

## **SPW African Dialogue on Sexuality and Geopolitics: Some Highlights**

*By Sonia Corrêa<sup>1</sup>*

On October 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>, a group of 18 researchers and activists from various countries in Africa, representing diverse communities engaged with sexual rights debates and sexuality more broadly, attended the SPW Dialogue on Sexuality and Geopolitics, hosted by Action Health, in Lagos, Nigeria. I have written the notes that follow right after the meeting. They are therefore “fresh” but also incomplete. Therefore, they must be read against the background provided by the detailed synthesis prepared by the AHI team (<http://www.sxpolitics.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/synthesis-of-presentations-and-discussions.pdf>). I must also underline that they are situated observations of the rich debates that have taken place in Lagos. Being an outsider, I may have emphasize aspects or else let escape dimensions that are considered much more relevant by those experiencing the daily challenges of articulating sexuality and politics in the African continents.

After introductions and clarifications about the framing of the overall project and the connections between the African conversation and previous dialogues, substantive discussions took off, triggered by the presentation of Sylvia Tamale’s paper – *Theorizing and researching sexualities in Africa*.

Although Sylvia unfortunately could not be present, two young Kenyan activists, Kavinya Makau and Saida Ali Mohamed, synthesized her ideas. They started by emphasizing that in the author’s view African sexuality research must be framed in articulation with gender analysis and that the plurality of African sexualities must be systematically recognized. They also highlighted Tamale’s analysis of colonial and post-colonial discourses to hypersexualize African women’s bodies as well as of the “silences on sex” that pervade African cultures. Saida and Kavinya also mentioned difficult questions examined by Tamale, such as the potentiality and limits of Western theories of sexuality to capture the diversity of African experiences and the problems deriving from donor driven research agendas and aspects relating to ethical standards in sexuality research, including issues concerning devolution and commitment to the expectations and needs of groups involved.

A second topic addressed in the same session was the intersection of religion and sexuality, which was examined by Asma’u Joda from Nigeria. Asma’u spoke both from her personal experience as a Muslim woman and as an activist engaged with the transformation of laws and religious norms affecting women and girls. Her first observation was that

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in Africa culture and religion cannot be dissociated. She also reminded us that, although differentiations can be made between Christianity and Islam, commonalities are found across all the Abrahamic religions in relation to suspicion of the body, the control of women's sexuality and a tendency to de-sexualize the lives of prophets. She insisted on the strategic relevance for feminists to engage with the re-interpretation of Koranic norms, because in Africa and elsewhere it is not sufficient to resort to secular law to redress abuse and injustice. Joda also called attention to the persistent problem of child marriage, particularly in Islamic communities, and the contradictions they imply in terms of legal parameters for age of sexual consent.

Both presentations inspired questions and reflections. A number of participants commented on Tamale's propositions in respect to the limits of Western sexual thinking. Others underlined the importance of adopting an intersectionality approach to research on sexuality in Africa, as it is not possible to understand trends currently at play without taking into account class, race, religion, and patriarchal norms. Various persons questioned if "silence" is, in fact, the best way to describe the way in which sexuality is addressed by Africans because, even if it is true that often the verbalization of sexual matters is rare, other languages exist and are used to communicate and express sexual codes, norms and even desire. Another discussion triggered by the paper concerns the tendency observed in the region to interpret sexual rights as defined in the Beijing Women's Conference Platform in ways that exclude notions of agency and pleasure. This line of debate also connected to a rich discussion on female genital mutilation/cutting, both in terms of the terminology, the lived experiences of women who have undergone the procedure and the limits of criminal law as a tool to eradicate the practice.

Sexual desire and pleasure in fact became the first subject addressed in the second session of the Dialogue. Dorothy Aken'ova presented a paper from INCREASE, Nigeria, emphasizing how the fluidity and rebellious nature of desire and pleasure require that these experiences not be compartmentalized. Dorothy also underlined the complex intersections between repression, on the hand, and the channels through which desire and pleasure travel, on the other, despite existing norms. This complexity, in her view, points toward the inefficiency and injustice of laws that criminalize sexual conduct.

Dorothy also examined the wide gamut of factors that determine desire: who can desire? What bodies are desirable? She recalls that this is not simply the result of inner drives of individuals but rather the constructed outcome of socialization, cultural norms and market forces. In her view, the same applies to meanings of and strategies to achieve pleasure, as exemplified by sex toys or sexual enhancers that, though marketed everywhere, are considered taboo and sinful when used by women.

Finally she interrogated who can regulate desire to conclude that it is not possible to think of desire and pleasure without considering power in its multiple manifestations (gender, economic, political, religious). Dorothy ended her intervention by sharing the story of a very young girl who came to counseling and told about her desire for and relationship



with an adult woman. She requested the audience to consider this experience as a reality that must be recognized and addressed, which, among other aspects, reveals the complexities implied in age of consent norms.

A panel discussion followed that aimed at mapping sexual citizenship, sexual orientation and gender identity issues on the continent. Contributions to the topic were made by Dorothy herself, Simone Heradien, from Gender Dynamics in South Africa, Sybile Ngo Nyeck, a political science PHD candidate at UCLA Los Angeles and Codou Bop from Greffels in Senegal. Each panelist examined the landscape through a specific angle.

Simone shared with the group her personal trajectory as a transgender person in the struggle for citizenship. Dorothy briefly mapped the various conflicts and controversies arising in the region in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity issues, identifying actors and factors behind these "sex wars", in particular the role played by conservative religious institutions and the media. Codou Bop examined recent Senegalese cases of moral panic and police intervention triggered by homosexuality. She reminded listeners that these situations cannot be exclusively attributed to the effects of laws against immoral acts, but rather must be analyzed having in mind other key elements, including the scandal created by the media and the gains that politicians may have from publicly condemning homosexuality.

Sybile raised a series of conceptual provocations. She asked if state homophobia is the best term to name what is being witnessed in Africa today, recalling that South Africa has quite advanced legislation on sexual orientation and gender identity that does not prevent or contain violence against Black lesbians. She also interrogated the notion of "coming out", asking why heterosexual people are not called to also come out about the aspects of their identities and desires that fall outside prevailing norms. She ended by tabling difficult questions in respect to political strategies aimed at expanding sexual citizenship in Africa and reducing levels of violence and abuse. She asked: Can I demand that the state fully recognize my sexual identity when I am not able to tell my grandmother I am a lesbian? Can the problems and challenges we are facing on the continent be addressed and redressed through the claiming of abstract rights, such as constitutional premises or international norms?

A rich debate followed. The group briefly explored the dilemmas posed by the case shared by Dorothy. Various participants recalled that sexual relations between adults and children, independently of their sexual orientation, always imply power differentials. Although it was not possible to delve deeper into the subject, the discussion made clear that age of sexual consent is one of the most complex dimensions of sexual rights broadly speaking.

In relation to the sexual citizenship landscape, discussions turned around the urgent need to expand and deepen social support to sexual citizenship (including across sexual orientation and gender identity). The complexities and trade-offs of political visibility vs. invisibility of diverse sexual identities were also discussed. And much attention was devoted to the role played by the media as one key domain of the public sphere. Various participants underlined that though the media may fuel hatred



and violence on how issues are portrayed, freedom of expression is also needed for the voices of those whose sexuality does not conform to dominant norms to be heard.

The second day of the dialogue also had two sessions. In the first Sybile presented her paper – Margins and Bargaining among Imperfect Partners – that expands and deepens the ideas she had previously raised in the panel discussions. The paper theorizes about the construction of post –colonial states in Africa, emphasizing the idea of “states in the making”. It also analyzes empirical data emerging from research on perceptions of priority policy issues in six countries – Malawi, Nigeria, Uganda, Senegal, South Africa and Zimbabwe – where issues of sexual orientation and gender identity are prominent and have provoked hate speech and state and societal violence. The data show that in all these countries the majority of people consider poverty, state protection and education as priority policy issues and do not value other dimensions of rights such as freedom (in its various expressions).

Sybile therefore asks if a strategy emphasizing civil and political rights to protect freedom and privacy is the best to enlarge the support for sexual rights (and issues relating to sexual orientation and gender identity). She also interrogates the efficiency and effects of state centered strategies to achieve these rights, suggesting that more horizontal and ground-level work is needed if LGBT constituencies want states to respond to their demands positively, which means re-crafting the agenda in economic and social terms. She asked about what would be the most strategic point of entry to advance sexual rights. Is the African Union a good choice? Does the Union respond better to state members and civil society or to donor countries? On the other hand, should not LGBT groups also engage with trusted local non -state actors? She also revisited the question about the rights discourse, asking how can rights be embedded in African daily realities and not remain simply floating in the air.

These ideas allowed the group to examine in greater depth the complexities of engaging with states and of state – society configurations. Questions were raised about state actors that are openly opposed to sexual rights, as well as about possibilities for identifying other non-state actors that can be supportive of sexual citizenship. The session also gave an opportunity to Sibongile Ndashe, from Interights, to share her experiences of sexual rights advocacy at the level of the African Union and the African Commission for People’s and Human Rights. One key aspect raised with respect to these particular arenas is that, differently from what takes place at UN level or in the Inter- American System, no African state is yet ready to partner with civil society to advance positive normative propositions in the domain of sexual citizenship. This means that much more investment is still required at country level to make that happen.

The second series of sessions examined sexuality across the life cycle. Nike Esiet, from Action Health in Nigeria, presented her paper on “Adolescent Sexuality and the Challenge to Attain Sexual Well Being”, while Codou Bop spoke more directly about the “Life Cycle Approach to Sexuality and Reproduction,” looking into the experience of Senegalese women over fifty.

Esiet contrasted the dominant notion of adolescents as turbulent to emphasize the fact that they are undergoing transformations but also



experiencing a context of vulnerabilities. She threw additional light onto the politics of child marriage in Nigeria, provided data about the high incidence of unsafe abortions among teen-agers and talked about insecurities also experienced by young males. Though much programming and funding has been devoted to adolescent sexuality in Africa, in her view the results remain poor because program designers do not dialogue with young people or tailor policies to their aspirations and needs. The most blatant example is the ABC policy for HIV prevention, which Esiet portrays as the DON'T framework and that, in her view, is totally unrealistic in face of the lived realities and aspirations of young people in Africa today.

She therefore proposes that models currently being used should be reframed in terms of a Sex –Positive Framework that recognizes that young people have sexual desires, exercise sexuality even when prohibited and sometimes can be quite strong in their demands and disruption of existing norms. She ended her presentation by sharing excerpts from a novel by a Ghanaian author in which a very young girl expresses her desires for her uncle and her expectation that through seduction she will marginalize her aunt, his wife, and be regaled with gifts.

The paper by Codou looked closely at the other point in the life cycle where female sexuality is supposed to disappear--because of menopause but also because of cultural norms, such as the one prescribing that when her daughter becomes pregnant a woman should never be pregnant again because this would be shameful. She reminded us that in contexts where age of marriage is very low it might happen that a woman in her late 30's may be compelled to become asexual long before menopause. Codou observes that when women reach that stage, they gain power and social privilege, as if an exchange must be made between sexuality and power. She also observes that in exercising their new power as asexual women quite often these older women are the gatekeepers of traditional norms that hamper younger women's autonomy.

In rural villages and poor urban settings there are also spatial constraints for older women to experience sexuality because there is no privacy. Therefore, although recent research shows that urban, highly educated Senegalese women still engage in sexual relations – including by searching for partners through the Internet – for the majority of women to have sex with a man after a certain age is still taboo. Codou also underlined the health risks implied in these cultural norms. Since older women do not have sex anymore, they are not screened by midwives and doctors and may develop diseases such as cervical cancer, which otherwise could be easily prevented.

Reactions included the call for a clearer distinction between desire, erotic feelings, fantasies, and bodily sensations during sexual intercourse, as an important element to more fully understand adolescents' sexual experience. Questions were also raised with respect to the phenomenon of witchcraft often associated with the older, asexual women whose experience Codou analyzed. Last but not least, the excerpt shared by Nike brought back to the table discussion of the difficult issue of age of



consent, suggesting that this is a topic requiring further research and conceptualization.

The fourth session of the dialogue was devoted to Sexuality and HIV/Aids in Africa. It encompassed an overview paper by Bernice Hello, from Ghana, a short paper by Morolake Odetoyimbo, from Nigeria, and another presentation on the experience of post-exposure ARV prophylaxis in the case of rape survivors, by Nelisiwe Khuzwayo.

Bernice's presentation on factors underlying the high incidence of HIV-AIDS among African women reiterated Sylvia Tamale's initial call for sexuality and gender always to be addressed in articulation with one another. Bernice examined causes that explain the vulnerability of African women to HIV, which range from pro-natalist policies in state institutions and societies that even today preclude women from accessing contraceptive methods, to sexual violence or rules and preferences concerning sexual practices.

She also mapped the limitations and potentialities of prevention methods currently available, to demonstrate that all of them present limitations and that their introduction and dissemination must take into account context and local sexual meanings. Such contextual factors include the difficulties many African women experience in touching their genitals, which makes difficult the acceptance of female condoms, or even the widely recognized resistance of men to accepting the use of both male and female condoms. Bernice also explored aspects relating to logistics and cost, as well the high level of donor dependency in the domain of HIV prevention.

Morolake brought to the discussion the perspective of HIV positive women. She started by reminding the group that all too often HIV/AIDS is the last item to be discussed in meetings like the dialogue, when in fact the epidemic is today a main driver of policies that impact on sexuality. Moreover, she said, HIV positive people are usually the last speakers, their voices come after the experts, just to bring lived experiences to the debate. In her view this hierarchy must be systematically contested, because HIV positive people and particularly women can substantively contribute to these discussions. Her paper addressed issues concerning vertical transmission and male circumcision. She also made a strong appeal against criminalization of HIV transmission and for the HIV-AIDS policy agenda to more fully incorporate the protection of the rights of sexual minorities.

Nelisiwe presented the findings of her study of rape survivors living in a slum area and their experience of post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP). The study concludes that although PEP is included in the response to HIV and can be very effective, many constraints and obstacles still exist that hamper the access of rape survivors to adequate services. In the community studied, rape affects both males and females, but the number of women victims is incomparably higher. Obstacles and barriers identified encompass difficulties in integrating police reporting and health responses, the limitations of the health system itself and the absence of a multidisciplinary approach to PEP, as very often post-exposure interventions are limited to a medicalized response.

But social, cultural and gender dimensions must also be taken into account for PEP to become really effective. For instance, the lack of



women's empowerment and absence of understanding of their personal rights to safety and bodily integrity mean that not all rapes are reported. When rape occurs within the family, it remains hidden because there is fear that if disclosed it will break ties and eventually provoke economic insecurity. Strong fears of stigmatization and recurrence of the violence also inhibit reporting, because women who report being raped become known. It is therefore not enough to have the technology in hand and establish services, because many other interventions regarding sexuality and its meaning in specific communities must be consistently addressed in order to gradually reduce the relative weight of rape as a main vector of HIV transmission in South Africa. Discussions that followed turned around the macro politics of HIV prevention, the problems and potentialities of female condoms and issues concerning criminalization.

The last session of was dedicated to revisiting the various issues, dilemmas and challenges put on the table and examined during the dialogue, to identify gaps and issues deserving further thinking and research, and to talk briefly about next steps and future strategies. A full and complete report of the meeting, being prepared by Oko Obomo from the University of Ibadan, will be ready by early November.