



doi:10.5281/zenodo.14725953

Religious Beliefs and Open Defaecation in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The paper defined open defaecation to mean the act of passing out faeces in the fields, forests, bushes, drainages, road sides, rivers, streams, lakes or other open places. It added that open defaecation is not limited to inhabitants of rural, semi rural and under-developed areas only, but people living in these areas practise it more. Also, the paper said that open defaecation has many implications which are health, social, environmental, agricultural, security and economic where billions of dollars is lost annually to open defaecation and the non meeting up with the Sustainable Development Goals. The paper emphasised the spiritual and religious beliefs to the practice of open defaecation. The paper added that with open defaecation free, the human environment will enjoy reduction in the spread of diseases and malnutrition, promoting school attendance, human dignity and boosting safety, and protecting of children less than five years of age from life-threatening diseases. The roles of health educators in attaining open defaecation free in Nigeria including intensifying advocacy within the country, organising classes for members of the society in enlightenment campaigns and others were mentioned. Also, it concluded and stated its contributions to knowledge including acting as a research document to other researchers in the field of health, education and diseases' prevention and control, government and private policy makers and planners in Nigeria and as a guide to the people on the adequate use of toilet facilities in the society.

Keywords: sanitation, implications, open defaecation, sustainable development goals

INTRODUCTION

Open defaecation is a term that is generally used to mean the process and act of passing out faeces in the fields, forests, bushes, drainages, road sides, rivers, streams, lakes and sometimes on other bodies of water (World Health Organisation [WHO] & United Nations Children' Education Fund [UNICEF], 2022; Onyimadu & Ibe, 2019). Open defaecation was popularised and became widely used in the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector in the 2008 for meeting the millennium development goals (MDGs) of 2015 and the Sustainable Development Goal Number 6 of 2030 (United Nations Organisation, 2023; WHO & UNICEF, 2017). According to UNICEF (2019), 91 per cent of people practising open defaecation globally live in rural and semi urban areas while the number of people engaged in the act was 673 million. However, the number decreased from about 892 million people or 12

percent as at 2016 (WHO/UNICEF, 2021). In 2021, about 494 million people were involved in open defaecation globally (WHO/UNICEF, 2021).

In addition, UNICEF (2021) said that of the global ranking of people with the highest number of people who defaecate in open places, Nigeria ranked second in the world with about 38 million people, while Ghana had 5.5 million. Meanwhile, open defaecation is attributed to increase in population in climes where it is practised such as Nigeria, Tanzania, Madagascar, Niger Republic and in some Oceania states (UNICEF, 2019).

With the hope that there would be light at the end of the tunnel, for about a decade (from 2000 and 2022), the number of persons who defaecate openly worldwide reduced from 1.3 billion to 419 million, a reduction by more than two thirds. In the year 2022, there were still 36 nations with open defaecation rates between 5% and 25% and in 13 countries, indicating more than one in four people were still practising open defaecation (WHO/UNICEF, 2023). Looking at the African continent, the approximated rate of open defaecation by number of people revealed that Nigeria had the highest (54 million), followed by Ethiopia (43 million) and Niger (15 million). Others include Democratic Republic of Congo, Burkina Faso, Chad, Angola, Madagascar, Kenya and Cote d'Ivoire. These ten countries could account for about 247 million Africans defaecating in the open by 2030 if urgent steps are not taken (World Bank, 2023).

Causes of Open Defaecation

Galan, Kim and Graham (2013), Abebe and Tucho (2020) and Osumanu, Kosoe and Ategeeng (2019) said the reasons for open defaecation are many and varied. People can voluntarily, semi-voluntarily or involuntarily take it as a choice. Most times, absence of toilet facilities and equipment is the reason. However, in some places even people with toilets in their houses prefer to defaecate in the open. Some reasons why people engage in the practice of open defaecation are toilet related reasons, non toilet related reasons, socialisation, sanitation reasons, personal reasons, cultural beliefs, religious beliefs, habits and others.

Abebe and Tucho (2020) said that toilet related reasons for open defaecation are lack of toilet infrastructure at homes, schools or in the farms. In some rural communities, where there are toilets, they are used for storing household items, animals, farms or kitchens. Another factor that determines open defaecation is the quality of toilet. Sometimes people have access to a toilet, but the toilet might be broken or of poor quality. Sometimes, toilets are not well lit, especially in areas that lack electricity. Others lack doors or may not have water. Toilets with maggots or cockroaches are also disliked by people and hence, they go out to defaecate. In some cases, toilets are without privacy. Some toilets do not have real doors other than improvised ones. In some communities, toilets are located in places where women are shy to access them due to the presence of men. Also, lack of water near the toilet is a barrier to ending open defaecation. Absence of supply of water inside the toilet causes people to get water from a distance before using the toilet. In addition, when too many people are using a toilet, this is the phenomenon that occurs in the use of shared or public toilets.

Non toilet related reasons for open defaecation are many. Principal among them is lack of awareness. People in some communities do not know about the benefits of using toilets. Some people lack behaviour change. In some communities that have toilets, people still prefer to defaecate in the open. In some cases, these toilets are provided by the government or other organisations and the people either do not like or value them. In that wise, they continue to defaecate in the open. Also, older people are often found to defaecate in the open and they are hesitant to change their behaviour (Abebe & Tucho, 2020). Some people stick to nature preference to the use of toilets. This happens mostly in less populated or rural areas, where people walk outside early in the morning and go to defaecate in the fields or bushes. They prefer to be in nature and the fresh air; instead of defaecating in a closed space such as a toilet. There may be cultural or habitual preference for defaecating beside a local river or stream or even the bush. However, other people combine open defaecation with other activities. Some people walk early in the morning to look after their farms. Some consider it as a social activity, especially women who like

to take some time to go out of their homes. While on their way to the fields for open defaecation, they can talk to other women and take care of their animals.

Open defaecation is an act of socialisation. Some people who engage in open defaecation do it with their friends and relatives and they take it as a social process. Many defaecate in the open for the reason of making the home and its environs clean from faeces, flies, rodents and odour nuisance. They consider defaecating in toilets around the home as promoting filth. Open defaecation is considered by some people as a personal activity. They personally go out on their own for open defaecation. Cultural beliefs are other reasons why people practise open defaecation (Galan, Kim & Graham, 2013).

Religious beliefs are not left out as reasons for open defaecation. Some persons are involved in the practice of open defaecation for religious reasons. Adherents of this practice argue that it started a long time ago and it was approved by divine beings and their spiritual activities (Galan, Kim & Graham, 2013). They added that it is the habit of some people to indulge in open defaecation. Open defaecation was perceived to be deeply influenced by the prevailing societal practice since historical times. Those involved do it as a regular habit for which they have never felt the need for alternatives. George (2015) said that many religious believers see open defaecation as a norm and instruction from God. For example, she added that the bible in the book of Deuteronomy 23 clearly asks Jews to get a place not within the camp and go out there, and you shall have a spade among your implements, and it shall be when you sit down outside, you shall dig with the spade and shall turn to cover up your excrement. As for the Hindus, she said that a text in their book of study requires believers to fire an arrow, and defaecate farther away than where it falls. Lastly, she said that a Buddhist text in the Vinaya Pitaka, instructs monks to defaecate in the toilet not in order of seniority but in order of arrival, and to cough loudly on arrival at the latrine in case it is already occupied. In India, notably among the Hindu-dominated Gangetic plains, open defaecation is practised. This is in accordance with their traditions and religious beliefs. They prefer open defaecation, far from home even if they have toilets. This they do to avoid ritual and spiritual unrighteousness. About 67% of all Hindu households in India whether in rural or urban areas practise open defaecation compared to 42% of Muslims homes (The Globalist, 2025).

Open defaecation in most urban areas, particularly in slum, is driven by a number of determinants including giving priority to more rooms for dwelling and rents rather than toilets and the unwillingness of both landlords and tenants to invest in toilets. That is why in some areas in cities like Lagos, people in the night defaecate in public places like rail tracks and nearby refuse dump (UNICEF, 2018). Other reasons adduced for open defaecation are ignorance, primitive lifestyles, lack of water supply, lack of appropriate technology in rural areas for toilet models, poor maintenance of facilities and equipment and heavy financial demands in arresting the surge.

People involved in open defaecation

Interestingly, the practice of open defaecation is not limited to inhabitants of rural and under-developed areas only; public places in the big cities and urban areas like Lekki in Lagos and others are not exceptions (Obinna, 2023; Oguntola, 2024). Sadly, open defaecation is a common occurrence in some federal and state-owned tertiary institutions in a parlance popularly known as 'shot put'. The existence of this practice in our tertiary institutions perhaps accounts for the failure of the institution's management and the government in providing a conducive learning atmosphere for students whereby basic human needs such as the need to use toilet facilities should not be seen as a luxury (Babalola, 2019).

Health implications of open defaecation

The health risks most researched in context of open defaecation are those infectious diseases associated with human excrement (WHO, 2017). It added that infected human excreta contain several harmful organisms that are associated with a number of health problems. WHO reports that 1.8 million people in low and middle income countries suffer from severe trachoma and more than 200 million people are infected with schistosomiasis worldwide (WHO, 2017).

The Nigeria Centre for Diseases' Control and Prevention [NCDC] (2022) stated that dangerous unhygienic health practices such as poor disposal of solid and liquid waste including open defaecation pollute and contaminate water used for drinking and personal use. Shayo, Elimbinzi, Shao and Fabian

(2023) stated that water-borne diseases are a major cause of morbidity and mortality. The United Nations [UN] (2009) said that sanitation has significant impacts on individual's human rights, adding that health implications linked to access to clean water, poor sanitation and open defaecation are clear contraventions of human rights.

Another health issue (disease) occasioned by poor water, hygiene and sanitation practices is helminthiasis caused by soil transmitted helminths (STHs). It is more prevalent among children living in conditions of poor sanitation and it leads to high morbidity and mortality in severely malnourished populations (Wokem & Onosakpondme, 2014). Soil transmitted helminths of the phylum Nematode helminthes and class Nematoda are one of the most medically important groups of infectious agents. They are the cause of serious global health problems. More than a billion people have been infected by at least one species of the group (Egwunyenga & Ataikiriru, 2005).

Security implications of open defaecation

UNICEF (2012) said that apart from its harmful effects on community health and well-being, open defaecation can also affect individual dignity and safety, especially for girls and women. When they are compelled to travel greater distances from home to reach sufficient hygiene and facilities, girls and women are put at greater risk of violence (including sexual violence) and attacks. Sexual violence is a serious public health issue that affects more females than males. It is usually associated with severe physical and psychological consequences (WHO, 2012).

Social implications of open defaecation

Human faeces can be unsightly. Sighting human faeces in small or large quantity causes eyesore and can make those close to it nauseate as a result of the offensive odour emanating from it. The bad odour it generates is unattractive. For all the regions affected, it creates a sorry sight and reduces the dignity of all those living in the slums of those regions. Life in these areas is disgusting and awful (Saleem, Burdett & Heaslip, 2019). Also, they said that there is violence against women and girls, which is often life-threatening and causing trauma to them. Open defaecation can lead to death of loved ones (Oguntola, 2024).

Environmental implications of open defaecation

Saleem, Burdett and Heaslip (2019) said that the soil suffers due to open defaecation. It is so because open defaecation introduces toxins and bacteria into the ecosystem in quantities that it cannot break down at a time, thereby leading to the accumulation of filth. Similarly, microbial load can become so great such that they end up in aquatic bodies where harm could be caused to aquatic lives. Also, they said that open defaecation can cause eutrophication or the formation of algal blooms that form disgusting scum on the surface of the waterways which disturb aquatic life underneath the water by preventing oxygen and light diffusion into the water. Open defaecation can pollute the environment and cause health problems and diseases (WHO/UNICEF, 2014). Also, El-Fadel and Massoud (2001) as cited by Okuku (2020) and the WHO (2018) said that open defaecation could lead to global warming, increase in temperature and climate change. This is due to the release of green house gases like methane from the faeces into the atmosphere. The increased climatic temperature levels might worsen air pollution which can cause respiratory infections and other diseases. Hence, there is a need to protect the environment by putting an end to open defaecation practices (Okuku, 2020).

Agricultural implications of open defaecation

Arising from open defaecation practices on farmlands, some micro organisms in human faeces can inhibit the germination of seed and growth of crops. Water and Sanitation Programme [WSP] (2012) emphasised that contamination of agricultural produce and growth inhibition of crops by bacteria from human faeces can lead to economic loss. National Bureau of Statistics [NBS] (2010) as reported by Okuku (2020) said that agriculture is one of the major sources of living for Nigerians through food supply and that it provides employment for about 30.5% of Nigerians in both rural and urban areas. The crop germination and growth inhibition due to infection of the soil by open defaecation practice and its consequences suggest that less harvest could be made by farmers.

Economic implications of open defaecation

The water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) in 2023 said that 1.3 per cent of Nigeria's Gross Domestic Product or N455 billion is lost annually due to poor access to sanitation, healthcare savings and productivity (Obinna, 2023). In the same vein, Ibeh (2024) reported that with an approximated £1.5 billion lost annually due to health related issues and reduced productivity, Nigeria is facing significant health and economic difficulties due to the persistent issue of open defaecation, these astonishing figures include the cost of medical treatment, loss of productivity and premature deaths associated with diseases such as diarrhoea, cholera and malnutrition, which are worsened by poor sanitation and water contamination. Meanwhile, the World Bank (2020) in a five-year country partnership framework said that with a \$1.5 billion financing package, Nigeria would have had post-COVID-19 recovery and the government could achieve its goal of lifting 100 million Nigerians out of poverty by 2030. In Ghana, there are huge economic implications of open defaecation. The economic impact of poor sanitation, including open defaecation on health and mortality is complicated by the negative impact on the environment and ultimately, on economic growth. The total global cost of inadequate sanitation is estimated at USD 260 billion per year World Bank (2020).

Open defaecation and the Sustainable Development Goals

UNICEF (2012) observed that when and where there are no basic sanitation services, people have no choice but to use inadequate communal latrines or to practise open defaecation, creating hazardous conditions for health and livelihoods. Also, in communities with toilets, waste containment and disposal may not be adequate. If they are difficult to clean, design or maintain, the safety and health of the people may not be guaranteed. This could lead people to contact excreta causing diseases.

With an estimated number of over 46 million people practising open defaecation in Nigeria, it is rated among the countries in the world with the highest number of persons practising open defaecation. Open defaecation has negative consequences on the people, especially children in the major areas of health and education. It might contribute significantly to the nations' inability to meet with some of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of 2030 (FGN & UNICEF, 2016).

The roles of health educators in attaining open defaecation free in Nigeria

1. Health educators should intensify in advocacy within the country (Akindayo, 2024).
2. Health educators should organise classes for members of the society in enlightenment campaigns
3. Health educators and other stakeholders should push for enactment of laws for the control of open defaecation for the purpose of criminalising it.
4. Health educators and health officers should collaborate in inspection of premises like banks, fuelling stations, motor parks and others to ensure compliance with open defaecation free laws.
5. Also, health educators should advocate for adequate government funding for the Clean Nigeria Campaign and Open Defaecation Free Roadmap of 2025 for the construction of more Household Toilets (Ibeh, 2024).
6. Also, health educators should organise seminars at communities' level where cash and gift awards will be given in recognition and appreciation of those that make outstanding contributions to the campaign in order to motivate others.
7. In addition, health educators should collaborate with technological innovators in building toilet models suitable to the environment and for the needs of the people.

CONCLUSION

Historically, open defaecation started from time immemorial (WHO & UNICEF, 2022). The WHO (2017) observed that to end open defaecation, people must use toilet facilities like septic tank systems, pour flush, aqua privy, ventilated improved pit latrines and traditional pit latrines. Obinna (2023) said that open defaecation has many implications which are health, social, psychological, economic, environmental, agricultural and security. Efforts should be intensified to meet the Sustainable Development Goals.

Contributions to knowledge

The paper contributes to knowledge in the following ways

1. It adds to knowledge as a research document to other researchers in the field of health, education and diseases prevention and control.
2. It may serve as a research material for government and private policy makers and planners in Nigeria.
3. It may guide the people on the adequate use of toilet facilities in the society.

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