples that the husband and wife follow different religions. Majority of the wives are in their first marital union. More of the husbands have been married more than once than the wives. The results show that unfaithfulness is not exclusive to the husbands, there are some wives that have also engaged in extramarital sexual relationships in the last 12 months that preceded the survey. There is higher level of unfaithfulness<sup>2</sup> among the husbands than the wives. Those unfaithful implies that they reported having sexual partners aside their spouses.

<sup>2</sup> Faithfulness was measured by evaluating the last three sexual partners in the last 12 months preceding the survey. A person is faithful when the last three sexual partners in the last 12 months have been only the spouse

Table 2: Selected Couple Background Characteristics

	Percent	Number
<b>Marriage Type</b>		
Monogamous	71.9	6145
Polygynous	28.1	2402
<b>Residence</b>		
Urban	32.5	2,776
Rural	67.5	5,771
<b>Region</b>		
North-central	16.4	1,403
North-east	20.0	1,706
North-west	32.7	2,795
South-east	5.9	501
South-south	12.1	1,034
South-west	13.0	1,108
<b>Wealth Index</b>		
Poorest	22.6	1,934
Poorer	21.9	1,874
Middle	18.2	1,554
Richer	18.6	1,594
Richest	18.6	1,591
<b>Age difference between Husband and Wife</b>		
Wife older than Husband	2.0	167
Husband at least 4 years older than wife	22.2	1,899
Husband 5-9years older than wife	39.3	3,361
Husband 10-14 years older than wife	23.2	1,980
Husband at least 15 years older than wife	13.3	1,140
<b>Mutual faithfulness</b>		
Faithful to one another	92.2	7880
Not faithful to one another	7.8	667
Total	100.0	8,547

Source: NDHS 2013

Most of the couples are in monogamous unions, with about two-thirds residing in the rural areas (Table 2). Majority of the couples are in the North-west geopolitical zone about 45 per cent of the couples are in poor households. Very few of the wives are older than their husbands, about 37 percent of the couples are in unions in which the husband is at least 10 years older than the wives.

A couple is said to be mutually faithful when both the husband and the wife do not have any sexual relationship with another person in the last 12 months before the survey. At least there is mutual faithfulness in 9 out of every 10 married couples in Nigeria. The implication of having some level of mutual unfaithfulness has implications for the spread of sexually transmitted infections and this may be a contributory factor to why new infections of HIV was said to be more among married heterosexuals.

*Relationship with Sexual Partners*

Table 3: The Relationship of Husband with Last 3 sexual partners

Sexual Partner	Marriage Type				Total	
	Monogamous		Polygynous		%	Number of couples
	%	Number of couples	%	Number of couples		
Spouse only	92.7	5,699	96.8	2,326	93.9	8025
Spouse and Girlfriend	4.5	274	1.2	29	3.5	303
Spouse and Casual Acquaintance	0.6	34	0.1	3	0.4	37
Spouse and Commercial Sex worker	0.1	4	0.0	1	0.1	5
Spouse and Live-in partner	0.1	4	0.2	6	0.1	10
Spouse, Girlfriend and Casual Acquaintance	0.0	3	0.0	0	0.0	3
Spouse, Girlfriend and Commercial Sex worker	0.5	28	0.0	0	0.3	28
Spouse, Casual Acquaintance, and Commercial Sex worker	0.0	2	0.0	0	0.0	2
Spouse and others not stated	0.0	2	0.9	22	0.3	24
Girlfriend only	0.2	12	0.2	5	0.2	17
Girlfriend and Live-in-partner	0.1	7	0.0	1	0.1	8
Casual acquaintance						
Casual acquaintance only	0.0	1	0.0	0	0.0	1
Casual acquaintance and Live-in-partner	0.0	1	0.0	0	0.0	1
Live-in-partner						
Live-in-partner only	0.5	33	0.2	4	0.4	37
Not sexually active	0.7	41	0.2	5	0.5	46
TOTAL	100.0	6145	100.0	2402	100.0	8547

Source: NDHS 2013

About 93 and 97 per cent of the husbands in monogamous and polygynous marital unions respectively have not been involved in sexual relationships with any person apart from their wives in the last 12 months preceding the survey (Table 3). The husbands in monogamous unions have been involved with girlfriends than those in polygamous unions. The fact that the husbands in polygamous unions are having relationships with girlfriends may be an indication that such a man may increase his number of wives. Similarly, a husband currently having relationships with girlfriends may be a path into polygamy. Irrespective of the type of union a husband is presently in, there are some that still engage in fling relationships with casual acquaintance not minding the attendant consequences of contracting all forms of sexually transmitted infections. Though this is more prevalent among husbands in monogamous unions, thus may be an indication that husbands in monogamous unions may not be transparent to their wives on the number of wives/partners they have.

Table 4: Wife's Relationship with Last 3 sexual partners

Sexual Partner	Type of Union				Total	
	Monogamous		Polygynous		%	Number of couples
	%	Number of couples	%	Number of couples		
Spouse only	96.4	5,926	95.8	2,300	96.2	8226
Spouse and Boyfriend	0.2	10	0.1	3	0.2	13
Spouse and Casual Acquaintance	0.0	2	0.0	0	0.0	2
Spouse and Live-in-partner	0.0	1	0.0	0	0.0	1
Spouse and others not stated	0.0	2	0.1	2	0.0	4
Boyfriend only	0.0	3	0.1	2	0.1	5
Boyfriend and Live-in-partner	0.0	3	0.0	0	0.0	3
Casual acquaintance and Live-in-partner	0.0	1	0.0	0	0.0	1
Live-in-partner only	2.3	143	0.5	13	1.8	156
Others	0.0	0	0.2	4	0.0	4
Not sexually active	0.9	54	3.2	78	1.5	132
Total	100.0	6145	100.0	2402	100.0	8547

Source: NDHS 2013

The results in Table 4 show that about 96 percent of married women have not been involved with sexual

relationship with another person other their husbands in the last 12 months preceding the survey. Married women in monogamous unions are more involved with boyfriends and casual acquaintances that those in polygynous marriages. There is the need for this to be further examined, for it would have been imagined that women in polygynous marriages may not be sexually satisfied than those in monogamous unions. It may also be a pointer to the reasons why women are engaged in extramarital relationships.

Table 5: Disparity in Number of partners/wives and marital fidelity by type of marriage

	Type of marriage			p-value
	Monogamous	Polygynous	Total	
<b>Disparity in Number of wives/partners</b>				
Husband and wife agrees on Number of partners	97.1	92.1	95.7	0.000
Husband has more wives/partner than known by wife	0.0	6.7	1.9	
Wife suspects that Husband has more wives than stated by husband	2.9	1.2	2.4	
<b>Mutual fidelity</b>				0.008
Faithful to partner	91.7	93.4	92.2	
Not faithful to partner	8.3	6.6	7.8	
<b>Husband's fidelity</b>				0.000
Faithful to partner	93.4	97.0	94.4	
Not faithful to partner	6.6	3.0	5.6	
<b>Wife's fidelity</b>				0.000
Faithful to partner	97.3	99.0	97.8	
Not faithful to partner	2.7	1.0	2.2	
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	
Number of Couples	6145	2402	8547	

Source: NDHS 2013

*Disparity in Number of partners/wives and Fidelity*

In examining whether there is any disparity in the number of partners/wives a couple know about each other, the paper will be looking at it by type of marriage, the economic status as depicted by the wealth quintile, place of residence and the geopolitical zone of residence of the couple.

There is more agreement in monogamous union on the number of partners/wives a husband has than in polygynous unions (Table 5). There is more suspicion that the husbands have more wives than what the wife knows in monogamous unions than in polygynous unions. In polygynous unions, the husbands have more wives/partners that are not known to their wives than husbands in monogamous unions. It is an indication that the woman in polygynous unions is less bothered with the number of wives or partner, her husband has than those in monogamous unions. The fact that wives in monogamous are suspicious of their husbands may be an indication of infidelity on the part of the husbands in monogamous unions. The results show that there is a significant difference in disparity in number of wives/partners a husband have between couples in monogamous and polygynous unions ( $p \leq 0.05$ ).

There is significantly more mutual fidelity among couples in polygynous unions than in monogamous unions. This may be attributable to the wives rather than the husbands in in such unions ( $p < 0.05$ ). The results show that husbands in polygynous unions are significantly more faithful to their wives than those in monogamous unions ( $p < 0.05$ ). Similarly, wives in polygynous unions are significantly more faithful to their husbands than those in monogamous unions ( $p < 0.05$ ). The implication is that there is more transparency between couples in polygynous unions than those in monogamous unions.

Table 6: Disparity in Number of partners/wives and Marital fidelity by Wealth quintiles

	Wealth quintile					Total	p-value
	Poorest	Poorer	Middle	Richer	Richest		
<b>Disparity in Number of Partners/Wives</b>							
Husband and wife agrees on Number of partners	97.6	95.8	94.5	94.2	96.0	95.7	0.000
Husband has more wives/partner than known by wife	1.7	2.0	2.1	2.0	1.6	1.9	
Wife suspects that Husband has more wives than stated by husband	0.7	2.1	3.5	3.8	2.4	2.4	
<b>Mutual fidelity</b>							0.000
Faithful to partner	98.3	94.3	90.7	87.0	88.9	92.2	
Not faithful to partner	1.7	5.7	9.3	13.0	11.1	7.8	
<b>Husband's fidelity</b>							0.000
Faithful to partner	99.1	96.6	93.9	90.0	91.1	94.4	
Not faithful to partner	0.9	3.4	6.1	10.0	8.9	5.6	
<b>Wife's fidelity</b>							0.000
Faithful to partner	99.5	98.2	97.9	95.9	96.9	97.8	
Not faithful to partner	0.5	1.8	2.1	4.1	3.1	2.2	
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	
Number	1934	1874	1554	1594	1591	8547	

Source: NDHS 2013

There is more transparency on the number of partners/wives of the husband among couples who are in poor household. The transparency is highest among poorest households and lowest among the Richer households (Table 6). There is a significant difference in transparency about the number of partners/wives by marital unions according to their socioeconomic status (wealth quintiles). Wives of husbands in the poor households are less likely suspicious of their husbands having more wives/partners than stated by their husband. This may be because husbands in poor households have limited resources at their disposal and may often be with the wife most of the time. Mutual fidelity is significantly higher among poor households than rich households ( $p < 0.05$ ). Husband's and wife's fidelity are higher among couples in poor households than those in rich households ( $p < 0.05$ ). Infidelity is lowest among the poorest couples.

Table 7: Disparity in Number of partners/wives and Marital fidelity by Place of residence

	Place of residence			p-value
	Urban	Rural	Total	
<b>Disparity in Number of Partners/Wives</b>				
Couple agrees on Number of partners	95.4	95.9	95.7	0.053
Husband has more wives/partner than known by wife	1.7	2.0	1.9	
Wife suspects that Husband has more wives than stated by husband	3.0	2.1	2.4	
<b>Mutual fidelity</b>				
Faithful to partner	90.0	93.3	92.2	0.000
Not faithful to partner	10.0	6.7	7.8	
<b>Husband's fidelity</b>				
Faithful to partner	92.3	95.4	94.4	0.000
Not faithful to partner	7.7	4.6	5.6	
<b>Wife's fidelity</b>				
Faithful to partner	97.6	97.9	97.8	0.378
Not faithful to partner	2.4	2.1	2.2	
	100.0	100.0	100.0	
Number	2776	5771	8547	

Source: NDHS 2013

There is no significant difference in the transparency between couples by whether they reside in the rural or urban areas (Table 7). Women resident in the urban areas are more suspicious of their husbands having other partners/wives than is known to them than those resident in the rural areas, even though not statistically significant. Couples resident in the rural areas are significantly mutually faithful to one another than those in the urban areas ( $p < 0.05$ ). The same holds for husbands' fidelity, husbands in unions resident in the rural areas are significantly more faithful in their relationships than those resident in the urban areas.

Table 8: Disparity in Number of partners/wives and Marital fidelity by Geopolitical zone

	North-central	North-east	North-west	South-east	South-south	South-west	Total	p-value
<b>Disparity in Number of Partners/Wives</b>								
Couple agrees on Number of partners	93.4	96.6	97.7	96.4	94.4	91.9	95.7	0.000
Husband has more wives/partner than known by wife	3.0	2.2	1.5	1.4	2.0	1.0	1.9	
Wife suspects that Husband has more wives than stated by husband	2.6	1.2	0.8	2.2	3.6	7.1	2.4	
<b>Mutual fidelity</b>								
Faithful to partner	89.6	96.9	98.7	92.6	78.5	84.5	92.2	0.000
Not faithful to partner	10.4	3.1	1.3	7.4	21.5	15.5	7.8	
<b>Husband's fidelity</b>								
Faithful to partner	93.1	97.9	99.0	95.0	85.9	86.9	94.4	0.000
Not faithful to partner	6.9	2.1	1.0	5.0	14.1	13.1	5.6	
<b>Wife's fidelity</b>								
Faithful to partner	98.8	99.4	99.6	98.4	88.4	97.8	97.8	0.000
Not faithful to partner	1.2	0.6	0.4	1.6	11.6	2.2	2.2	
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	
<b>Number of Couples</b>	1403	1706	2795	501	1034	1108	8547	

Source: NDHS 2013

The results show that there is a significant disparity in number of partners/wives across the geopolitical zones in Nigeria ( $p < 0.05$ ). The level of transparency about the couple knowing the exact number of partner or wives of a husband has is highest among couple resident in the North-west geopolitical zone and lowest among

the couples in the South-west geopolitical zone (Table 8). The proportion of husbands having more wives/partners than known by the wives is highest among couples' resident in the North-central geopolitical zone and lowest among those resident in the South-west geopolitical zone. The implication is that husbands in the North-central are least transparent compared to those in other geopolitical zones. But the level of suspicion of the husband having more wives/partners than known to the wives is highest among the couples' resident in the South-west geopolitical zone.

Mutual fidelity among couples is highest among those resident in the North-west geopolitical zone and lowest among couples who are resident in the South-east geopolitical zone. The results show that there is a significant difference in mutual fidelity of couples based on the geopolitical zone of residence ( $p < 0.05$ ). Husbands' fidelity is significantly different across the geopolitical zones ( $p < 0.05$ ). Husbands in marital unions in the South-south geopolitical zone are the least faithful to their wives, while those in the North-west geopolitical zone are the most faithful. A similar pattern holds among the wives.

#### 4 Conclusions

Mutual fidelity is higher among couples in polygynous unions, the couples who are poor, those resident in the rural areas and those resident in the North-west geopolitical zone. The implication of all these is that the likelihood that culture and religion have effect on the likelihood for a married man or woman to be engaged in extramarital relationships is high. Most of the residents in the North-west are adherents of the Islamic religion and many are in polygynous unions. There is the need for further research on the contributions of culture and religion to marital fidelity. The fact that couples in poor households are more likely to be faithful to each other does not imply that poverty is good. The situation only suggests that necessary interventions need be put in place for husbands and wives to know how to better manage improvement they may have in their socio-economic status. It is generally believed that a poor man who never owned a car but now has one is likely to begin to spend late nights outside the home and such engage in extramarital affairs. The consequences of infidelity on our quest as a country to reverse the trend of HIV is better imagined than experienced. There is the need to create more enlightenment and awareness on the need for transparency and mutual fidelity among couples. This is to ensure the health of the spouse and the well-being of the entire family. The health of the spouse not engaged in infidelity may be endangered resulting from sexually transmitted infections that may be contracted, and the well-being of the family is likely to be worsened when there will be the need for medical care and resources that should have been utilized for other family needs will go to cater for the health needs of the unfaithful partner.

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