"They are not Proper Boys":
Youth Interpretations and Policing of Transgressive Gender Behaviours a Heteronormative School Space in Kaduna State, Nigeria.

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Abstract

In the Conservative socio-cultural context of Northern Nigeria, schools are potent sites for reinforcing heteronormative gender norms. These norms seek to construct and regulate the behaviours of young people in ways that conform to heteronormative ideas of masculinities and femininities, thereby, denying young people agency in the construction of their social identities. Therefore, the study investigates how students in a Kaduna secondary school interpret and respond to peer behaviours that transgress these norms. A six-month qualitative ethnographic study was conducted, using participant observations, focus group discussions and semi structured interviews with students aged 13-20 years. Findings reveal a gendered double standard: girls adopting masculine behaviours (tomboy/agbero) were often admired for accessing male power and freedom, while boys exhibiting feminine traits (boy-girl/Charlie-charlie) were ridiculed and policed for failing hegemonic masculinities. However, instances of peer support and sympathy indicate spaces for negotiation. The study argues that the heteronormative school environment is a dynamic arena where youths actively enforce, but also sometimes challenge, gender boundaries. It underscores the urgent need for inclusive educational policies in Nigeria that affirm gender diversity.

Keywords: Young people, gender, transgressive behaviours, heteronormativity, school space

Introduction

Learning, according to Francis (2024), takes place in schools, which are not neutral places but social institutions that teach, perform, police, and reproduce gender norms. Heteronormativity, which means the assumption that heterosexuality and binary gender identities are the default and normal, comes into play in many educational contexts, and it shapes policies, curricula, everyday interactions, and disciplinary practices in such a way

that only certain gender performances are recognized as legitimate (Okanlawon, 2020; Zhange & Mohangi, 2024; Francis, 2024).

Gender studies around the world have emphasised the need to see gender identities as social constructs which are created, developed and expressed by individuals through the process of social interaction (Butler, 1999; Connell, 1987; Pattman, 2005). Contrary to the essentialist idea of gender as naturally determined, studies have emphasised the need to see gender as social identifications we construct and practice through everyday interactions (Butler, 1999). It is important, therefore, to understand gender identities as being created through interactions with social and cultural resources available to individuals in particular societal contexts (Pattman, 2005).

In this research, "transgressive gender behaviours" are defined as the acts, expressions, or performances of the young people that are not in line with the prevailing local gender norms (e., girls wearing boyish clothes or behaving like boys, boys being emotionally open, or students claiming non-binary gender identities). Such behaviours in a heteronormative school setting are usually monitored by the peers and authority figures and treated as disciplinary issues, moral failures, or even social threats (Mayeza, 2018; Francis, 2024). It is important to know how students view these deeds, how they refer to them, what reasons they give for them, who they hold responsible, and what responses they think of, as this will help us understand the social control and resilience mechanisms in the school environments.

Literature Review

Young people interacting in social relationships often navigate an already organised adult world along with gender binaries. In this way, gender categories are presented as opposites - boys in opposition to girls, and masculinities in opposition to femininities (Butler, 1999). These opposing categories are often understood when viewed through social interactions as existing within a compulsory heterosexual context (Francis, 2018). In such instances, traditional contextualisation of gender considers the proper practice of gender as conforming to heteronormative ideals. It compels young people to comply and adopt already prescribed gendered behaviour that continuously reinforces gender differences and, consequently, inequalities. DePalma & Atkinson (2010) argue that strict and continuous adherence to norms that produce such inequalities would mean that young people in school are restricted to only a few ranges of behaviour that only supports normative forms of gendered behavious.

DePalma & Atkinson (2010), while studying the nature of institutional heteronormativity in primary schools in the United Kingdom (UK), define the concept as institutional structures that reinforce the adoption of heteronormative gendered behaviours as normal while other forms of non-normative identities are deviant. Heteronormativity reifies the belief that gender operate in opposites. Furthermore, understanding that gender behaviours must be within the strict scope of a boy-girl or man-woman identifications. Any other form of non-binary identification is regarded as non-conforming to existing societal values. An earlier study conducted by Dyson, Mitchell, Smith, Dowsett, Pitts & Hillier (2003) among schools in Australia linked heteronormativity in schools with self-harm, depression and dropping out of schools for non-conforming students. More recent studies in Africa reveal the continuous domination of discourses of danger, disease, damage, violence, among other negativities

within the framework of discussing non-conforming identities both within the school environment (Okanlawon, 2020) and the society at large (Tamale, 2013).

These pressures are intensified by the socio-cultural, religious tenets, and policy environment of Nigeria. The very mention of sexuality, non-conforming gender identities, and queer subjectivities is heavily stigmatized; adolescents who go against the dominant gender expectations often face exclusion, harassment, or erasure from school life and health/education services (Olaseni, 2024). This stigma not only has a negative impact on the psychosocial well-being of the affected individuals but also hinders their access to information and supportive resources for young people going through the process of gender and sexuality.

The Nigerian Federal Ministry of Education (FMOE, 2017) adopted the national policy on inclusive education. The policy provides equal opportunity for all Nigerians to participate in the teaching and learning processes that ensure their overall well-being. Despite implementing this policy, the Nigerian education sector is yet to achieve considerable success in this regard. Studies on gender in Nigerian schools such as Babatunde, Bolanle & Akintunde (2016); Fawole, Balogun & Olaleye (2018); Okanlawon (2020), reveal little or non-existence of formal discussions on gender diversities. This inhibits the ability of young school goers in Nigeria to acquire adequate knowledge about their gender and sexual identities.

While Studies in Southern Africa (e.g., Mayeza, 2018; Morojele, 2011) have explored issues around gender diversity among youths, there is a critical lack of empirical research focussing on the peer-driven interpretations of gender transgression in Nigerian schools,

particularly in the conservative north. Studies conducted among Nigerian youths such as Egbochuku & Akerele (2007); Izugbara & Modo (2007); Odimegwu & Somefun (2017) are organised around discussions about youths' sexual activities and other issues of reproductive health in Southern and Eastern Nigeria. Very little or no attention is paid to understanding how young people construct and live sexual identities. The Northern region of Nigeria is silent about gender and sexuality with regards to young people, as evident in the lack of literature. This silence, as presented in some Nigerian studies, such as Vaughan & Banu (2014); and Mukoro (2017), is related to the broad historical influence of religious and cultural beliefs on gender diversity. These beliefs portray young people as non-agential beings, thereby implying that exposing them to issues of gender diversity and sexual desires that will only promote promiscuity, the contraction of STIs and expose them to non—heterosexual tendencies. As a result, discussions on or about gender and sexuality are mostly prohibited among young people. (Duze & Mohammed, 2006).

Kaduna State serves as a very enlightening example. According to recent surveys and mixed-method research that involved data from Kaduna, there are still gender inequalities and conservative and fundamentalist attitudes in the area that affect educational participation, gender role expectations, and young people's gender-related attitudes in the entire northern Nigeria (Tuki, 2025; Eboyem, 2024). These contextual dynamics imply that heteronormative expectations are probably very much a part of the daily social fabric of schools in Kaduna, influencing the way students interpret, respond to, and classify "transgressive" gender behaviours.

The existing Nigerian studies generally tend to touch upon the sexual and reproductive health issues, legal restrictions on LGBTQ+ lives, or adult views on gender (Olaseni, 2024; LeeVan et al., 2022), while very few discuss the interpretation and reactions of adolescent friends to gender nonconformity in the schools. This shortage is significant because the youth peer cultures are the primary areas where the gender norms are either policed or negotiated; thus, their interpretations will not only reflect but will also reinforce larger social scripts and will additionally have immediate impacts on the safety and inclusion of gender-diverse students (Eze et al., 2025). This paper therefore asks: How do students in a heteronormative school in Kaduna State understand, label and police transgressive gender behaviours among their peers? It argues that through daily interactions, youth simultaneously reinforce and, in limited ways, resist the rigid gender boundaries of their society.

The study is built around the ideas of the social constructivism and post-structural feminism framework. In line with social constructivism, the study conceives knowledge and reality as being created through interactions with people in society within a specific social context. This consequently makes human behaviour a product of interactions with the external social world (White, Bondurant & Travis, 2000). The theory suggests that individuals' reality is informed by the knowledge they acquire through the interactive process of learning with other people and the social environment. This paper thus explains how students construct their gender identities through interaction within the school space. it argues that gender is socially constructed and should not be understood as natural sets of biological characteristics. Gender do not exist before or outside the social practices in which people create and sustain relationships. Post-structural feminism further provides

insight on the fluidity of gender boundaries. The theory argues that gender is performative, it is socially constructed through everyday social practices. It further highlights the non-universality of gender categories of being a man or woman. It emphasizes the complexity of gender as going beyond binary and natural differences created through social processes in Society.

Methodology

The qualitative research design was utilized in this study to investigate how students of a Nigerian secondary school comprehend and react to gender behaviours that are outside the accepted norms. The qualitative method was preferred because it provides a comprehensive study of the meanings, perceptions, and experiences of individuals in their social context (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The fieldwork was carried out in a co-educational public school in Kaduna State, Nigeria, for a period of six months. The choice of the school was informed by its peculiarities. It is located within a heterogenous community with people coming together from diverse ethnic, religious and socio-economic backgrounds. This reflects the broader social fabric of Kaduna State.

The participants were male and female students from 13 to 20 years old, coming from different grades, and from various socio-cultural backgrounds. The ethical approval was granted by the concerned institutional review board, and informed consent and assent were obtained from the participants and the school authorities before the commencement of data collection. During data collections, participants were informed about their right to not answer any question the feel uncomfortable with. They could also withdraw from the

study at any point they experience any form of discomfort; prior arrangement was made with the counselling section of the school to attend to any such student as a priority.

Participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs) were the methods used for data collection. Daily interactions, classroom settings, and relationships among peers were the main areas of focus for observations in order to understand how gender norms were acted out and maintained in real-time. Semi-structured interviews, on the other hand, revealed individual stories and reflections on gender expressions, while FGDs facilitated the process of making meaning together and discussing shared experiences among classmates. The data collection process went on until the saturation of themes was reached. A total of 18 semi-structured interviews and 4 focus group discussions (with 6-8 participants each) were conducted. All of the sessions were audio recorded with the consent of the participants and then transcribed word for word. Thematic analysis was carried out according to Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive framework to find patterns of meaning in the data. The use of multiple methods and participants for triangulation increased the credibility and reliability of the results (Nowell et al., 2021). To ensure that confidentiality was maintained, the researchers used pseudonyms and did not disclose any identifying information.

Findings

Studying the spectrum of gender among young people, Thorne (1993) suggests the recognition of existing dualisms and forms of deviance from the dominant forms of gender categorisation and the labels attached to such individuals. Thorne (1993) discovers the use of "sissy" as a word of contempt used to describe boys who often display what are

constructed as feminine characteristics. Also, girls who display "masculine" forms of behaviour may be referred to as 'tomboys'. Interestingly, the use of the term "tomboy" in her study often implies something positive. In this study, forms of gender transgressions among boys and girls were reported and observed. Just as in Thorne's study, young people in the school show more acceptance for girls who express masculine tendencies (referred to as "Tomboy/Agbero") than for boys who exhibit feminine characteristics (referred to as "Boy-girl/Chalie-Charlie"), who are mostly being ridiculed and embarrassed. This was recorded by the researcher in a research diary thus:

> Today I interacted with two groups of students in SS1 and SS2 on gender transgressions among students. Although these discussions were not planned, they occurred on the same day with different sets of students in different year groups. These discussions were informed by some events that took place in the two classes. In the morning, before assembly, I was standing by the window of an SS1 classroom watching students sweeping the premises in preparation for the day. The girls were sweeping while two boys were helping to move the desks to allow more space to sweep. After moving some desks, one of the boys said he was tired and needed to rest, but the other rebuked him and asked if he has become like Zicham who behaves like a girl. I listened closely, picking up on the conversation that ensued. Apparently, Zicham is a boy in SS1 who exhibits some characteristics of non-hegemonic masculinity. After the boys had finished moving the desks, I asked them to join me outside. I started a conversation about Zicham, trying to understand the construction of his identity and what they think about it. By this time, another boy and a girl had joined us. From our conversation, these students expressed disdain for boys who behave in "girlish" ways. When I asked about their attitude towards gender transgressive identities, Didam stated: "God forbid a "boy-girl" cannot be my friend. They behave girlishly, they are weak and gullible, and I don't want such people as friends. I better be friends with an agbero girl, that one I know she is tough and will not embarrass you[me] in public". Interestingly, other students in the group made comments that support Didam's idea of transgressive gendered identities as unacceptable in the school space.

Later in the day, during the break, I went to interact with SS 2 students who were sitting in front of the SS 2 science classroom. It was a mixed-gender group who were eating biscuits they bought from a shop behind their classroom. A girl, Zinai, walked past us. She was on a low haircut and had a boy-like physique. Yanang, one of the girls I was sitting with, expressed her likeness for Zinai, "I like how she walks, she just lives her life without worry." The other students in the group seemed to have the same likeness for Zinai as they both made comments that agreed with Yanang's. I became curious and decided to push the conversation further. During our discussions, their admiration for Zinai was informed by the perceived level of freedom Zinai enjoys in terms of wearing any type of clothes she wanted, playing freely with boys, and her ability to challenge boys' masculine domination. They used the words "tomboy" and "Agbero" to refer to Zinai. However, this admiration was not there when we spoke about Zicham. Zicham is a boy in the school whom everyone referred to as a "boy-girl" or "Charlie-Charlie" because he behaves in a non-hegemonic masculine way. These students felt that "men are supposed to be strong and able to defend themselves and their women" [girlfriends]; a characteristic Zicham did not possess. Zicham would cry easily when he was sad or when he was being punished by teachers or senior prefects.

During observations and FGDs, the terms "boy-girl" and "Charlie-Charlie" were used by students interchangeably to police transgressive masculinities. While the terms "tom-boy" and "agbero" were also used to refer to girls who transgress the feminine gender boundaries. In line with the ideas of social constructivism, the conversation depicts how young people police transgressive forms of gender identities among their peers through social interaction with one another within the school. The following sections, therefore, present discussions on the understanding and construction of transgressive gender identities like the "boy-girl" and "Tomboy". The sections discuss the experiences of two students (one boy and one girl) who have been constructed by other students as possessing transgressive forms of gender identities.

Policing Effeminate Boys: The "Boy-Girl/Charlie-Charlie"

During the study, the researcher encountered students who performed forms of gender identities that contradict the dominant forms of identities constructed along with strict masculinities and femininities. In this case, boys who do not express forms of masculinities that have been culturally associated with men (hegemonic masculinities) were referred to as "boy-girl" or "Charlie-Charlie".

In the course of conversation with students on the forms of gender transgressions in the school, Zicham's name was mentioned a couple of times by students as possessing a "boy-girl" identity. During our conversation, Zicham admitted being called derogatory names by other students in school because of the way he behaves, which he understands is natural and unchangeable. He further indicated a few times where he experiences some form of non-violent bullying by students who would tease him and laugh at him whenever he became angry and started to cry. The following conversation ensued regarding his relationship with other students in the school.

Zicham: Uncle, some of the students don't like me, especially the boys. They call me names like boy-girl, Charlie-charlie, or call me a girl...one boy once called me gay and I reported him to our teacher and he was punished. Since then nobody calls me gay again.

Hilary: Why do you think they call you these names?

Zicham: Uncle, they say I behave like a girl and as for me I am just being myself; this is how I was born, and I grew up to see myself like this. I think it is because I am not as strong as other boys. You know I don't like trouble and so I try to not play rough play with the boys. The other day, one girl who is my friend said sometimes I should fight them [other boys], but me I don't want to fight anybody, that is not who I am.

Hilary: Do the girls call you names too?

Zicham: Yes, sometimes, but not as the boys. I have more friends that are girls than boys because the girls they use to tell me they like how I am calm and not rough like the other boys. I also have a few boys who are my friends, but it is the boys that call me names more.

Hilary: Interesting! So do you have a girlfriend?

Zicham: Yes! I have a girlfriend but not in this school. She is in my church. I like her but she was the one that came to tell me that she likes me because of how I carry myself. I told her that I like her too and we have been happy together.

Hilary: That's nice. Have you experienced any difficulty in school because of how other students address you?

Zicham: Not now, before when I came to this school, I could not even concentrate in class because I know they [other students] will call me names when the teacher is out. But later I made friends and they supported me. Now I live my life, I don't care if you call me names, I have accepted who I am and will not change. That time they will come and be calling me all those names, I will get angry and cry, and they will laugh at me. But since I stopped crying, they reduce the way they were disturbing me.

Hilary: So you ignore them now?

Zicham: Yes, I ignore them. But if anybody calls me gay, I will report that person because I am not gay. Like I said, I have a girlfriend. The other day one girl here in this school even said she wants us to date, but I told her I have a girlfriend already.

Zicham admitted being called derogatory names by other students in school because of the way he behaves, which he understands is natural and unchangeable. He further indicated a few times where he experienced some form of bullying by students who would tease him and laugh at him whenever he became angry and started to cry. Zicham constructed his identity as no lesser than other boys, even though he was not as strong as they were and did not engage in physical forms of activities that required strength. However, he also has an inclination towards girls with whom he establishes romantic relationships. Zicham is constructed in this way because he does not express the characteristics of hegemonic masculinities by being physically strong, tough, and rough. The support he gets from

teachers and other students, especially girls, has made him accept his identity as being normal and not allow it to be a source of frustration when other boys call him derogatory names, such as boy-girl, and exhibit condescending attitudes against him.

Negotiating Masculine Girls: "Tomboy/Agbero" Identity in the School

Although a few other girls self-identified as "tomboys," this study paid more attention to Zinai. It is believed Zinai's popularity within the school would provide a better understanding of being a "tomboy" in a heteronormative school space. During conversations with Zinai, she self-identified as a "tomboy", an identity she was proud to possess. The following conversation ensued with Zinai:

Hilary: What do you think about people calling you a tomboy?

Zinai: Well, there is a way it is, but I am cool with it, it is who I am and I love being me. Some even call me agbero, but I have no problem with it.

Hilary: Does it affect your relationship with other students in school?

Zinai: No, it doesn't.

Hilary: Have you been stigmatised by other students in any way?

Zinai: No, not at all, students like me, they make friends with me, both boys and girls. It's just that sometimes, like at home, my parents will be saying I should behave like the girl that I am and stop behaving like a boy. Even in school, some teachers will be advising me to behave like other girls, but I will tell them this is who I am. In school, my friends will say they wish they have my kind of freedom and I tell them they can be like me. Even my boyfriend said he likes me like this, so I don't care.

Hilary: Okay!

Zinai: The other day, I was coming to school and one man stopped me and was asking me why I walk like a boy, I just ignored him, because I don't know what to tell him and he said I should better change.

Hilary: Have you been punished in school or at home for behaving in this way?

Zinai: No! Never! They only use to advise me to change the way I behave. Like my brother he even said he likes the way I behave, nobody will bully me or even push me around. But some teachers and my parents will always say I should stop behaving like a boy.

Hilary: So, why do you think they call you a tomboy?

Zinai: I don't know, maybe because of the way I walk and the way I dress at home, I always wear trousers and shorts. I like to do things that boys do; I even play football sometimes.

Hilary: Do you think it is mostly because you play football with boys?

Zinai: No uncle, other girls also love to play ball [football] with the boys sometimes, it is fun, but they don't call them tomboy like me.

Hilary: Are you worried that they call you agbero, considering the meaning of agbero?

Zinai: No, I am not, at least they know that I am not a street girl. I am a responsible girl and I just behave differently. Call me agbero or tomboy, I am still the same person.

Although she had experienced some form of disapproval regarding her behaviour from her parents at home and some teachers in school, as well as other individuals outside school, she rarely experiences any form of disapproval or discrimination among students in the school, owing to her "tomboy" identity. This depicts the non-supportive cultural environment that gender transgressive individuals must navigate to exist. In this case, restrictive cultural gender values are being propagated by adults in society. However, young people can resist this restriction and still act in ways they deem appropriate during interactions with their peers. The supportive attitude of young people in school towards Zinai's behaviour is further informed by the assumption that girls who transgress gender boundaries enjoy some power and freedom associated with masculinities in patriarchal societies.

Discussion of Findings

From the findings presented above, the study argues that societal perceptions of gender are heavily influenced by cultural values about gender that glorify masculinities over femininities, this resonates with the ideas of social constructivism that argues that reality and meaning we attach to concepts and behaviour are product of social interactions within different context. The ascendancy of masculinities over femininities is reflected in young people's acceptance of girls who express masculine behaviour. These girls are constructed in ways that portray a positive image of the individual actor. They are seen to express forms of behaviour that are ordinarily "above" the expected feminine behaviour they should possess.

This is further exemplified when a student can identify herself during a discussion as a tomboy without any expectation of disdain from the other participants. This further reflects the assumption that girls who transgress gender boundaries are indicating that they could enjoy the power and freedom which are associated with masculinities in patriarchal societies. On the other hand, boys who exhibit supposedly feminine characteristics are conceived as being retrogressive in that they express feminine characteristics that have been constructed by patriarchal cultural norms as being inferior to the masculinities of men. They are therefore ridiculed for their failure to be "proper" boys. Such ridicule is promoted by the tenuous relationship boys develop in a patriarchal context in which boys assert themselves as "proper" boys by distancing themselves from and ridiculing other boys who are seen as transgressing normative understandings of boyhood.

Although dominant gender norms require that girls should be gentle and calm, as expressed inclination to masculine boys, students in this study showed their support for Zinai's transgressive behaviour, which serves to challenge inclinations to strict gender boundaries by challenging the domination of boys' masculinities. In line with the arguments of the post-structural feminist, the transgressive forms of gender performances indicate the agency that young people exercise in negotiating the forms of gender values they are exposed to in the socialisation process. They not only assimilate existing gender norms, but they also negotiate and act in ways that fit their realities (MacNaughton, 2000).

The boy-girl/Charlie-Charlie identity in this study is often attributed to boys whose character and behaviour have been culturally associated with girls; such characters and behaviours depict weakness, timidity, calmness, and dependence. The term boy-girl is used to ridicule boys who are effeminate in speech and behaviour. It is used as a derogatory term as young people indicate their dissension for boys whom they construct as boy-girl. Contrary to studies by Thorne (1993) and Mayeza (2018), where they found non-participation in "masculine" sports by boys as a determinant of effeminate identities, this study reveals that boy's non-participation in sports constructed as masculine or participating in female constructed games does not define one as a boy-girl. Rather, participation in games constructed as feminine, such as skipping, is a pleasurable exercise for boys, and any boy could participate in such games.

The expressions of contempt towards boys constructed as boy-girl/Charlie-Charlie could be attributed to the cultural and lawful disapproval of non-normative sexualities in Nigeria. The use of these terms is tied to definitions of the transgression of gender roles and has

little or nothing to do with transgressions of normative sexual expectations. The expressions of negative reactions to the boy-girl identity indicate the lack of tolerance for non-normative gender identities among young people in the school. If not controlled, this could result in homophobic bullying against students with such identities as the boy-girl. In this school, boys who have been defined as boy-girl become vulnerable to bullying and are also being ridiculed by their peers. This study, therefore, recognises the importance of understanding the experiences of boys constructed by others as boy-girl within the school.

Interactions with young people in the school reveal the construction of certain girls as "tomboys" or "Abgeros". As earlier stated, these terms are associated with girls who express forms of gender identities that have been culturally identified as masculine. Thorne (1993) in her American study, found that the term "tomboy" is used to refer to girls who are spirited and adventurous in their character and behaviour. She further reveals that "tomboys" dislike feminine dresses and are drawn to activities that have been associated with boys. This study, found similar constructions of "tomboys" as those explained by Thorne. However, while most students in Thorne's study did not use the term "tomboy" to refer to this category of girls, the majority of young people in this study frequently use the term tomboy and/or agbero to describe this set of girls.

The student's construction of "tomboy" identity in this study is ascribed to girls who are adventurous, active, and independent. In line with Mayeza, 2018 and Morojele 2011, in their studies in South Africa and Lesotho respectively, such girls reportedly engage in activities that involve physical strength. They are rough and dress in ways that boys are culturally known to dress. Conversations with students about "tomboys" are filled with

positive meanings of the concept, unlike the boy-girl identity (as discussed earlier). In this study, "tomboys" also serve as mediators for boys who want to establish relationships with girls in school. Based on students' understanding of the "tomboy" identity, it does not only accord girls the freedom to act in ways they deem fit irrespective of gender restrictive norms, but it also serves as a way of challenging the domination of boys by acting like boys and resisting forms of masculine bullying in school.

Contrary to societal cultural expectations, the construction of Zinai's "tomboy" identity by her and other students in the school denotes a positive meaning, which is reflected in the acceptance of her identity (as against the filial abhorrence at home) despite its contradictions with dominant normative gender roles. The "tomboy" identity serves to challenge the ascendancy of masculine boys. In this study, students who engage in masculine forms of sports like football had little or no significance on the construction of girls as "tomboys". Rather much emphasis was placed on their ways of dressing and behaviours such as how they walk, how they talk, their physique, and their engagement in forms of play that require physical strength, not necessarily sports. Again, this draws attention to the importance of understanding young people's agency in their construction of social identities, which does not necessarily conform to societal perceptions, which is tied to adult constructions of what young people's identities should be.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the heteronormative school in Kaduna is a contested space where gender norms are not simply imposed but are actively negotiated, policed, and occasionally by student in their daily interactions. Social interaction in the school is

structured along with heteronormative values that promote consciousness regarding gender boundaries, and therefore raises implications for the gender identifications in line with masculinities and femininities. Effeminate boys referred to as Boy-girl or Charlie-Charlie are often ridiculed for their failure to be "proper" boys while on the other hand, transgressive girls, referred to as Tomeboy or Agbero are praised for expressing masculine behaviours considered to be superior over femininities. This study is based on a single school: findings are not generalised, instead it offers a deep insight into the interplay of social process within a particular school regarding the formation of gender identities. In this way, the study sees gender as performative through everyday social interaction. Understanding gender in this way raises possibilities for accommodating alternative gender identities in schools and seeks to inform young people in interaction to relate with each other in ways that reflect fluid gender boundaries and could accommodate non-hegemonic gender identities; an attitude that could be propagated further and encouraged to ensure the wellbeing of students in school.

Recommendation

It is pertinent to critically engage with issues of gender among young people in school and create conditions that support and sustain alternative forms of gender identities. This will serve as a means of addressing existing forms of gender inequality in the school. In creating this enabling environment, it is important to emphasise the plurality and fluidity of gender boundaries as well as highlight the consequences of persuading young people to conform to dominant gender values as so defined by society. Therefore, the study present the following recommendations:

1. Schools should recognise the vulnerabilities of non-hegemonic masculine boys and transgressive girls in school. Schools should deliberately cultivate environments that affirm diverse expressions of gender through co-curricular activities, counselling, and inclusive classroom practices. Teachers and school counsellors should adopt non-judgmental and supportive approaches to students who challenge gender norms. and provide channels for victims of bullying to report such cases.

2. Government at all levels should incorporate gender sensitivity and inclusivity into school policies and curricula. This should include explicit guidelines addressing gender-based ridicule, discrimination, and stereotyping within school environments.

3. Given the influence of cultural and religious norms in Kaduna State, awareness workshops should involve parents, religious leaders, and community gatekeepers to foster understanding of gender diversity and discourage moral policing of non-conforming youth.

4. Programs that promote empathy, emotional intelligence, and respect for difference should be integrated into youth development initiatives both within the school and in communities. These can reduce peer-led ridicule and promote solidarity among students.

5. Future studies should explore the long-term impacts of peer policing and investigates the perspectives of teachers and parents on gender nonconformity in schools.

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