

Contested Bodies: The Local and Global Politics of Sex and Reproduction

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Introduction

This analysis is based on a comparative examination of the eight country case studies — Brazil, Egypt, India, Peru, Poland, South Africa, Turkey, and Vietnam — and the two essays focused on the United Nations and the World Bank, that form the body of this volume. Our approach to this examination is selective. It is grounded, first, on the particular theoretical perspectives that we bring to this comparative exercise and, second, on our reading of the most important crosscutting themes that emerged from the case studies themselves. There is no way that we can do justice in a paper of reasonable compass to the richness of the material. Our goal is abstraction and generalization. For detail, readers must go to the individual essays, and we hope what we have to say here will be sufficiently intriguing that they will do so.

Comparison between these diverse case studies has been a challenge, even within these limitations. Rather than focusing on a common set of concerns, case study authors identified what they considered the most critical sexuality-related issue or issues in their particular country or institutional setting. The authors then examined these issues from the perspec-

tive they determined would provide the greatest insight. Consequently, the essays are quite disparate in their scope, in the specific topics they address, in their analytic approach, and in the material on which they draw. Turkey, Poland, and Egypt, for example, have almost nothing to say about HIV; India has nothing to say about reproductive health. The UN and World Bank essays offer important context, but are in many ways incommensurate with the eight country papers. Further, the authors are differently positioned in relation to their material: some are academics, some are advocates, and some are both. It is surely possible that our interpretations would be different if the data — and the authors’ positioning in relation to the data — were more directly comparable. Nevertheless, we have attempted to make a virtue of this lack of comparability in detail by attempting to extrapolate from these unique and context-specific cases a series of insights about the political construction of sexuality as a concern in itself as well as a venue for the expression of general social processes.

One final prefatory observation: none of these authors is ideologically neutral with respect to the material she or he presents. All are committed to so-called “modern” ideologies of sexuality and reproduction (Wardlow & Hirsch, 2006; Giddens, 1991, 1992; Weeks, 2000) that privilege the sexual and reproductive health and rights of individuals and communities over ideologies that subordinate health and rights to competing interests. In light of this, it is perhaps most appropriate to read each of these analyses as primarily concerned with strategy. Thus, each paper identifies, either explicitly or implicitly, critical points of intervention and the terms of the analysis employed suggest the terms to be used by sexual and gender rights activists and advocates.

Theoretical perspectives

All of these essays — including the two on international bodies — are ultimately about power: destabilization of “traditional” gender and sexual relations threatens established hierarchies of church and state power. Church and state, predictably, fight back, using their considerable resources not only to preserve but also to reinforce existing structures. Why is this destabilization so powerful a threat (evidenced, as we shall see, by the reactions it elicits)? Much of the most important theoretical work in recent years on both gender and

sexuality has sought to answer this question. In her pioneering work on gender and history, for example, Joan Scott answered as follows:

“Gender is one of the recurrent references by which political power has been conceived, legitimated, and criticized.... To vindicate political power, the reference must seem sure and fixed, outside human construction, part of the natural or divine order. In that way, the binary opposition and the social process of gender relationships both become part of the meaning of power itself; to question or alter any aspect threatens the entire system (our emphasis)”
(Scott, 1988, p. 49).

Reflecting on the actions of rulers, from Jacobin revolutionaries to the Ayatollah Khomeini, Scott continued:

“[They] have legitimized domination, strength, central authority, and ruling power as masculine (enemies, outsiders, subversives, weakness as feminine) and made that code literal in laws (forbidding women’s political participation, outlawing abortion, prohibiting wage-earning by mothers, imposing female dress codes) that put women in their place... The actions can only be made sense of as part of an analysis of the construction and consolidation of power. An assertion of control or strength was given form as a policy about women.”
(And, we would add, about gay men.) (Ibid.)

The complex relationship not only of power and gender, but also of power and sexuality, has received similar attention. Michel Foucault, in his pioneering work, *The History of Sexuality*, for example, responded to much the same question by focusing on sexuality as the point of convergence for a wide range of strategies linking knowledge to power, and evident not only in practices of oppression but also in the discursive configurations that have been produced around sexuality in modern life:

“Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given, which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain, which knowledge gradually tries to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of con-

trols and resistances, are linked to one another in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power” (Foucault, 1978, pp. 105-106).

Writers such as Gayle Rubin (1975, 1984), Jeffrey Weeks (1995, 2000), R. W. Connell (1987), and others (see, for example, Chafetz, 2002, and the essays in Parker & Aggleton, 2007) have further elaborated on many of the same themes to elucidate the ways in which both gender and sexuality operate — at times independently and at times in conjunction — as axes of inequality and domination in highly diverse social settings. This work has offered important new insights into the ways in which, and the reasons why, gender and sexuality have become contested sites of political struggle throughout the contemporary world. Additional questions — suggested by Sewell’s work on the “theory of the event” (Sewell, 2005; see, also, Sahlin, 1987) and by the analysis of social movement scholars of the interplay between movements and “counter-movements” (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996) — concern the circumstances under which these struggles are most likely to emerge, the form they will take, and how they are likely to play out. The answers to these latter questions, as Scott points out, “can only be determined specifically, in the context of time and place” (Scott, 1988, p. 49). We turn now to those specifics as portrayed in the ten essays that constitute our data.

Substantive hooks/tensions

The authors of each of the 10 case studies chose different substantive hooks and tensions around which to organize their material and tell their story. We will not discuss these in detail, but some description is necessary if the reader is to make sense of our subsequent analysis. For purposes of reference Table 1 gives a summary of each case study’s main hooks and tensions.

Table 1. Substantive Hooks/Tensions

Country	Hook	Tension
Brazil	Progress in achieving reproductive and LGBT rights.	1. Value of civil society and state cooperation versus risk of state’s cooptation and patronage of civil society groups. 2. Strategic advantages of identity specific agendas and strategies versus collective action in response to crises such as HIV/AIDS.

Egypt	Mobilization and state penetration by Islamist activists over past 30 years, focused on women's sexual rights.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Effectiveness of state to control and contain sanctioned Islamist groups is another symbol of the non-democratic context within which to pursue sexual and gender rights. 2. National and international initiatives to advance sexual and gender rights provides opportunities for social conservatives and fundamentalist groups to organize themselves and promote conservative policies.
India	Efforts to overturn 19 th century law criminalizing sexual relations between persons of the same sex.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sexuality as a venue for the expression of conflicts between modernist national ambitions and cultural essentialists. 2. The costs and benefits of public health versus human rights based approaches to sexuality.
Peru	Series of struggles between official bodies and rights advocates, 1990–2004.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Benefits and limitations of strategic short term gains for particular sexual constituencies versus long-term coalitional approaches to fundamental sexual and gender reforms. 2. Benefits and limitations of cooperation between civil society and state entities, particularly when power shifts are common at the state level.
Poland	Repeal of liberal abortion laws, replacement by highly restrictive ones.	Consequences of state granted versus civil society claimed reproductive rights.
South Africa	Series of constitutional court rulings on sexual and reproductive rights issues.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Disjunctures between constitutional, judicial, legislative and popular beliefs about and evaluations of sexuality. 2. The costs and benefits of human rights and social justice approaches to sexual rights.
Turkey	Government effort to criminalize adultery in context of its bid to enter European Union, 2002–2004.	Competing vision of women's sexuality on the part of secular feminists and social conservatives and religious traditionalists.
Vietnam	Government sexual/reproductive policies pre- and post-Doi Moi as manifest in shifting media attention and funding from family planning to HIV/AIDS programs.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Advantages of international donor support for development of NGOs constrained by inability of weak civil society groups to hold NGOs accountable. 2. Dominance of government ideology and programs as sites for resistance compared with the construction of a strong and independent civil society.

UN	Two “cases” centered on “whether or not to recognize ‘sexual rights’ as a concept, and to name ‘sexual orientation’ in UN documents.”	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Strategic compromises to advance specific agendas are likely to weaken attempts to advance specific causes in the future. 2. Value of including precise and specific terms and definitions in UN documents compared with the strategy of creating more general statements that will support varied interpretations.
WB	Analysis of gender ideology and policy based on document review.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Presumed scientific and economic basis of bank programs advances narrow, homogeneous, and ideologically conservative views of gender and sexuality.

At the most general level (with the possible exceptions of Egypt and Vietnam) the eight country cases are narratives of struggle — in most instances between the state and its allies (most often religious bodies) and non-state groups that seek to advance sexual and reproductive health and rights agendas. In the case of Egypt and Vietnam, however, while such conflicts are intimated, the focal struggle is of a different order. In Egypt, it is the tension between the state and ultra-conservative groups for whom sexuality is but one of many sites for anti-government activism. This case concerns the mobilization of Islamic activists — over the past 30 years, but particularly since the 1994 UN conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo — in support of highly conservative gender ideologies and practices, the roots of which reach deeply into pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial nationalist and religious histories. And in Vietnam, the struggle is within the state between its modernization initiatives (*Doi-Moi*, that is, the opening up of Vietnam to neoliberal economic policies in the early 1990s) and its desire to ensure continuity with old socialist approaches to social problems. Progressive activists in both countries pursue their agendas with apparently minimal visibility.

The Turkish story is organized around the government’s effort to criminalize adultery in the context of Turkey’s bid to enter the European Union, and women’s struggle against that effort. Through this analysis we come to appreciate how debates about sexuality are entwined with the country’s faltering commitment to secularism, and a national identity that crosses the imagined and experienced cultural divide between “East” and “West.” The India case

focuses on popular efforts to overturn a nineteenth-century, colonial-era law criminalizing sodomy, defined as “carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman, or animal” (Ramasubban, this volume, p. 92). It is a struggle that provokes highly polarizing debates concerning Indian culture and history. The view that sexuality manifests essential qualities of cultures and even nations is one we find at play in most of the cases. This helps explain the political potency of debates concerning sexuality and gender, for both are sites for the enactment of disputes over identity and power. Thus, in Poland the recent repeal of liberal abortion laws following the overthrow of communism and their replacement with more restrictive laws is considered by those responsible as necessary for the reclamation of the country’s true identity, which communism had corrupted and perverted. This is similar to the situation in Vietnam, where nationalist visions are conflated with very particular and highly restrictive definitions of the “proper” Vietnamese women. Women’s sexuality also lies at the crux of competing visions of Egypt’s future. While the remaining country case studies are more wide-ranging they echo these profound debates. The South Africa analysis employs a series of constitutional court rulings on sexual and reproductive rights to measure the development of the post-apartheid state, revealing, in the process, significant contradictions within and between state institutions, the young democracy’s constitutional vision, and the beliefs and life-conditions of its citizens. The Peru and Brazil studies describe a similar, but longer (20-30 years), series of struggles between sexual and reproductive rights advocates and various official bodies. These latter three cases provide a clear demonstration that advancing sexual and reproductive rights involves complex social processes, requiring interventions at multiple levels of state and civil society. More often than not these different processes do not play out synchronously or in a complementary fashion thus creating multiple opportunities for conservatives to contest newly articulated rights claims.

For at least the past 20 years, the United Nations and, to a much lesser (or perhaps merely less visible) extent, the World Bank, have been among the principal global stages on which the dramas portrayed in each country case have been enacted. The UN essay narrates two instances, separated by about 10 years, of intense partisan struggle over document language that allegedly would — or would not — affirm sexual rights. The power of words is central, as well, to the review of World Bank documents, for their definition and use can inspire visions of more equitable and liberated societies or, as is more often the case, constrain our imagina-

tions and actions. Thus, while “gender” and “sexuality” have entered the bank’s lexicon, they are couched in narrowly economic, purportedly scientific, and/or technocratic terms.

Events and opportunities

In the “eventful sociology” proposed by William Sewell, historical events “are happenings that transform structures” (Sewell, 2005, p. 218). Whether and how the transformative potential of mere “happenings” is realized depends on how these happenings are interpreted by interested actors and on the extent to which those actors possess the material and symbolic resources necessary to grasp the political opportunities such happenings present. The past quarter-century has witnessed a series of arguably transformative events at the global level and in each of the countries with which we are concerned. (Events on these two levels are not, of course, independent of one another.)

Globally, the HIV/AIDS epidemic that made its appearance in the early 1980s is perhaps the most obviously relevant of these events, creating whole new discursive spaces and categories of political actors and in the process changing the meanings attached to gender and sexuality almost beyond recognition. Perhaps never before have sexuality and gender been so publicly discussed and problematized, literally on a global scale, in relation to such a wide range of social, cultural, economic, and political issues as has been the case in relation to HIV and AIDS over the course of the past 25 years. Only somewhat less important in the present context were a series of UN conferences (see Françoise Girard, this volume), in particular the International Conference on Population and Development, mentioned above, and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing.

These conferences gave international visibility and legitimacy to dissident views on questions of reproductive and sexual health and rights, and they were powerful catalysts for social movement and NGO organization, both cross-nationally and within countries, in support of — and in opposition to — those views. The impact of other “happenings” in the same period — the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, pressure from global economic actors beginning in the mid-1980s and leading to widespread adoption of neoliberal economic policies (by the countries of concern to us here, among others), the attacks on the World Trade Center in

New York in September, 2001 — is more ambiguous. Perhaps the main relevant effect of these events — suggested by several of the country cases — has been to destabilize existing structures of power, leading the beneficiaries of those structures to search for order in the affirmation and/or restoration of traditional gender and sexual norms and practices.

During the period in question, each of the countries examined here has experienced momentous political and social upheavals with potentially transformative consequences for society and the state. The most important of these consequences has been the opening of opportunities for new social actors — not necessarily progressive — to make their mark on the political scene. These openings vary substantially from the proliferation of NGO and other civil society organizations in Brazil and South Africa, for example, to the far more constrained field of possibilities in a country like Vietnam where one must read more closely to observe these opportunities, such as the difference in approach between the functioning of NGOs in the north and south of the country — more technocratic in one area and more interventionist in the other. From the perspective of advancing health and rights, the results have been contradictory — almost always forcing an end to longstanding silence about issues of sex and reproduction, but mixed in their impact on the ground.

In Table 2 we summarize these events and the opportunities they created. Following a slightly more detailed description of each event, we focus our analysis, first, on the (remarkably parallel) words and actions of the eight nation-states as they responded to the challenges posed by those events; and, second, on their impact on reproductive and sexual health and rights debates in each country.

Table 2. Country Cases: Events and Opportunities

Country	Events	Opportunities
Brazil	Transition from military dictatorship to civilian rule. Promulgation of the “Citizen’s Constitution” (1988).	Strong pre-existing social sector seizes opportunities to advance reproductive and sexual health and rights.

Egypt	1970s – Sadat releases Islamic activists from jail; 1994 – ICPD held in Cairo.	Cairo conference creates opportunities for Islamic activists to mobilize internationally and to acquire sophisticated mobilization techniques/strategies.
India	Advent of HIV/AIDS (mid-1980s); increasing militancy of Hindu Nationalists.	Advocacy groups against AIDS discrimination and for sexual rights emerge. Mounting challenge to traditionalists and breaking silence for multiple sexualities.
Peru	Multiple shifts in government: • Fujimori (1990–2000) • Toledo (2001–2006).	Opportunities shift with political winds in context of weak sexual minorities sector and powerful Catholic Church.
Poland	Overthrow of communist government (1989) and reorganization of civil rights so that they are no longer exclusively state administered.	Mobilization of Catholic Church to capitalize on new political opportunities. Weak feminist movement.
South Africa	Demise of apartheid and establishment of democratic system that includes a participatory constitutional development process (1994); Advent of HIV/AIDS (mid-1980s).	Multiple voices legitimized, with conflicting claims; Constitutional authority and judicial independence.
Turkey	Islamic party political victories (1994); Islamic government proposes to criminalize adultery (2004).	Pre-existing feminist/sexual minority organizations seize opportunity created by government overreaching and EU politics.
Vietnam	Communist government installed in mid-1970s. Opening to neoliberal economic policies (<i>Doi Moi</i>) in mid-1990s.	Civil society very weak. Opportunities exist primarily for NGO and government actors based outside the country.

NOTE: The UN and World Bank create opportunities by their very existence. They are targets of opportunity and, insofar as they are perceived to respond in various ways, they encourage further mobilization and further pressure. They would not be targets unless their words, documents they produce, and their actions were perceived to carry weight.

Five of these eight countries have, within the past 35 years, experienced seismic shifts in government — from dictatorship to democracy, from secular to religious, from communist to non-communist. Peru has experienced multiple such shifts in a relatively short time span as the political pendulum has swung from one ideological system to another. In Egypt it appears only a matter of time before such a shift occurs as the current regime employs increasingly repressive measures to maintain power and threatens to lose control of the oppositional space it created in an attempt to control Islamist activists. Among the eight, only India's government has remained relatively stable, although the rise of Hindu fundamentalists, ongoing conflicts with its Muslim neighbors, internal tensions between Hindu and Muslim activists, and rapid economic and, consequently, cultural changes among its middle and upper classes, provide a political momentum that can be difficult to predict. The enormous political changes experienced by most of the countries examined were often — but not inevitably — transformative in their impact, particularly in the opportunities they opened for new sets of actors to exercise political and policy influence.

Opportunities must be grasped, however, and the capacity to take advantage of openings as they occurred was unevenly distributed across issues and across countries. Turkey, Brazil, Poland, and Egypt provide excellent — if very different — illustrations of this point. Turkey has a long history of feminist movements and so, despite a period of fragmentation immediately following the 1994 Islamic political victories, feminist groups from around the country were able to unite behind reform of inequitable gender provisions of the Turkish Penal Code, holding mass protests and campaigning through a sympathetic media. In Brazil, as well, social movement actors who mobilized around the promulgation of the new Constitution in 1988 were well positioned to seize the political opportunities to advance sexual and reproductive rights offered under a democratic regime. The advent of the Solidarity government in Poland created political opportunities as well, but rights advocates were poorly positioned to seize them while the Catholic Church — lying in wait during the communist regime and emboldened by a Vatican under the leadership of John Paul II, the “Polish Pope” — was able to march right in. Islamic conservative activism had been building in Egypt since Anwar Sadat's government came to power in the early 1970s. However, it was the Cairo and Beijing conferences that triggered organized mobilization by Muslim religious fundamentalists against sexual and reproductive rights as they were interpreted by leading feminist advocacy

groups. (We will explore this mobilization further in the context of Girard's essay on the United Nations.)

The picture in the remaining four country cases is less clear. In Vietnam, at one extreme, the existing political space is almost fully occupied by the state, leaving little or no room for actors without state sponsorship, and the state relies heavily on external (non-Vietnamese) donors, governments, and non-governmental organizations to shape its sexual and reproductive health policies. Peru and South Africa do not lack local NGOs, but in both places the highly contested politics of reproduction and sexuality appear to have resulted in scenarios of uneven and fragmented progress in some social sectors while others stagnate or regress. HIV/AIDS has created space in India for the emergence of advocates for sexual rights, for the visibility of multiple sexualities, and for a greatly expanded discourse on the topic. Yet arcane judicial processes and indifference, or at best ambivalence, on the part of political leaders muffles momentum on the ground.

More generally, although social and political crises create the potential for positive social transformation, whether or not that potential is realized is highly dependent on the larger local, national, and even global context at the moment when those crises occur. Peter Evans in his analysis of the conditions for environmental protest argues that the two most important dimensions of that context in recent years have been, first, the transition to a global economy — that is, the opening of economic markets on a global scale — and, second, a gradual transition to electoral democracy, opening significant spaces for citizen action in the countries where this transition has occurred (Evans, 2002). A similar argument could be made concerning sexuality and gender for increasing flows of information globally and the development of transnational activist networks have developed significant force in some arenas, the UN being among the most notable of these. Nevertheless, without local freedoms and a certain level of economic empowerment it is difficult for these efforts to result in significant changes in the lives of many communities.

Ideologies and interests of state

These eight countries differ on almost every imaginable dimension: political, economic, social, and religious. More striking than their differences, however, are the commonalities

in response when the stability of established gender and sexual hierarchies is perceived as threatened. Reaching into imagined pasts, powerful elites in each country draw upon readily available gender, sexual, and reproductive ideologies to oppose progressive reforms, equating — as Scott’s analysis would predict — the preservation of “traditional” gender norms and sexual morality with the preservation of the nation-state. Consequently, a key venue for engagement on the part of sexual and gender rights activists is national narratives, for these are used by the empowered to justify the status quo (Bhabha, 1990; Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1989). That is, these narratives naturalize inequality by erasing historical contradictions and giving the appearance of teleological authority to the state’s current organization. What they attempt to claim is that “this is who we are and this is what we were always meant to be.” Every case supplies illustrations of this point. Those that follow are by no means exhaustive.

The most paradoxical case, perhaps, is that of India where the “modern Indian state” has come to the defense of a nineteenth-century anti-sodomy law imposed by the imperial British, arguing that “the security of the ‘Indian nation’ is at stake” and that repeal would violate an “essential ‘Indian culture’” (“norms of universal marriage, monogamy, and procreative heterosexuality involving chaste women and masculine men, enforced by the triumvirate institutions of patriarchal family, caste, and community”) (Ramasubban, this volume, p. 94).¹ Polish national identity is equated with the historic figure of the “Mother Pole” raising children as a “patriotic act for the nation” in the context of Poland’s nineteenth-century struggle for independence against Russia, Prussia, and Austria. “Any attempt by a woman to liberate herself from family roles was treated as a betrayal of the nation and [much the same thing] the [Catholic] religion” (Nowicka, this volume, p. 178). Turkey’s early twentieth-century modernizers, despite their abolition of Islamic law and rhetorical emphasis on women’s “liberation” as symbolic of the modern state, regarded women’s sexuality as a “potential threat to public order and morality.” A “foundational premise” of Turkey’s 1926 Penal Code was that “women’s bodies and sexuality are the property of men, family, or society” (Ilkcaracan, this volume, p. 252) In communist Vietnam pre-*Doi Moi*, “...the state continued to exalt women’s ‘traditional’ virtues of endurance, faithfulness, compassion, and self-sacrifice as invaluable to the national cause of building a modern and industrialized nation. Therefore,

¹ Heather S. Dell, in “‘Ordinary’ sex, prostitution, and middle-class wives: Liberalization and national identity in India” (2005) makes very similar points about sex, gender, and national identity in India.

while the Vietnamese woman provided a ready-made ‘emancipatory subject’ for the newly established socialist order, her emancipation started with her subjugation to the new nation” (Le Minh & Nguyen, this volume, p. 296).

Post-*Doi Moi*, “women again play a key role since they bear the responsibilities for the welfare of the family and therefore, by extension, also the welfare of the nation” (ibid., pp. 298-299). Women’s bodies are, in each case, construed as subordinate to the projects of the state. It is important to emphasize — and Vietnam with its rapid urbanization and industrialization and embrace of neoliberal economic policies illustrates this point particularly well — that none of these countries reject “modernity” wholesale. They reject it in ways that protect established structures of power without, as they see it, threatening critical economic interests.² There is a problem, of course, when these two projects clash, as in the case of Turkey.

National identity has been conflated with progressive policies as well, but with a more fragile hold. This point emerges with particular poignancy in the case of South Africa. On the one hand, there is constitutional court Justice Albie Sachs’ “rhetorical harnessing of sexual rights to the country’s core national narrative...‘The right [for same-sex couples] to get married ...represent[s] a major symbolic milestone in the long walk to equality and dignity.’The phrasing of this final sentence echoes the title of Nelson Mandela’s autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, a ‘sacred’ metaphor in the liberation story” (Beresford, Schneider & Sember, this volume, p. 217). On the other hand, “the cultivation of ‘Africanness’” — associated with “anti-modernist commitments to essential, timeless, and stable moral beliefs and practices” — is “very much a part of the country’s current nationalist discourse” readily appropriated by ambitious politicians (ibid.). But South Africa is certainly not alone in this regard. Brazil has also shown a willingness to link progressive policies in sexual and reproductive health with its own national image, taking regional and international leadership roles, for example, in relation to global movements such as those leading up to both the Cairo and Beijing Conferences, or in the more recent introduction of the ultimately unsuccessful Brazilian resolution, entitled Human Rights

² A recent book on how nation-states negotiated issues of sovereignty at UN conferences makes the point that “sovereignty compromises are more likely when the potential for material gain is high (e.g., when they can bargain for economic resources in exchange for accepting environmental regulation) and less likely when states perceive core identity issues, such as values asserted by governments as central to particular national or cultural ways of life, to be at stake. In other words, for states seeking resource concessions on certain issues, sovereignty is used as a bargaining chip” (Friedman, Hochstetler, & Clark, 2005, p. 102). Where there is little to gain except increased legitimacy in the eyes of international and/or local NGOs, sovereignty is less likely to be bargained away.

and Sexual Orientation, in the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. Perhaps even more clearly, Brazil's highly regarded HIV/AIDS program has increasingly become a featured part of Brazilian foreign policy, touted by the Brazilian government at intergovernmental events such as the United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) on AIDS, and written into bilateral cooperation agreements between Brazil and strategic foreign partners such as China, South Africa, and the other Latin American countries. While some of this attention has been due to the technical successes of Brazil's antiretroviral treatment access program, this success has been firmly grounded in the long-term commitment to the defense of human rights in relation to gender and sexuality that has provided the foundation for the Brazilian program (Berkman et al., 2005).

Population and reproductive health

Women's bodies have long been a site of political contest between the state, the church, and the occasionally strong, but more often weak and fragmented, voices of women themselves. Given the remarkable and consistent conflation of control over women's bodies — in particular, over their reproductive powers — with the identity and power of the nation-state, the level of state investment in these contests is unsurprising. Where religious groups and the state have joined forces, as in parts of South America, and in Egypt and Poland, or where the state occupies the entire civic space, as in Vietnam, reproductive rights discourses have gained little purchase.³ In Egypt, for example, the official National Council on Women (chaired by first lady Suzanne Mubarak) felt it necessary to refer legislation criminalizing female genital cutting to religious authorities for their opinion. Rejected by those authorities, the legislation promptly died.

On this contested landscape, birth control occupies an ambiguous position. Although Western feminist movements have generally seen access to the means of fertility control as central to women's liberation, fertility control imposed by the state (or advocated by agencies of other states) to advance projects of population control in the service of economic development is quite another matter. In Peru, for example, Fujimori "used the global feminist discourse [from Cairo and Beijing] to 'cloak' his coercive population control policy" (Cáceres,

³ Advocates for reproductive rights are active in India (see Ramasubban & Jejeebhoy, 2000). Their absence from this discussion reflects their absence from Ramasubban's essay in this volume. The Turkey narrative is focused exclusively on women's civil rights.

Cueto, & Palomino, this volume, p. 139). In so doing, he coopted and confused Peru's relatively weak feminist movement and paved the way — once his actions were disclosed — for the Catholic Church and its allies (including United States based religious conservatives) to demand an end to all family planning programs (a project endorsed by Fujimori's successor, Toledo). Vietnam's promotion of family planning programs (pre- and post-*Doi Moi*) has been driven almost entirely by its nationalist aspirations: "After *Doi Moi*, the emphasis of family planning shifted from building socialist subjects and socialist nation to constructing small-size, prosperous, and happy families as foundation for a strong and modern nation" (Le Minh & Nguyen, this volume, p. 298). Critical voices have been almost entirely absent. Perhaps the larger point is that insofar as birth control services are available in these eight countries — and we have no quantitative data as to whom they are available and under what conditions — this availability is as often the outcome of state policies and actions as it is of demand from women's movements or other progressive forces.

However initiated, birth control pales by comparison with abortion in the emotional intensity of the controversy it evokes. Vianna and Carrara (Brazil) note, "[Media] coverage was on abortion as an isolated issue disconnected from the broader sphere of sexual and reproductive rights." This is a remarkable statement that is nevertheless applicable well beyond Brazil. Even in Brazil, with a strong feminist movement dating from the 1970s and a Constitution that incorporates family planning as a reproductive right, legislation aimed at legalizing or extending the circumstances for abortion has been systematically rejected by the National Congress, most recently in 2005. Taking full advantage of its access to parliamentarians and other political elites, the Catholic Church (and its allies in other religious bodies) was able to defeat a policy change that emerged initially from the Brazilian government itself. Yet even this conflict should call our attention to the complex intersections that exist between civil society and the state, since such a policy would never have been elaborated in the first place if feminist activists had not come to exert important influence on governmental policy. Indeed, in Brazil, as in a number of other countries, the role of social movement elites — feminists involved in reproductive health and population programs, AIDS activists working in the HIV/AIDS Program, and so on — has been one of the most effective strategies for seeking to implement gradual but ultimately far-reaching policy changes related to gender and repro-

ductive and sexual health and rights (a similar point has been made by Rosalind Petchesky in her study of global feminism and health and human rights movements [Petchesky, 2003]).

However, a constitutional right to abortion does not, in and of itself, ensure that this procedure will be available and safe. Abortion was made legal in South Africa in 1994. Nevertheless, it is highly contentious (74% of Black South Africans think that abortion in the case of “economic hardship” is always wrong), political parties are deeply divided on the issue, and there is a large gap between law and practice, in part because of community and medical provider opposition: “access to official abortion services is extremely limited for the majority of the female population.” Fundamentalist churches are increasingly powerful in South Africa, and a highly stratified and fragmented women’s movement, many of whose leaders have been coopted by the government and political parties, has not sustained the “pro-choice” momentum of the early 1990s, when it played a key role in the development of the country’s constitution and initial legislative agendas. Anti-choice groups, on the other hand, are increasingly active and are building what promises to be a very influential base of popular support.

The extreme case, of course, is Poland. Under the communist regime abortion was available essentially upon request — not (as the essay emphasizes) because women fought for it but because the government decided it should be so, attributing high rates of maternal mortality to unsafe “underground” abortions. The matter generated little public debate. In 1993, following accession of the Solidarity government to power, however, abortion “on social grounds” was criminalized, making legal abortion unavailable to most women. Abortion was identified with communism. To be in favor of abortion rights was not only to be pro-communist but also to be anti-Catholic, a position in which no post-communist politician wanted to find him- or herself. The Catholic Church in Poland, identified with the overthrow of communism and with the country’s beloved “Polish Pope,” dominated political consideration of “social,” i.e. sexual and reproductive, issues following the fall of communism. The Polish women’s movement — strong before World War II — essentially disappeared under communism. Solidarity was disinterested in what it defined as “women’s issues.” Although the Solidarity government’s actions on abortion stimulated the creation of an opposition women’s movement, it has been fragmented and politically divided, no match for the all-powerful Catholic Church.

Among the most important social transformations sparked by the HIV/AIDS epidemic have been its role, first, in catalyzing social movement organization around the disease itself, and second — perhaps more important — in forcing the acknowledgment of multiple sexualities and creating space for organizing around these sexualities. The road has not been smooth, however, and in some countries — illustrated in the present context by Vietnam — even finding a path is hard. It is useful to begin with a brief synopsis of the state of play in each of the five countries where relevant information is available, and then identify some sticky issues these narratives raise.

Effective organization — meaning politically influential organization — in both domains (AIDS and multiple sexualities) is furthest advanced in Brazil. AIDS-related advocacy groups were formed in the mid-1980s, before the promulgation of the Brazilian Constitution, and established strong links with the movement for political reform. Much like the Catholic Church in Poland (however far-fetched this analogy may seem) these groups were strategically positioned to capitalize on pre-existing political ties once the new regime took power. The accomplishments of the Brazilian AIDS movement — government-supported media campaigns to promote condom use and (recently) against homophobia, free medication for persons with AIDS, support for the creation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) groups, not to speak of the Brazilian government's high profile on the international stage in the domains of AIDS and of sexual rights — are attributable (we would argue) to these early connections. This assertion finds support in the essay's allusion to the “remarkably large numbers of professionals working within NGOs and state organs” (Vianna & Carrara, this volume, p. 38; see also, Parker, 2003; Berkman et al., 2005). Friends in court are the key to advances in public health (Nathanson, 2007).

In no other country was the political context so favorable. Cáceres and colleagues argue that in Peru the “visibility and legitimacy of those who are sexually different has significantly improved in the last two decades” (this volume, p. 159) and that “public perceptions of persons living with HIV/AIDS have also improved” (this volume, *ibid*). The level and quality of attention to the AIDS epidemic and its many related issues appears, nevertheless, to have

been highly sporadic, dependent on the shifting political fortunes of the country's political leaders, on the whims of international donors, and on the rise and fall of various advocacy groups. In sharp contrast to Brazil, neither the Peruvian public nor Peru's politicians have any real engagement with questions of sexual (or reproductive) rights.

The governments of both India and South Africa — from very different political starting points — long delayed or interrupted serious confrontation with HIV/AIDS, and even now the extent and effectiveness of their commitment is unclear. “Both the Indian state and civil society were in denial [until the mid-1990s], apparently convinced that a sexually transmitted disease like AIDS could not possibly spread in a country which had the protective effect of ‘Indian culture’” (Ramasubban, this volume, p. 98). Strikingly (and, again, in contrast to Brazil) for the Indian political left “sexuality was of little concern and homosexuality was a ‘capitalist aberration,’ an elitist and imperialist import” (ibid., p. 106). Without a solid structural base on which to build collective action, voices of protest against these hegemonic discourses were muted. Recently, Ramasubban argues, this situation has begun to change: erstwhile fragmented sexual rights and AIDS-related groups have joined to demand the repeal of India's anti-sodomy law and in 2006 the government's AIDS office — in its first publicly stated position on the issue — “supported the decriminalizing of alternative sexualities” (this volume, p. 118). Whether or not the law will in fact be repealed, and how its repeal will contribute to addressing India's HIV/AIDS epidemic, are as yet unknown.

The South African story is more familiar, and we will comment on it only briefly. First, South Africa's problems in this domain did not begin with President Mbeki's questioning of the scientific consensus on the cause of AIDS. A “well-reasoned and affordable plan” to deal with the AIDS epidemic was discussed in the years leading up to the collapse of the apartheid government and was available in the early 1990s. It was not implemented for lack of infrastructure and leadership from Mandela and the African National Congress (ANC). This vacuum continued and was exacerbated under Mbeki. Despite numerous dramatic episodes involving legal disputes with pharmaceutical companies (with positive outcomes for the South African government and activist groups) and the efforts of activist groups such as the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), the majority of South Africans living with HIV/AIDS do not have access to life-saving resources: “Over the past seven years, the government

has initiated a number of programs to address the epidemic but the results have always been disappointing” (Beresford, Schneider, & Sember, this volume, p. 237).

Second, the gap between legal rights and popular endorsement of those rights, identified earlier with respect to abortion, exists throughout. Gays and lesbians, for example, have been transformed from criminals (under apartheid) to full citizens under the government of the ANC. Nevertheless, 81 per cent of black South Africans believe that same-sex adult sexual relationships are “always wrong,” and at least one mainstream politician (and potential future president) has stated publicly “same-sex marriages are ‘a disgrace to the nation and to God’” (Beresford, Schneider, & Sember, this volume, p. 220). Third, the Treatment Action Campaign has, like many social movements in the country, oscillated between cooperative and oppositional relationships with government with mixed results: it has embarrassed the government into action on occasions only to find that jointly heralded breakthroughs are either unrealized or implemented piecemeal. Nevertheless, South Africa now has the largest antiretroviral treatment program in the world. Given the size of its HIV-positive population, however, this still only represents a fraction of those in need of care and falls far short of what activists have long demanded.

Finally, “economic hardship and crime-induced fear,” along with the contradictions embedded in the South African government’s HIV/AIDS policy, have made the country “ripe for the absorption of conservative initiatives and programs” (ibid., p. 238). “Many South Africans have distanced themselves from the political and labor organizations they formerly supported and are turning to the rapidly growing number of evangelical and Pentecostal churches established with spiritual, intellectual, and financial help from the evangelical right in the United States” (ibid., p. 223). Together with fundamentalist religion, the United States has exported to South Africa the full armamentarium of approaches to sexuality favored by its current administration — delay sexual debut, abstain, be faithful — to an audience that, in the absence of attractive alternatives, has become increasingly receptive to conservative ideologies.

At one point in their essay on Vietnam, Le Minh and Nguyen describe Vietnamese discourse on population as “a two-way discussion between the state and its experts [on the one hand] and the donor community [on the other]” (this volume, p. 292). People affected by govern-

ment policies had no voice. These statements apply with equal force to the discourse on HIV/AIDS. Doing what it “knew best,” the state initially (in the 1990s) gazed at HIV/AIDS through a socialist lens, construing the epidemic as the result of “social evils” (prostitution and drug use) to be eradicated by reeducation of female sex workers (and drug users) to become “proletarian subjects.” (As we have seen, “socialism” has no lock on such discourses.) Under pressure from international donors, the state has recently (at least publicly) abandoned this approach in favor of a medical one: sex workers are now described as “an imminent threat to the health of the nation” (Le Minh & Nguyen, this volume, p. 302). Wives — again coopted as servants to the state — are urged to “provide class-appropriate pleasure to their husbands” in order to insulate them “against the lure of prostitutes” (ibid., p. 303), a risky strategy (for wives) at best. Insofar as there is a civil society voice in these state projects — *Doi Moi* was followed by an explosion of local NGOs — it is almost exclusively state and (to a greater extent) international donor sponsored and funded.⁴ On the evidence of this essay, there has been little impact at the grassroots and, in consequence, little impact of the grassroots on policy.

This review of countries’ responses to HIV/AIDS raises a number of questions. First, there is the potentially fraught relationship between governments and social movement organizations (SMOs). These organizations obviously benefit from government recognition and funding, but there is considerable evidence in these essays that with recognition and funding may come cooptation, loss of militancy, and depoliticization. This has clearly happened in Peru — although the situation there is so fluid that it could “un-happen” with the next change of political regime. In South Africa there is some indication that TAC is similarly vulnerable given that its leaders have a history of strong support for the ANC and have even suspended activist campaigns prior to national elections as a tacit signal of solidarity with the ANC government. Despite this inclination, TAC remains strongly independent and is vocally opposed to government concerning its AIDS policies and related issues. State and

⁴ Western-type NGOs are, in fact, illegal in Vietnam and current efforts to legalize them are making little headway in parliament. The only legal associations are “technical” with stated aims of research and/or evaluation. Vietnam’s approach to the question of associations is illustrated by the country’s experience with associations of people with AIDS. Returning from an international AIDS meeting, the prime minister informed the health minister that the country had to have such an association. A plan was drawn up that included individuals from various state ministries, but no one with HIV/AIDS. Vietnam was determined to possess the trappings of a player on the international AIDS stage, but was obviously clueless as to how to go about it.

donor funding of NGOs in Vietnam renders it almost impossible for SMOs to have a strong political voice. Even in Brazil, where activist and civil society involvement in the response to HIV and AIDS has been seen as a model that others might emulate, the movement of activists back and forth between NGOs and the state, and their on-going involvement in implementing program activities sometimes at the expense of political advocacy, has occasionally led to both cooptation and de-politicization (Berkman et al., 2005; Parker, 2003). A second related issue is the shift in meanings of HIV as it goes from being a moral/political issue to a medical/chronic disease issue. What are the consequences of this turn for AIDS-related and sexual/human rights organizations that have grown up around, or in response to, earlier definitions? Third, with the growth of groups focused on sexual/human rights rather than on AIDS exclusively, there is the great potential for identity fragmentation and competition for recognition and resources. (Girard cites many examples of this competition in the United Nations context.) Where a clear common goal has been identified (as in India around the demand for repeal of its anti-sodomy law) this problem can — at least temporarily — be overcome, but it will continue to lurk in the shadows.

Capture the flag

The “flag” in our subheading is the United Nations and — and to a lesser extent because it is not so open to capture — the World Bank. The flag in the former case is almost wholly symbolic — words and phrases in documents and resolutions — but nonetheless powerful in its ability to confer legitimacy on one vision of the global social order as compared with another. Capture of the World Bank has not only symbolic but significant material value as well: the vision it adopts drives how the bank’s money is allocated and how its programs are shaped. As their respective positions in the global social structure have evolved over time, these two institutions have become increasingly inviting — indeed obligatory — targets in struggles for power and ideological hegemony in the arenas of reproductive and sexual health and rights. The opportunities they present are, however, very different.

As the vignette that introduces Girard’s paper makes clear, the United Nations has limited ability to keep out uninvited guests (e.g., members of the Lesbian Caucus) and, at the same time, offers unprecedented opportunities for media exposure (“everyone in the [Beijing]

plenary, including government delegates from 189 countries had [seen the banner and] got the message” [Girard, this volume, p. 311]). Much like the typical “weak state,” the UN combines multiple venues (i.e., not only the actual conference but multiple preparatory and follow-up conferences where non-state as well as state actors can make their case and struggle to have their views prevail) with an incapacity to impose resolutions on the combatants. Indeed, the UN is, by definition, a forum for the public exchange of views. The World Bank has a very different mission: to lend money in support of projects for economic development of poor or economically struggling countries. Although it “has demonstrated, time and again, sensitivity to pressure from organized actions mounted by civil society” (de Camargo, & Mattos, this volume, p. 363) “. . . the bank [by virtue of its structure and economic leverage] is far less open [than the United Nations] to organized political pressure from civil society” (ibid., p. 371).

Girard’s essay gives ample testimony to the importance of the Cairo and Beijing conferences (along with the related UN conferences that preceded and followed these two critical events) in mobilizing feminist activists and, more recently, LGBT activists around the world on behalf of sexual and reproductive health and rights.⁵ “Mobilization was key to success in Beijing, and will be key to future successes at the Human Rights Council and elsewhere. North/South alliances are especially important....the leadership provided by Southern activists effectively counters the claim that [sexual and reproductive rights] are Northern/Western issues” (Girard, this volume, p. 355). As an internationally recognized global forum, the UN has been able to legitimize discourse on a set of highly contentious issues and, by extension, the groups that advocate on those issues. Indeed, one of the questions raised by Girard’s essay, particularly in light of the country case studies (see, in particular, Ramasubban’s essay on India), is the relationship between advocates’ status and visibility at the United Nations and their status and visibility in their home countries. To what extent and under what circumstances does successful advocacy at the UN translate into successful action at home? There is insufficient evidence in the country studies to answer these questions, a symptom perhaps of the paucity of connections between the global activist domain and local struggles and organizations, even if a set of activists is able to move easily from one arena of engagement to another.

⁵ Much has been written about these events and their impact. The value of Girard’s essay lies in her interviews with key participants and in her in-depth analysis of the, sometimes agonizing, trade-offs necessary to produce agreed-upon documents and resolutions.

Among the more striking testimonials to the impact of the movement Girard so effectively describes is its success in generating a full-fledged countermovement. If a social movement consists of “collective challenges by people with common purposes and solidarity in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities,” a “countermovement’ is a movement that makes contrary claims simultaneously to those of the original movement” (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996, p. 1631). Conventionally, nation-states are the targets of social movements. They appear quite willing, however, to adopt social movement — or, in this case, countermovement — forms when the occasion requires, as documented by Bahgat and Afifi’s wonderfully detailed description of Egypt’s response to the Cairo conference. Unhappy with what they perceived as “defeat” at Cairo (i.e., the ICPD Program of Action’s “groundbreaking language on sexuality, particularly on the right to have a ‘satisfying and safe sex life’” [Bahgat & Afifi, this volume, p. 59]), Egypt’s religious authorities (by now fully identified with the state) swung into action, copying almost to the letter the strategies and tactics of their opponents. Not only did Egypt rectify its perceived mistakes at Cairo by participating fully in preparations for Beijing and in the proceedings of the conference itself, Egypt’s religious activists were instrumental in formation of an Islamist women’s NGO (the International Islamic Committee for Women and Children [IICWC]) “to counter the influence of progressive feminist and pro-women[!] NGOs at the international level,” (Bahgat & Afifi, this volume, p. 60). Bahgat and Afifi argue that since Beijing this international coalition of Islamic women’s organizations “has become the Islamists’ most powerful tool in the struggle over gender issues and sexual and reproductive rights” (ibid.).

These accounts suggest that international bodies such as the United Nations play a major role in sustaining protest and conflict. However much they might like to do so, nation-states cannot shut protest down because these bodies provide forums for the airing of dissent. Under circumstances where the international body lacks authority to resolve the conflict — as in the case of conflict over reproductive and sexual health and rights at the UN — partisan struggle is likely to continue indefinitely.

The World Bank has considerably greater capacity not only to resolve conflict but also to suppress it, although even its capacity is not unlimited, as recent events have shown. What de Camargo and Mattos contribute to our appreciation of this capacity is the fact that in

addition to the power of its financial economy is the power of the Bank's discursive economy. In combination, these two economies have the authority to shape not only government's economic policies but also their framing of social initiatives. To understand how this works, it is not sufficient to point out that "a comprehensive view of sexuality is conspicuously absent from the World Bank's public discourse," (Camargo & Mattos, this volume, p. 371); it is also necessary to trace how this silence itself is manufactured, for sexuality issues "are present in some bottom tier documents but disappear as the narrative moves up the hierarchical scales" (Ibid., p. 372). As a case study of these practices of discourse construction and their translation, or failure to translate these into economic policies and assistance programs, this analysis encourages us to pay attention to the issue of what is spoken about and how and what is made silent in all venues. A substantial aspect of the struggle over sexuality and gender is the dialectical relationship between envisioned sexual and gender regimes and material transformations. Vision is able to guide action while shifts in resources and practices can stimulate a vision of what gender and sexuality systems may be possible. As Camargo and Mattos conclude, "the public discourse of the bank is yet another important arena where the affirmation of a constructive conception of sexual rights has to be fought for, potentially with repercussions on a global scale" (this volume, p. 373). The affirmation of constructive conceptions of sexual rights is no less important in the numerous other arenas to which these cases lead us.

Conclusion

The many differences between these various case studies make it difficult to develop controlled comparisons between them. Nonetheless, we hope that this discussion has highlighted some of the crosscutting issues that emerge from a careful reading of these stories about the many struggles taking place in the early twenty-first-century with regard to gender and sexuality. While we want to resist the temptation to try to draw any overarching or definitive conclusions from this brief excursion through some of the issues that the case studies have raised, we do want to close by calling attention to a number of points that we think these studies tend to illustrate or confirm — and to highlight a number of new questions which they raise even if they are unable, within their understandable limitations, to fully answer.

In particular, it appears to us that in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights, as has been the case in the analysis of a number of other areas of social activism in recent years, it is possible to identify two major trends in recent history that have had an especially important influence in shaping both local struggles and transnational processes — what Peter Evans has analyzed as the transition to a global economy, with an unprecedented opening of economic markets on a global scale, and a gradual (but for the most part sustained) transition to electoral democracy, which has opened important opportunities for citizen action and social movement organization in the countries where this transition has occurred (see Evans 2002). Although these factors, which appear to be key elements of the broader process of globalization in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, open up significant possibilities for change, it is difficult to predict the precise direction of such change. Depending on a range of social, cultural, economic, and political conjunctures it is just as possible for change to unleash conservative and even reactionary forces (as in the many forms of religious fundamentalism that have made their influence felt in nearly all the cases that we have examined) as it is to encourage what we view as more positive social transformations that might increasingly guarantee human freedom and dignity through the extension and expansion of sexual and reproductive rights. Whether or not that potential for positive social change is realized in any specific setting is thus very much dependent on local, national, and even global contexts within which changes take place.

There is no question, in our view, that the global transformations of recent decades have opened up important new spaces in almost all societies and institutions (and certainly those examined in these case studies) for advocacy and activism in defense of gender equity and sexual freedom. Increasingly extensive global flows — not merely of capital, but of people, technologies, images, and ideas (what Arjun Appadurai has usefully identified as the landscapes of contemporary globalization [Appadurai, 1996]) — have made possible not only the spaces of local struggle in which the politics of contested bodies have increasingly taken place, but also the emergence of important and growing transnational movements and activist networks. These networks have begun to have a major impact on changing the contemporary landscape of sexual and reproductive health and rights (networks that have themselves perhaps made possible the space of the collaborative research project that provided the context for the case studies we have examined

here). These transnational movements have opened up new arenas for dialogue and debate — in the United Nations system, for example — which hold important potential for the future.

At the same time it is also clear that without being built upon a foundation of local freedoms — including social and economic inclusion at levels that are still far from being guaranteed anywhere in the contemporary world — progress made in transnational settings may be almost irrelevant for the sexual and reproductive lives of many (women, men, and children) in local communities. Indeed, one of the key priorities for the future, and one of the areas that this set of case studies only begins to open up, is a fuller understanding of the ways in which the new transnational language of sexual rights impacts the lives of people at the grassroots (see Parker, 2007). For example, what does the notion of sexual rights mean for impoverished women struggling to escape domestic violence in their daily lives? Or for female and transvestite sex workers, or the poor youth of the communities that ring the modern metropolitan urban centers in virtually all of the countries we have examined? How are emerging gay and lesbian communities in relatively peripheral social and economic settings creating and re-creating their own understandings of citizenship and empowerment that may or may not have the same terms of reference as LGBT and queer activism as it evolved in the centers of economic and political power — and that may have very little to do with the transnational activism focusing on sexual rights in arenas such as the United Nations? How can notions of sexual citizenship, and of erotic justice, be constructed in ways that will make them meaningful for those in the front lines of on-the-ground struggles, typically waged at the local level or in state or national political arenas?

The case studies that we have examined here, and the broader collaborative project within which they were crafted, only begin to offer answers to many of these questions. But that they do, in fact, begin to offer such answers, is nonetheless a remarkable achievement for which we are indebted to their authors. In this brief comparative analysis of the key crosscutting themes emerging from the case studies our primary goal has been to highlight some of these themes and issues in the hope that readers of this essay will be interested enough to go to the individual case studies for their more detailed analyses. We very much hope that what we have said here has been sufficiently intriguing and thought provoking that they will feel compelled to do so.

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