



AFRICA REGIONAL DIALOGUE ON SEXUALITY AND GEOPOLITICS

October 5-6, 2010

SYNTHESIS OF PRESENTATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS¹

DAY ONE: OCTOBER 5, 2010

The first day of the *African Regional Dialogue on Sexuality and Geopolitics* opened with a warm welcome address from Adenike Esiet, Executive Director of Action Health Incorporated (AHI), which served as the Lagos venue for the dialogue. She noted that the Dialogue was sponsored by Sexuality Policy Watch, whose Co-chair, Sonia Corrêa, was in attendance. She summarized the Dialogue's objectives as including:

- To enhance conceptual clarity on issues of sexuality and the linkages between theory and practice;
- To map out and analyse sexual citizenship in Africa, including eroticism and pleasure;
- To examine linkages between governance, underdevelopment, and sexual and reproductive rights;
- To increase visibility and enlarge the space for the voices of sexual minorities; and
- To disseminate results of the Dialogue widely – both within the region and beyond it.

The Dialogue brought together participants whose complex backgrounds and diverse orientations helped enrich it.

Session one

This session was chaired by Adenike Esiet and contained a presentation by Asma'u Joda ("Activists strategizing to address religion and culture") and discussions of a paper written (but not presented) by Sylvia Tamale on "Theory and Practice". The discussants were Kavinya Makau and Saida Ali Mohammed.

In the session, the core issues of the Dialogue were again reiterated as being complex and multi-dimensional, especially as it provide a "a space and moment of reflection" where people could feel free to explore marginal issues even from a personal perspective. The

¹ Synthesis prepared by the Regional Task Force and the Action Health team

papers and discussions would form the basis for an interregional dialogue. The main issues raised or discussed by participants are identified below.

- Sexuality was noted to be still a taboo topic, which made it important for young people to be able to speak about sexuality and for civil society to integrate it in activism. The need was expressed for a collective vision of sexuality because any examination of the African reproductive health policies would reveal that sexuality is either not mentioned at all or treated merely as a medical issue. Sex and pleasure are not mentioned at all and this tendency is carried forward by policy makers. A break with this situation makes it necessary to engage with the state and the policy making community.
- There was call for a political theory of sexuality, which would explain the nature and operations of the State, policies and ideologies (which include religions) as these affect sexuality. Such a theory would have impacts on human wellbeing and livelihoods and should reaffirm the quality of sexual rights. It would be an opportunity to develop what was described in context as “a new vision of how activism is going”.
- Concerning the purpose of the Dialogue, the point was made although these discussions “would lead to the end of a meeting, it could be the beginning of something else at the political and practical level”.

On the issue of the “culture of silence” noted in Tamale’s paper, the point was made that, sexuality was actually not as silent in historical Africa as it is in the present day. The silence was seen as a recent thing. This intervention drew attention to aspects of sexuality that existed long before incursions of extreme and conservative influences.

At this point, the questions before the Dialogue became more nuanced. The idea that sexuality followed transitions in modernization was discussed and it led to contentions with global evolution of sexuality from a celebratory state in many cultures to the more stringent mode of its repression today. It was seen as important to identify the points at which the transitions occurred because a more global perspective may be more suitable for understanding local circumstances.

These issues were characterized as forming part of “the paradoxes of modernization”. The Dialogue saw sexuality as more complex than had been presented in much of the literature or media debates. The conversation turned to the predilection of modernization for discipline and control.

Still discussing Tamale’s emphasis on the plurality of African sexuality, some participants agreed on a need to understand the cultural meanings attached to the practice of female genital cutting and its inherent diversity. Myths that had circulated from South Africa that sex with infant or virgins immunized one to HIV were viewed as making influence research thinking in the formulation of questions and should, therefore, be challenged.



Positive aspects of sexuality (such as pleasure, eroticism and desire), which were missing from the African sexuality agenda in the 1990s, right up to the ICPD in Cairo, required to be placed on the agenda, especially in their intersection with the non-reproductive sexual rights. The Dialogue was enjoined to interrogate folkloric traditions, which containing many referents to sexuality but these are dismissed in what seemed like a prior commitment to demonizing or vilifying authentic African expressions.

Should sexuality be regarded as a foreign concept and treated as such? The participants ruled that out as undesirable Western theoretical perspectives that contain legal frames that already exist. To disregard them would be futile, as “we would be spending more resources to reinvent the wheel”. There is need to contextualize sexualities in terms of the intersections of labour, authority and performance in relation to sexuality because hierarchical constructions of sexuality are linked to backdrops of capitalism and patriarchy.

Reference was also made to research findings that “come with strings attached”. As one participant observed, “Anything can be put in your plate when you receive donor money and are not looking”.

ASMA’U JODA’s “Activists Strategizing to Address Religion and Culture” examined religion as a subset of culture. Focusing more on “the Abrahamic religions”, she queried the desexualized status of key figures in some religions, mentioning how one prominent Nigerian, a Senator, had exploited interpretations of Islamic provisions to violate federal law.

Session two

In the second session, which Caroline Koussiaman chaired, Simone Heradien and Dorathy Aken’Ova presented papers on “Sexual Citizenship” and “Sexual, Desire, Seduction, Eroticness and Pleasure”, respectively. For both, eroticism and desire are “difficult to compartmentalize” because both categories are essentially rebellious. Simone stressed that sexual citizenship could be realized or defined outside the scope or context of nationality. For Dorathy, some key questions are pertinent to the debate of desire:

- “When do we start desiring”? For her, repressive regimes tend to produce greater desire. She drew attention to situations where women expressed desire but experienced its criminalization if it occurred outside “normal” channels or social expectations.
- “Who can be desired?” This can also be shaped by socialization and media projections.
- “How are desires shaped from birth?” Images of Barbie, Tarzan, Johnny Bravo made the mental images clear but were examined for cultural content. For Dorathy, “Desire



is always regulated because power is involved. This is why same sex liaisons are challenging to patriarchal”, and this was a key point of her presentation.

- “Who has power to regulate?” Even though desire cannot be checked, the responsibility is often placed on the woman. Attempts are made to regulate the other person’s sexuality.
- “Desire aids”. Toys and aids are everywhere. Targeted State attacks against her organization in its ability to provide sex enhancers and aids reflected dread of the agency that it had and its capacity to use its science and rights-based perspective to influence things and engender change.
- “How regulated are existing services”? Structures should be accountable. There are challenges in relationships and environment, quite apart from changes in her body.

The discussion focussed on pleasure, which was as the end product of desire. It is a complicated experience, with many social psychological elements. It is necessary to deconstruct what sex is all about because its assumptions are frequently wrong. There was profound misunderstanding of the body, especially women’s, by people, including women themselves.

Key questions raised included how to define the concept of sexual citizenship and what issues were raised by it. How do people strategize around laws which do not permit them to live as they would like to live, or love? On the power of the media, how has it helped (present issues to those not physically present at events) or hurt (antigay march, homophobic portrayals).

Panelists in this session were spoke of the political character of sexuality and the need to have conversations around it with multiple communities. The discussion highlighted disparities between standards and expectations imposed on sexual minorities, even from within (“coming out”). Heterosexual persons are not required to “come out”.

Discussants noted that, in Africa, “the term homophobic” may not apply since it embodies opposition to anything outside the normal realm. While South Africa recognizes the legality of civil unions, same sex marriages are not accorded similar assent. In the main, participants agreed, in the words of one contributor, that “Sexual orientation is just a minuscule component of who you are, not the whole part or everything”.

Although media portrayals and coverage could be harmful to sexual minorities, they sometimes had positive value. The responsibility and mandate is to speed up activism towards the protection of the rights of all irrespective of their sexual orientation, gender identity and lifestyles.

It was, however, recognized that the media cannot induce hate or violence. Here should not be a call for a violation of the freedom of expression, which is just as fundamental.



Moreover, the standards of consent should apply wherever vulnerable populations are concerned. Hence, same sex relations with a child ought not to be permissible.

DAY TWO: OCTOBER 6, 2010

Session three

In Session 3, chaired by Dalia Abd El-Hameed Ali, Sybille Ngo Nyeck presented “Stretching the Margins and Bargaining among Imperfect Partners: A Paradoxical Approach to Sexual Rights Advocacy in Africa”. It was a combined a preliminary theory of the state, steeped in the history of international recognition, with an empirical study of the perceptions of an unstated segment of respondents culled from six African countries (Malawi, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe). The paper framed questions around problems and solutions in term of marginalities; reflected on the challenges and opportunities of government in Africa, and how these shape socio-political wellbeing and engagement.

The paper focused on sexual rights advocacy adaptable to other groups for conceptual and strategic challenges. Why do sexual rights remain peripheral in Africa? It defined marginal issues, such as sexual rights, as in terms of relative position [or lower rank] of objects or issues in the scale of priorities. African states were regarded as spatial entities although the significance of the Diaspora for remittances and the influence it exerts on policy directions and electoral outcomes makes it simultaneously trans-spatial.

The model of a single Africa is said to have failed although that tendency is returning or has returned through greater regional integration and cooperation. The paper urged participants to distinguish between practical solutions and optimal solutions although that led to a stated need for clarification between the terms.

Possible areas of attention include the need to cross tabulate the described perceptions across different sexual groups. Similarly, it was important to examine intrusions of the state at local levels because its operations are continuous. It is just as important to describe the role of other actors in this state-centred assessment as well as link marginality with power and state/resource control issues.

Other theoretical issues raised include whether utility (such as of freedom) declines as its platforms and modes of expressions increase? How can groups that are trusted at local levels be theorized as not necessarily being those that are most active in the provision of services? Does the African Union respond more to the priorities of donor communities or do its constituent states suffer from espousal failure? How can rights be grounded in an African reality and not left hanging in a in a vacuum? How do we avoid dependency, this might depend on what is to be attained and why.

Nike Esiet's "Adolescent Sexuality and the Challenge of Attaining Sexual Wellbeing" observed that, although there has been much support adolescent programming, the expected outcomes have not been achieved. The paper sought answers for this.

It affirmed adolescents and young people as a vulnerable group against the backdrop of Margaret Mead's argument that adolescence is not in itself turbulent. It became so as a result of the rise of modern industrial capitalism and the ways in which it made roles for this segment of the human population ambivalent. The paper threw light on the geopolitics of child marriage and thus anticipated the need for multiple strategic approaches to different parts of Nigeria and other countries where it occurs.

The presentation described the social conditions behind high unsafe abortions. These included a hostile legal and service climate that did not take account of the sexuality of young persons. This insight calls for a reassessment of high maternal mortality rates in Nigeria as these may be a reflection not of family or infrastructural challenges but of their impacts on adolescent wellbeing and livelihood.

The perception of young persons as risk takers might reflect their adaptation strategy to unstable and ambiguous requirements of everyday life in industrial society. The paper queried the ABC Model, characterized it as a "The Don'ts Framework" that is unrealistic and often not practical. It suggested in its place a Pleasure, or Sex-Positive Framework that recognizes Young people as having have desire and that can sometimes be strong enough to disrupt existing social relationships and norms. The framework argues that adolescents are sexual beings with rights to pleasure and their social recognition.

Codou Bop's "Life Cycle Approach to Sexuality and Reproduction" links aspirational explanations to the subject of sexuality. In describing the social construction of asexuality, she noted the inadequacy of views that failed to understand that menopause could occur later or earlier than 55. Participants noted that the sexuality of older menopausal women cannot be achieved with a campaign to change perceptions of the body, how it functions, and how eroticism and sexual pleasure are to be conceived.

The life cycle approach also deals with changing attitudes through the life course and can include intergenerational differences between mothers and daughters on the same questions of sexuality. The paper mention "two taboos" as militating against the appropriation of sexual rights by menopausal women. These were:

- The exercise of sexuality of parents viewed as taboo;
- The mother should not keep bearing children alongside their daughters: Culture, power, legacy and social structure issues, linked to inheritance

The latter taboo shows the need for increased women's education, which had been identified earlier as key to placing women in better positions to assert, extract and enjoy rights.

Participants asked the presenter to make more distinctions among what was sensual, sensuous, or sexual as there were important lived differences among these concepts. Also, the paper should interface between menopause, widowhood issues and allegations of witchcraft, at their connection with political economy, and the down age trend in which young children are becoming the new witches. The discussion on life cycle contradictions in which a person starts out as a woman and ends as a man requires clearer empirical and ontological clarification. It was agreed that the best place for sexuality education to start is at home and the best time, when the child asks the relevant question.

Session four

In Session 4, which had Sibongile Ndashe as chair, Bernice Heloo's "Sexuality, HIV and AIDS", addressed the question of women's vulnerable to HIV and, in some sense, was an analytical echo of Sylvia's argument that gender and sex cannot be separated. This was more notable in allusions to the Parity 10 Custom, which occurs often among pronatalist African societies with historical conditions of high infant and child mortality. The issues showed engagement with the state in terms of providing social security shows how action in political economy can have positive impacts on women's sexuality. Noted the need to place prevention in the hands of women, how prophylaxis should have a social and sexual aspect to be maintained. The paper found out that erotizing male and female condoms is a key to making condom use comfortable and pleasurable and that the female condom can be "sexed up".

Similarly, widowhood rites have been identified as forming part of strategies for distracting women from asserting rights over property. It is important to examine the contexts for the emergence child witchcraft as the new face of social dislocation.

Morolake Odetoyinbo's "Emerging Issues in HIV and AIDS" starts by noting the paradox constantly relegating a burning issue like HIV to the background of most discussion sessions. For her this pattern of placing HIV and AIDS presentations in meetings such as this Dialogue evinces the relative significance accorded its many difficult issues.

The paper addressed tough questions of links between pregnancy and HIV; the criminalization of HIV transmission; the role of male circumcision in curbing transmission; and the need to address and protect the rights of sexual minorities. It followed the lead of Nike Esiet's paper and queried the obsolescence of the ABC model on both gender and strategic grounds.

Nelisiwe Khuzwayo's "Rape Survivors and the Provision of HIV Post Exposure Prophylaxis" was presented against the background of recurrent rape in Kenya, especially in slum communities during elections. It examined issues of post exposure prophylaxis (PEP) and rape; the need for community-wide knowledge about PEP; removing barriers to and creating access to PEP; and best practices and Mechanisms that can be used to create better and efficient access to PEP.



Describing rape as affecting men and women, it noted that its prevalence among women has reached what it described “as epidemic proportions”. Suggested best practices included having all African countries to adopting PEP policies; providing comprehensive health care; adopting a multi disciplinary approach; and creating greater community awareness of PEP issues.

Barriers to action include lack of empowerment about personal rights, options and service availability; fear of family disorganization; fear of stigmatization.

Questions and comments included a query on microbicides with only 38% protection. Ridiculous. The female condom press conference had 1 journalist. The microbicides conference was packed. It depends on the funding and a geopolitical issue and a macroeconomic issue as well. Also, the criminalization of HIV transmission has to be placed in the overall criminal justice law, along with other forms of criminalization. It has opened up prospects for decriminalization.