

## Sexual Agency in Contemporary Jamaica: The Case of the Nyhabinghi Empress March 26, 2020

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**ABSTRACT:** This study explores the regulation of sexual health and wellbeing, particularly among the women of the Nyahbinghi Order in the local Jamaican Rastafari community. Therefore, the research examined how Rastafari's grounded belief may impact the enablement of sexual agency, participants' understanding of their sexual health and wellbeing as stated by their religion and whether sexual agency remains non- progressive in an era of modernisation. The study used the snowballing technique to identify participants for data collection. A comparative case study approach allowed for the analysis of data collected. The findings suggest that despite the Rastafari's rigid beliefs, the Nyhabinghi women's ability to exercise freedom of choice may be causing such Jamaican women to experience the enablement of sexual agency. The research concludes that modernisation has enabled the Nhyabingi empress to have some amount of sexual agency in a rigid belief system that denies sexual health and wellbeing. The study also showed that in this space; male sexual partners seem to "distribute" some aspects of sexual agency to women. The study recommends further research (with larger sample size) to understand the extent to which women of this particular group are quietly exercising their right to freedom of choice to exercise sexual agency.

**KEYWORDS:** Sexual Agency, Jamaican Rastafari Women,

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Within the public life of Jamaica, Rastafarian levity is a small group but a very general way of life. The scope and extent of Jamaican women being able to have sexual agency is something that remains a mystery among the women of the Rastafarian group to include the Nyahbinghi empresses. The World Health Organisation defines sexual health as a state of physical, mental and social wellbeing concerning sexuality (World Health Organization, 2000). Having sexual agency requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences free of coercion, discrimination, and violence (World Health Organization, 2000). The determinant of sexual agency according to the World Health Organization includes the ability to access sexual health and sex rights particularly the right to be free from coercion, discrimination, violence, sexuality, and sex (World Health Organization, 2000).

The most recent Jamaican population statistics conducted in 2011 shows a significant difference in the ratio male to female Rastafarians (25, 325 -3,701) highlighting a patriarchal dominance within this group. The gender role expectations of Rastafarian females suggest a gap between gender role expectations and female sexual health and wellbeing within their community. Gender role practices of the Rasta woman contradicts the standards of sexual health and wellbeing set by the World Health Organization, suggesting Rasta women have no entitlement to sexual agency. Being a part of the Jamaican society since 1930, Rastafari women contribute to the representation of a Jamaican woman yet little can be said about them. Thus, it is imperative to acknowledge that the Jamaican Woman is not a monophonic group; instead, there are several types that we must understand. This study places focus on the ability of one kind of a Jamaican woman to experience sexual agency, the Nyabinghi empress, as a means to open communication with a group that appears to be living among the shadows of the Jamaican society. One theory that prompts study on Caribbean women was the conflict theory. Several kinds of literature written on Caribbean women suggested that gender role creates inequality resulting in the oppression of women. The idea was that female gender roles affect their ability to experience liberation. This theory seems logical because the focus of class/race continues to preclude specific attention to structural constraints of women (Gordon, 1981). Early pieces of literature on the Rastafarian women in Jamaica have focused on the female gender roles and expectations in upholding the principles of their belief (Nicholas & Sparrow 1979). Another literature showed that the identities formed by the Rastafarian people's history have changed in many ways, yet the subservient roles of women have somehow survived (Greville, 1998). Since this time, works of literature on the Rastafarian women continue to focus on the expectations of these women.

Although women of the Rastafarian community have been making strides in the labour market through their expressions in music and publication of books, their sexual health and wellbeing lack attention. The relatively sparse research on Rastafarian women has left room for further investigation. Firstly, much of the literature has focused on the role of the Rastafarian women place in her community (Chevannes, 1994). Secondly, the gender role expectation of the Rastafarian community contradicts the determinants of sexual liberation for women living within this community. One literature states that the family structure of Rastafarian is patriarchal, and therefore, women are to be submissive to her partner though she might be the breadwinner. In addition to being submissive, the role of a rasta female is to care and provide a stable environment for her Kingman and their children (Afari, 2007) placing rasta women secondary in decision making interfering with her ability to experience sexual liberation.

Consistently, other literature by T. Nicholas and B.Sparrow states that an empress should never use contraceptive as this goes against their purpose to procreate. The purpose of contraceptive is not limited to preventing procreation since it protects an individual from the negative psychosocial impacts of an unplanned pregnancy. Jamaica's Reproductive Health and HIV survey carried out in 2008 reported high rates of unplanned pregnancy and a 20percent of females respondents saying that they have been forced or coerced into having sex (Serbanescu, Ruiz, & Schdev, 2010). While this is not a representation of the Rastafarian Community, rasta women lived in the space and time of this study. Rasta women gender role expectation draws attention to the ability of these women to experience sexual agency. Third, not all aspects of a Caribbean woman are studied sufficiently. Majority of studies are focus on, labour market stratification (Gordon, 1981), gendered relation within the Caribbean (Blank, 2013) and Caribbean sexual relations (Kempadoo, 2009) with no significant mention of this population making it relevant to examine sexual health among this group. Fourth, the sexual health and wellbeing of Jamaican women lack attention. The first women health survey conducted in 2016 showed that more than one in every four Jamaican women between the ages of 15 years and 64 years of age would, over their lifetime, experience intimate partner physical and or sexual violence (Watson-Williams, 2016). What this study suggests is that violence against Jamaican women is widespread. Despite the survey not showing an accurate representation of the Rastafarian community, there is a concern since these women gender role expectations can create the sphere for sexual violence base on standards provided by the World Health Organization. Finally, not all aspects of the Rastafarian woman sexuality have received sufficient attention. In 2007 Afari, states in his book, a Rastafarian woman is to be sexually involved with only one Kingman at a time even if he is engaged sexually with another empress suggesting a gap between the Rastafari women gender roles and distribution of sexual agency. Examining the Nyahbinghi empress is essential since they have been living within Jamaica's society for an extended period and represents the Jamaican Woman in an era where there is a global emphasis on health and wellbeing. Therefore, the current study helps us to understand that the Jamaican Woman is not a monophonic group by examining the regulation of sexual health and wellbeing among the Nyahbinghi empress. Specifically, the historical and contemporary views of these women sexual agency, Rastafari women's understanding of their sexual health and wellbeing as stated by their religion and whether sexual health and wellbeing remain unprogressive despite modernisation. Since this approach examines a person as well as a phenomenon, further research using the same process with a bigger sample size will shed more light into the sexual health and wellbeing of one kind of a Jamaica woman.

## II. METHOD

**Participants:** Using the non-probability sampling method; the study identified two females using the snowballing technique. Both participants have been actively living within the Nyahbinghi community for over thirty years. The study excluded several potential participants because of their accessibility and willingness to participate.

**Material:** The ability to enable sexual agency was measured using a structural interview consisting of five (5) research questions and fourteen items (14). The study collected data during separate interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 5 hours. Data collected is used to create two case studies, one representing the traditional views and the other representing the contemporary views. The study compared the response in each case to identify similarities and differences in reactions. The regulation of sexual agency was analysed using the determinants as stated by the World Health Organization that highlighted four constructed themes (sexual agency as an act of distribution, sexual agency as an act of entitlement, value system of sexual agency and transparency of sexual agency).

**Procedure:** Data from participants were collected using a structured interview at a time and date convenient to both participants. Initially, at each interview, participants gave informed consent. Each consent form contained legal and ethical obligations of the researchers and participants. Next participants were brief on the interview

conditions and the area of sexual agency the interview would examine. The study collected data for the analysis on two separate days. The study used this approach to control the focus of individual experience to the current research. At their assigned time, participants received the instructions of the interview process. The reading of the questions followed, and responses captured manually. Also, biographic and demographic information remained confidential, although each participant was aware that there is another participant. This procedure is to prevent participants from influencing each other's shared experience of having the ability to exercise sexual agency. Immediately after each participant's data were collected, information was secured using appropriate measures. After which participants were debriefed and dismissed. The study explored the data collected under themes emerging from the determinants of sexual health and wellbeing, according to the World Health Organization. Thus, the study examined the extent to which sexual agency is an act of entitlement, having sexual agency as an act of distribution, the transparency of sexual agency among the group and the value system of sexual agency among the group.

### **III. RESULT**

Data on the ability of a Nyhibinghi empress to experience sexual agency shows limitations due to the small sample size. As such, a larger sample size is relevant to provide clarity to the enablement of sexual agency among this group of women. The ability of a Nyhabinghi empress to exercise sexual agency in contemporary Jamaica is showing strides of progression despite the rigid religious beliefs that suggest otherwise, which was very good considering the focus on health and wellbeing globally. The study aimed to support that the Jamaican woman is not a monophonic group; instead, there are several types that we must understand such as the Nyahbinghi Empresses who have been mysteriously living among the Jamaican woman community for decades. A thematic analysis of the themes emerging from the study showed that factors to include socialisation, partner and freedom of choice influences the ability of a Nyahbinghi empress to exercise her right to have sexual agency. To our knowledge, this is the only research to provide a qualitative analysis of the regulation of sexual health and well being for the Nyahbinghi empress in contemporary Jamaica. This information provides clarity to the claims that a Jamaican Woman is a monophonic group. While the current research sample is limited in size, overall, support was found that shows excellent consistency in empresses' ability to experience sexual agency in contemporary Jamaica.

### **IV. DISCUSSION**

The purpose of the study was to examine the regulation of sexual health and wellbeing among one type of Jamaican Woman. The study predicted that the ability of a Rastafarian woman to exercise sexual agency is progressing in contemporary Jamaica. What the findings reveal is the extent to which a Rastafarian woman exercises her power to experience sexual agency is as a result of socialisation, intimate -partner and freedom of choice. Thus, this study concludes that the Jamaican Woman is not a monophonic group since one type is showing strides in their ability to experience sexual agency in contemporary Jamaica despite the gender role expectations of this group of women. With the use of a qualitative methodology, the research conducted a case comparison analysis of two case studies on the regulation of sexual health and wellbeing among a set of females from the Rastafarian community. The data collected provided crucial information to address the objectives of the study. Nyahbinghi empresses in contemporary Jamaica are now experiencing sexual agency more as an act of entitlement despite their rigid way of life beliefs.

Additionally, modernisation creates the sphere for a new way of socialisation for the Nyhabinhi empress, which seems to have given this sect of empresses the ability to have sexual agency over their bodies to a greater extent. The gender role expectations of Rastafarian women have been traversing with the way of life since its conception in the 1930s; a period of great distress in Jamaica is still shadowing the progressiveness in the regulation of sexual health and wellbeing among empresses. One empress in her response stated "empress wants their voice heard"; which suggests either of two things that no one is listening to these empresses or something is overshadowing the empresses' voices so no one can hear them. The study adds to the aim to open communication among one type of a Jamaican woman; that appears to be living among the shadows of the Jamaican society.

While we acknowledge this progression, the gaps identified in the research leaves the research with more questions that need addressing.

1. Is an empress's ability to experience sexual agency influenced by Rastafarian men deviating from the beliefs of the religion?
2. Would the study yield similar findings with a larger sample size?

3. How is Nyahbinhi empress's deviation affecting the balance between the beliefs of their way of life and sexual health and wellbeing for this particular group? Moreover, what does this mean for their identity as a Nyahbinhi Empress?

Despite this, the exciting findings are, both empresses thought that their ability to give consent to participation in or decline a sexual activity and having her desires honoured is dependent on the empress partner at the time. Additionally, a new way of socialisation for this community has given women the opportunity to date outside their city. Furthermore, the study found that empresses were using their freedom of choice to practice the use of contraceptives, suggesting a lack of transparency in sexual agency within this space. In summary, the study concluded that modernisation has significantly influenced the progression in the regulation of sexual health and wellbeing among Nyahbinhi empresses as an act of entitlement despite this way of life rigid beliefs. Empress's ability to experience sexual agency is influenced by socialisation, partner and freedom of choice. Suggesting the Jamaican Woman is not a Monophonic group; instead, there are several types we must understand. As the regulation of sexual health and wellbeing among the Nyahbinhi empresses warrant clarity as it continues to remain a mystery. Thus further research to examine the code of sexual agency among this group of people is recommended.

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