

Revisiting the SPW Regional Dialogues on Sexuality and Politics

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Between March 2009 and October 2010 SPW sponsored a series of three Regional Dialogues on Sexuality and (Geo) Politics in Asia (Hanoi, March, 2009), Latin America (Rio de Janeiro, August, 2009) and Africa (Lagos, October, 2010). These were followed by an Interregional Dialogue (Rio de Janeiro, September, 2011), which brought together participants from the previous events. This exercise aimed at sharing knowledge, analyses and research findings. It immediately followed the 2004– 2007 global research project that resulted in *SexPolitics: Reports from the Front Lines* (Parker, Petchesky & Sember, 2007)¹, in which the units of analysis were individual countries and global institutions, explored through case studies. The Dialogues were not designed as a research project, in conventional terms, but rather as an opportunity to enhance collective processes of reflection on sexuality and politics, involving academics and activists engaged in diverse areas of sexuality research and advocacy. The aim was to break through the boundaries of the nation-state so as to better capture the transnational forces and trends at work in these intersecting realms.

The conceptual framework that oriented these exercises had as its central premise the understanding that sexuality is always related to power, whether defined in political, cultural, scientific or religious terms. On the one hand, cultural norms, values and beliefs, as well as laws, institutions and policies influence sexual behaviors, name identities and often circumscribe sexual freedoms. On the other, states and political processes, economies, religious doctrines and practices, and science are also

1 Available at <http://www.sexpolitics.org/frontlines/home/index.php>

culturally constructed artifacts. As such, they not only have an impact on, but also are also strongly affected by the socio-cultural systems in which they are embedded, which are inevitably gendered and sexualized. Based on this premise, the proposal was that the dialogues would look into four sets of intersections: (1) sexualities and the state/political processes, (2) sexualities and religion, (3) sexualities and science, and (4) sexualities and economics.

The Dialogues also intended to contribute to the further development of sexuality-oriented knowledge networks in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The meetings were thus organized in close discussion and partnership with SPW collaborators and colleagues in the regions, who defined the meetings' agenda and composition. These regional taskforces adapted the overarching conceptual framework, with its four axes of discussion, in ways that reflected conditions prevailing in sexuality research and politics in each context, perceptions in relation to priorities and relevance, the availability of pre-existing research and analysis that contributed to the dialogues, as well as the composition and profile of participants at the meetings and of the taskforces that organized them. This adjustable model inevitably produced refractions in terms of how the framework and its intersections were addressed in each region.

One first and obvious caveat, of course, concerns the problematic limits of 'region' as a meaningful construction. As a geographical and policy/political category it certainly has a rather robust correspondence with global governance structures, in particular, of the United Nations and its various machineries. In the last twenty years, the prospects that regional governance structures such as those built in the European Union would emerge in the various continents must also be taken into account. Regional and sub-regional structures have been effectively established across the globe, even if their solidity and capacities for governance remain extremely uneven. In particular, when examining trends in relation to sexuality and human rights, it is not at all trivial that regional human

rights architectures exist in Europe, the Americas and Africa², whose premises, treaties and modus operandi overlap with and complement international human rights law and related instruments, institutional bodies and procedures.

That said, the limitations of the ‘region’ as a framework for analysis did not escape the attention of the Dialogues’ participants. “What is Asia?” was the very first question raised at the Hanoi Dialogue. From there on, the question of how to engage in conversation on sexuality and politics in regional terms, given the backdrop of deep heterogeneity in terms of political regimes, cultural norms, histories of state formation, religious traditions, (often competing) projects of ‘development,’ as well as systems of gender and sexuality, underlay the discussions at the Asia meeting, and was later reiterated in the Latin American and African conversations.

Despite the admitted limitations of the Dialogues, it is fair to say that their outcomes in some ways reflect the state of the field. The research findings and analyses brought in to contribute to discussions at the meetings, for example, were predominantly anthropological and micro in scope, a feature that somewhat mirrors frames prevailing in research on sexualities in the global south. Yet, in all regions, more cross-disciplinary and meta-analytic studies were also presented in relation to states and political processes, and science and technology. It was also the original intention that in each region religion would be an important focus, albeit with distinctive contours and focuses, although this proved ultimately to be highly variable. Perhaps most striking, nowhere were the intersections between sexualities and economics examined through more structural lenses – in other words, in ways that fully engaged with or contested dominant epistemologies of economics, again, reflecting certain gaps in sexualities research more broadly.

2 There is no regional human rights architecture in Asia. But many Asian countries have established national human rights institutions and almost all of them belong to the Asian Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions that has played quite a relevant role in terms of regional and transnational exchanges.

Altogether, the Regional Dialogues involved 85 researchers and activists from 25 countries³, whose names are listed at the end of the second volume. In the course of these debates, thirty-seven papers were presented and debated. In the case of the Asian and African Regional Dialogues, the main outcomes have been published as executive reports on the Sexuality Policy Watch website⁴ (and the papers written for and discussed at the Latin American Dialogue were published in the e-book, *Sexualidade e política na América Latina: histórias, interseções e paradoxos* (Sexuality and politics in Latin America: histories, intersections and paradoxes), published in the original Portuguese and Spanish (Corrêa & Parker, 2011).⁵

The final product of this extensive process of exchange and discussion is a two-volume publication in e-book format. This first volume comprises six papers selected from those presented at the Dialogues and this short overview. The second volume offers a more comprehensive and expanded overview of the debates at the Dialogues, which pulls together major threads of discussion raised at those meetings, connecting them with theorizing and research on these topics developed by a wide range of thinkers and authors whose lines of work also explore the four dimensions SPW's partners and collaborators examined in Hanoi, Rio and Lagos.

We are grateful to all participants of the three Dialogues who contributed to these discussions by sharing their ideas and experiences. In particular, we want to express our deep gratitude to Rafael de la Dehesa, as without his knowledge and patience these publications would not be possible, and also to Rosalind Petchesky for offering her wisdom and editing skills to enrich and refine the ideas we had developed in this exercise. We also thank the Ford Foundation for having supported this project, in particular, Barbara Klugman who was the Program Officer for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights when this cycle of debates took place. Most especially, we would

³ Australia, China, Argentina, Brazil, Cameroon, Colombia, China, Egypt, Gambia, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, Malaysia, South Africa, Paraguay, Peru, Puerto Rico, Philippines, Thailand, United States, Venezuela, Vietnam, and Zambia (see Volume 2 last pages).

⁴ Available at <http://www.sxpolitics.org>

⁵ Available at <http://www.sxpolitics.org/es/?=1725&cat=29>

like to recognize Gabriela Leite, the longtime activist and leader of the sex worker movement in Brazil, who participated in the Latin America Dialogue and who collaborated closely with us in SPW and at the Brazilian Interdisciplinary AIDS Association (ABIA) prior to her untimely death just before we finalized this text. Her courage and solidarity were an inspiration to us, and her thoughts and influence are present throughout these pages.

It is our expectation that these twin volumes will contribute to the continuing interrogations on the connections between sexuality theorizing and research and political change, highlighting blind spots and pitfalls but also breakthroughs and gains, however limited and provisional they may be.

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Overview

The current volume begins with Sylvia Tamale's chapter providing a comprehensive analysis of the state of sexuality research in Africa. While it charts African sexualities and related contemporary politics, it also delves into colonial legacies and the post-colonial condition in terms that are not exclusively African. In her own words:

Nowhere were assumptions regarding the 'knower,' the 'known' and the 'knowable' taken more for granted than in sexuality research conducted on colonized populations such as those found in Africa ... Generally speaking, research in the colonial context was conducted along a traditional hierarchy of power between the researcher and the researched. It was almost always assumed that the researchers knew the researched individuals and that they were always naive 'subjects'. It was further presumed that only the former could create legitimate, scholarly knowledge, usually through written reports and publications with little or no acknowledgement of the role the researched played in the process.

Tamale shows how these biases, which can be traced to the colonial enterprise, are systematically revived in the context of contemporary structural disparities between north and south. Global power asymmetries play out in terms of national research capacity and the very logics of sexuality research financing, priorities, and topics. Tamale critically examines the modalities and biases of research focusing on population growth, HIV and AIDS, and female genital mutilation on the continent, which have added grist to the mills of long-standing stigmatizing narratives of Africans' purported "uncontrolled sexuality" and "promiscuity". We selected Tamale's reflections to be the first chapter in this collection as a cautionary note with regard to the traps and pitfalls of sexuality theorizing and research, from which the narratives on sexuality and politics that have emerged from the Dialogues may not be entirely exempt.

The next two chapters, one written by S.N. Nyeck, the other by Mario Pecheny and Rafael de la

Dehesa, offer critical views on the inscription of sexuality into historic processes of state formation and contemporary technologies of governmentality. Both chapters examine the paradoxes of rights language and claims, guided by questions concerning how state administrative techniques interweave with sexual matters and instrumentalize sexuality and how the subjects of sexual politics engage with and are located in relation to real political processes of recognition, exclusion and cooptation. Yet there are also relevant distinctions to be noted between the papers in terms of theoretical perspectives, contextual conditions, time frames, and emphases.

Pecheny and de la Dehesa emphasize the depth and breadth of transformations resulting from contemporary sexual politics in Latin America in the context of the processes of formal political democratization that swept the region since the 1980s, the effects of the HIV epidemic, and the transnationalization of discourses on rights, gender, sexuality, and reproduction. The authors remind us that these recent changes must be situated in relation to longer arcs of history and processes of state formation, briefly tracing the imbrication of gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity with normative projects and political dynamics since the wars of independence in the 19th century. They then locate contemporary sexual politics in relation to some key features of Latin American polities, including various projects of modernization, the persistence of political clientelism in formally democratic contexts, and the consequent blurring between private and public spheres that plagues policy formation and political institutions.

Finally, Pecheny and de la Dehesa call attention to the ways in which rights language has become a lingua franca of LGBTQI and feminist activists, underscoring certain blind spots and contradictions implied by this trend. Liberal human rights frames privileging individual and negative rights, for instance, are generally incapable of redressing the sharp inequalities and extreme violence prevailing in many areas of Latin America. In the authors' view, it is thus impossible to discuss gains in the formal recognition of sexual rights without, at the same time, calling attention to the abyss that remains between law and formal policy and daily realities shaped by the inequalities and structures of privilege that characterize Latin American societies.

S.N. Nyeck's chapter also explores the conceptual and political tensions surrounding contemporary sexual politics in Africa, including the growing appeal and use of rights language. Nyeck starts by problematizing the notion of "failed states", which to a large extent dominates mainstream academic and media narratives on African politics, countering with the more calibrated notion of imperfection. She thus suggests that the politics of rights and sexuality on the continent might be framed in terms of political games involving imperfect states, imperfect rights, and imperfect actors. She also asks whether the global discourse on state homophobia that has been intensively deployed in the last ten years has sufficient explanatory power to account for the caveats, discrimination and extreme violence experienced by persons of non-conforming gender/sexuality in African societies. Instead, she suggests that it is necessary to bring other elements of African social and political arenas into the picture.

To illustrate her point, she reviews data collected by the Afrobarometer to assess policy preferences in six countries – Malawi, Nigeria, Uganda, Senegal, South Africa, and Zimbabwe – where issues of sexual orientation and gender identity are prominent, in some instances provoking hate speech and state or societal violence. The data collected by the Afrobarometer shows that in all these countries the majority of people consider poverty, state protection and education as priority policy issues, superseding political rights or discrimination. Nyeck underscores that these political preferences cannot be understood as a rejection of freedom but rather, that they raise questions about the intersections of vulnerabilities, once again raising underlying questions about the differential access to rights and to 'choice' experienced by different sectors of society. Nyeck thus interrogates the validity and efficiency of state-centered human rights strategies to achieve protection of persons whose sexual identity and conduct do no conform to dominant norms. In her view, more horizontal and ground-level work as well as more emphasis on social and economic rights is required for states to respond positively to LGBTQI rights claims.

Both Juan Marco Vaggione and Jayashree Ramakrishna also addressed – though highlighting different dimensions – the intersections of the state, technologies of governmentality, and gender

and sexual orders. Vaggione analyzes the crucial role played by religion, particularly conservative faith-based activism, in contemporary Latin American sexual politics, while Ramakrishna analyzes the interconnections among statecraft, market forces, and the medicalization of sexuality in India.

Examining some of the same themes examined Pecheny and de la Dehesa, Vaggione looks more closely at the long history of entanglement of religious and political authority in Latin America, which has rendered laicization and secularization partial or incomplete in most countries. He specifically highlights recent and ongoing transformations in the Catholic Church's engagement with politics, particularly sexual politics, in the region, calling attention to its growing influence in public life. While noting that these transformations are in part the effects of doctrinal changes enacted at the Second Vatican Council, Vaggione argues that they primarily reflect a "reactive form of politicization" that gained strength under the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, aimed at reversing the advances made by sexual and reproductive rights movements. One notable dimension of the Church's contemporary political articulations is its Janus-faced nature. On the one hand, it claims a privileged status as a religious institution vis-à-vis other religions whose presence has expanded in the region in recent decades, rooted in its official status in Iberian colonial enterprises; at the same time, it organizes its faithful as civil society actors, among others, claiming a legitimate role in democratic public debates.

Most importantly, perhaps—in light of debates at play in global sexual politics—Vaggione problematizes the classical liberal view that secularity requires that religion (like sexuality) remains confined to the private sphere. Despite this long-standing idealized premise, he notes, both sexuality and religiosity have been increasingly politicized, as reflected in the fierce battles underway around abortion, emergency contraception, and same-sex marriages. In this rapidly shifting context, demanding respect for or even the reconstitution of *laïcité*, or secularity, of the state cannot provide a solid basis for the exercise of sexual and reproductive rights, as he explains:

While campaigns in favor of *laicidad* (*laïcité*) are necessary, they are not sufficient to capture and countervail religious opposition to sexual and reproductive rights. The challenge is to break with secularism and laicism in order to expand our understanding of religion as a legitimate element of contemporary politics. Despite antidemocratic religious practices, it is not possible to exclude conservative religious voices from public arenas, even when they oppose pluralism. Normative frameworks must be revised to open the space for religious actors and discourses on the political playing field.

In her chapter, Jayashree Ramakrishna uses the recent history of condoms and Viagra in India as a window to explore the imbrications of state power, medical technologies, market forces, and gender and sexuality in the country. Before examining the current scenario in which these two products are reshaping and reifying sexual norms, she reminds us that any discussion of the medicalization of sexuality in contemporary India must be placed against the long history of population control in the country. Reflecting the global neo-Malthusian obsession of the Cold War era, population control was posited as a “key to development” and a means of making India a modern country, where poor families would be able to control the “hubris” of excessive fertility.

Turning then to the contemporary panorama, she underscores the ongoing and occasionally paradoxical ways in which notions of gender and sexuality both shape and are shaped by the circulation of medical technologies. While an Indian company produces one of the few available options of female condoms and the problem of the feminization of the AIDS epidemic has been debated for quite some time, for instance, the female condom has never been systematically promoted in the country. Moreover, the state guidelines for condom distribution remain focused on male sexual intercourse outside marriage and “most at-risk populations” (MARPs). Women, except sex workers, are not considered because they are viewed as “asexual”, as wives and procreators. Underscoring the transnational dimension of some of these moralizing visions, Ramakrishna notes, for example, the influence of USAID restrictions defined under the Bush administration. These prompted the Indian government’s adoption of ABC guidelines in part because they found resonance among

conservative sectors of Indian society, despite its not being a predominantly Christian society.

In contrast, Viagra circulates in the market without much regulation. Its logic and principles converge with a wide range of traditional Ayurveda products aimed at enhancing male sexual fluids and sexual performances. At the same time, the local production of generic versions of sildenafil citrate is so successful that Pfizer, the company that produces Viagra, was unable to capture the Indian market. Ramakrishna, therefore, identifies a sort of ‘division of labor’ between the state and the market in terms of sexual regulation and disciplining. If the market, on the one hand, is in charge of the medicalized enhancement of male sexuality, without restrictions, the state, on the other hand, is responsible for the micro-disciplining of the condom distribution to men, in particular to those men whose sexual conduct is perceived to be higher-risk. At this complex intersection, Ramakrishna correctly identifies medicalization and the regulation of sexual life by medical technologies as key features of the contemporary landscape of gender and sexual politics, which must be understood in relation to the profit-oriented logic of local and transnational pharmaceutical companies.

Michael Tan, in the last chapter of the collection, also explores the technological dimensions of contemporary landscapes of sexual politics in a sweeping analysis of the trajectory and skyrocketing effects of the informational and digital technology revolution, as materialized in the Internet. Tan retraces the thread of sociological and political research on new technologies of communication to Marshall McLuhan’s theorizing in the 1960s, before describing how new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are transforming the structures of public spheres in Asian polities. In examining the current landscape Tan contends that new technologies can reinforce as well as undercut underlying class disparities, depending in part on the technology in question. He notes, for example, that while cellphones have been much more widely disseminated, only 13% of people in the “developing world” had access to the Internet in 2007.

Tan’s chapter also charts the various ways in which e-commerce, widespread access to cellphones, and social networking sites, among other innovations, have transformed sexual landscapes and

created arenas for people to “[build] identities around gender and sexuality”. Tan offers a typology of digital spaces that are allowing for sexual exchanges, politicizing, knowledge-gathering, and greater plasticity in the Internet: libraries, recreational sites, market places, social networking, performance platforms and political arenas. These spaces and the changes they trigger not only allow for an intense political and market mainstreaming of sexual matters but also, in many instances, have given rise to new “subaltern counter public” communities that produce alternative understandings of identity, which through political contestation may come to influence public debates around sexual plurality and erotic justice. Lastly, Tan examines the politics of digital spaces, providing a bird’s eye view of the growing trends toward stricter regulation and censorship of the Internet, quite often triggered by moral panics around sexuality, as in the case of online pornography, particularly child pornography.

This brief overview cannot do justice to the wealth of ideas and data presented in the six chapters included in this volume. Rather, it offers brief snapshots to entice the reader to enjoy and more fully explore the reflections developed by these authors. The second volume of this publication expands on these themes, offering a much broader, crosscutting analysis that draws as well on all the presentations and debates at the various dialogues that were not included in this volume.