

# Editorial: Researching Sexuality with Young Women: Southern Africa

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Every woman is a chameleon; she changes her colour to suit the situation; she adjusts and adapts to face the pressing challenges. She wears a different face but the essence of who she is remains the same. That's how we have to be as young feminists fighting on multiple fronts and living and working in the world ([www.jassblog.org/2010/11/i-am-chameleon-young-feminist-in.htm](http://www.jassblog.org/2010/11/i-am-chameleon-young-feminist-in.htm))

The quotation comes from a publically accessible blog created within JASS Southern Africa (Just Associates, an international community of popular educators, activists and writers dedicated to feminist political engagement at a number of levels); the blog features inputs from a global range of young women activists. It's hard to tell exactly, but the words seem to come from Rudo Chigudu (calling herself a proud Vagina Warrior), a fiercely passionate activist telling the blogger about YOWLI, the Young Women's Leadership Initiative in Zimbabwe. Filtered through the blogger's words, we learn that YOWLI emerged out of conversations among young women in which their analysis of the experiences in their lives came to foreground the politics of sexuality as core to the ways in which they were fighting for new versions of freedom – not nationalist, not “post-democratic”, and not “conditional”.

In 2012, Rudo Chigudu kicked off a discussion at a session on sexuality in a three day Open Forum organized by OSISA by moving away from the people with whom she was seated on a panel, and transforming the front of the large lecture hall into a stage. Dancing herself flat onto the ground, she performed (part Shona, part English) the narrative of a Zimbabwean woman, fighting for her right to sexual pleasure, to the control of her own reproductive choices and to the fullness of her own life in a way which first alarmed – and then delighted – the audience. The alarm was generated by Chigudu's invocation

of what it might mean to be sexually hurt or frightened; up until that point, the Forum discussions had been fascinating but decidedly focused on the intellectual. The delight was recognition of embodiment as a zone through which to illuminate the influence of embattled political and economic forces. Rudo Chigudu's way of asking the room (some 500 people, men and women, from diverse regions and organizational locations) to rethink what it means to discuss sexuality insisted on the poetic presence of her body – noisy, unpredictable, disruptive, volatile, full of movement and language, and full of the capacity for pleasure.

Dominant writing about the politics of gender and sexuality for young women in Southern Africa rarely foregrounds the energy, courage, and innovation of Rudo Chigudu's performance that day. Young women are overwhelmingly positioned as pinioned between the demands of diverse patriarchies and those of neo-capitalist economies thriving on the commodification of femininities which police women's bodies while simultaneously suggesting that (under 'new' nationalisms) the same women have unprecedented access to education, political authority, and professional opportunity (Lewis, 2009). As Bennett explores in her article in this issue, the category of "young women" has been constructed over the past decade of research on HIV-transmission, gender-based violence, and reproductive health. She is, in South Africa, explicitly racialized as black, and across Southern Africa as poor and vulnerable. Many NGOs have sympathized with the notion that the fight for access to reproductive rights or for advocacy which supports sexual healthcare must prioritize young women. Sometimes, this is linked to demographic profiles; across Southern Africa, people under the age of 24 comprise 60% of the regional population (Williams, 2012). Sometimes, the focus on "young women" is generated by savvy local, often feminist, analyses of policy moves or popular debates (such as those driven by the One-in-Nine Project in South Africa, or Katswe Sistahood in Zimbabwe). Very occasionally, activism is galvanized by those willing to name themselves, for political reasons, as "young women" (such as the community theatre collective, the Mothertongue Project, or the Ignition Project in Cape Town).

And of course, "young women" form one of the core constituencies to which *Feminist Africa* directs its writing. An academic journal born of the desire to support and nourish the vibrant feminist intellectual community within universities, research centres, NGOs and activism, *Feminist Africa*

has consistently interpreted higher education, and its associated spheres of research, teaching and scholarship, as a zone in which activism alert to the imperatives of decolonization should be part and parcel of daily work. Although only a very small proportion of any Southern African country's girls register within higher education institutions, these young women represent the hopes of many more. In themselves, they constitute a very diverse constituency, all of whom are powerfully linked to sisters, cousins, friends, partners, families and communities far beyond the campus of a university, technikon, or training college. They and their families have usually struggled hard to afford the fees of a higher education, and all its attendant costs – transport, living expenses, communication. What they are offered in terms of education and professional training differs vastly, depending on the programmes with which they enlist, the institution's own mission and national context, and the resources available. But, as Teresa Barnes suggests, most higher educational institutions are actively hostile to feminist notions of what it may mean to strengthen women's independence, and simultaneously wary of the use of gender within socio-political education (Barnes, 2007).

A handful of universities in Southern Africa run academic courses or programmes which actually offer students the opportunity to study feminist approaches to gender and sexuality formally, and only three, all in South Africa, offer the option of doctoral level work in this terrain (the University of KwaZulu/Natal; the University of the Western Cape, and the University of Cape Town). The paucity of academic programmes for students is paralleled by the pressure for young women who are already working in higher education as writers, researchers, teachers and trainers to concentrate in the fields of science and technology, and to avoid research which explores the politics of gender (Mohlakoana, 2010). What this means is that despite the relative privilege of higher education, young people – men and women – registered as 'students' encounter many of the same expectations about masculinities, womanhood, sexuality, and power faced by those without access to higher education. These expectations include ideas about gender conformity, religious pressure around sexual morality, and very strong popular opposition to homosexuality. The cultures of higher education institutions may, in themselves, add particular rituals, norms, and expectations to the mix (see Hames, in this issue).

A number of socio-economic realities need consideration when taking the lives and experience of young Southern African women seriously. At the risk of

homogenization (clearly, given vast political diversity across Southern Africa, it is not altogether wise to conflate “Southern African” in this way), current constructions of gender – the meanings of “manhood” and “womanhood” – are currently in intensive contestation. The negotiation of “masculinities” and “womanhood” intersects with the dynamics of escalating poverty and unemployment, juxtaposed against the concerted efforts by the State to facilitate people’s access to new opportunities.

As is well-known, a second issue which colours all contemporary exploration of sexualities and reproduction in Southern Africa is the prevalence of HIV and the numbers of people dying of AIDS. The challenges of HIV and AIDS can be readily enumerated: the struggle to contain and prevent new transmissions, the politicized and fraught terrain of treatment, the economic implications of home-based care for the ill and dying, the challenge of loving and nurturing children (and others) left in the wake of death, the imminent collapse of certain hospital systems and the strain on all medical resources, the disappearance of teachers, nurses, labourers, fathers, politicians, singers, from their posts. It is also true that significant victories have been achieved: some excellent legislation on non-discrimination towards HIV positive people, vibrant (if occasionally infuriating) debate at governmental and NGO levels, and on-going work at every level of society to illuminate the severity of the epidemic as a threat to the very foundations of democracy. Those engaged as feminist activists and researchers have for the past decade been vigorously embedded into the work of addressing the challenges of living in a country in which issues of sexualities and gender are dominated by the realities of the HIV and AIDS epidemic.

There has been some success here, and it is now recognized in many circles that most South African women, especially young women and married women (categories which may overlap) do not have enough power over the negotiation of heterosexual sex to create conditions of “safety” for themselves and their partners. This is also especially true for poor women. There is also increasing recognition of the ways in which escalating poverty is transforming sexuality (heterosexualities and other performances of sexuality) into the terrain of transaction, where all players are vulnerable to commodification – who buys, and who sells, what are contextually defined, vulnerable to “market volatility”. “Masculinity” is bartered among and between bodies, and gets constructed as most powerful when most visibly heterosexual;

“femininity” – within bodies owning both penises and vaginas – purchases a vast range of resources: phone time, electricity, school fees, taxi-fares, jeans, status, groceries, networking opportunities...such transactions are not coded as sex work but as legitimate, expected, exchange within sexual (especially heterosexual) relationships. These dynamics present particular challenges to young men and women, placing them at the forefront of SRHR (sexual and reproductive health and rights) challenges.

These challenges encompass, of course, the vulnerability of young women to gender-based violence. It is recognized that confronting gender-based violence entails not only a solid set of legal instruments and an excellent system for their implementation, but simultaneously knowledge of women’s and girls’ rights *not* to be targeted as sexual prey. The corollary of this would be to say that SRHR work in Southern Africa demands a focus on women’s and girls’ confidence, authority, and capacity to negotiate relationships in terms of their own survival and safety.

Questions of reproductive health and rights are intertwined with all discourses on young women’s sexuality. Even in contexts such as South Africa, where access to information and contraception is fairly easily available, it remains an expectation that reproduction is a “woman’s business”, and negotiating the dynamic between health, pleasure, reproductive choice, and security is part of all sexually-active young women’s lives. As a political space, this has been undercut by questions around “safe sex” which pertain to the prevention of the transmission of HIV (except in debates about the termination of pregnancy), but just as new fundamentalist discourses have stressed the immorality of having sex outside marriage, so have they also deepened opposition to young women’s unquestioned access to contraception.

Between 2010 and 2011, the African Gender Institute hosted a project funded by the Ford Foundation on strengthening the SRHR leadership of young women based at five different SADC universities: the University of Zimbabwe, the University of Botswana, the University of the Witwatersrand, the University of Namibia, and the University of Cape Town. The project was based on previous work aimed at supporting African feminist writers, researchers and NGO activists in their understanding of the politics of sexuality and gender and in their deployment of different concepts, including that of SRHR, in their own work. We recognized the need to move into work directly engaging the young women who were so frequently the topics of discussion

about gender-based violence, the impact of economic stress on options for sexuality, and the meaning of reproductive rights in politically troubled contexts. Because so much of this research assumes that it is poor, rural, or working-class women who should be the focus of exploration, we deliberately chose to work with (not “on”) young women with largely lower-middle class backgrounds, on higher education campuses, and with very diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds.

This issue of *Feminist Africa* is a special edition which foregrounds the research created, with the young women, through the five different teams. Jill Bradbury and Peace Kiguwa, working with a team of young women, write about their own visual mapping of the University of the Witwatersrand as a way of re-seeing campus streets and surroundings in terms of sexual pleasure and sexual vulnerability. Sethunya Mosime, Poloko Ntshwarang, and Godisang Mookodi from the University of Botswana focused on the use of personal story-telling to generate dialogue about sexual conventions and the negotiation of gendered expectations for young women on campus, and off. Pieces by Tanja Bosch and Susan Holland-Muter, of the University of Cape Town, Lucy Edwards-Jauch from the University of Namibia, and by Naomi Wekwete and Charity Manyureke of the University of Zimbabwe add texture and diversity to the articles’ analysis of the work with young women on questions of gender-based violence and policy, the politics of space and sexuality, the meaning of HIV-prevention campaigns, and the politics of gender and sexual pleasure. In five teams, very interesting, cross-generational action research projects were developed, and the material presented in *Feminist Africa 17* is rich with potential for theory on what it means to take up SRHR work where young women’s lives are concerned.

The material generated through the project is embedded within a range of pieces which ask important questions about researching young women’s experiences of sexual and reproductive health and rights. The article by Mary Hames explores aspects of the work of the Gender Equity Unit at the University of the Western Cape, arguing that the Unit’s activist approach to fighting for the safety and dignity of young black lesbian, gay and transgendered people on campus constitutes a radical pedagogy, impossible in formal academic space. Rishita Nandigiri, of the Women’s Global Network on Reproductive Rights challenges the category of “young women” as homogenizing and unhelpful to feminist activism, and the complementary standpoint pieces of

Simukai Chigudu and Athenkosi Sophitshi, both “young” people suggest that the strongest route into the theorization of young Southern African men and women comes through their own self-representation.

In the *In Conversation* piece between Shereen Essof, director of JASS Southern Africa, and Jane Bennett of the African Gender Institute, Shereen Essof suggests that the question of security needs to be taken seriously – more seriously than it has ever been – by feminists working towards sexual rights in our contexts. Her analysis comes from a sense that the vocabulary of gender equality is too thin, in contemporary discourses around the ownership of women’s and girls’ bodies, to manage the threats against the right to choose one’s sexual partners, one’s own reproductive path, one’s own sources of sexual pleasure, and one’s right to accessible sexual and reproductive healthcare. While it may be the vocabulary of gender equality which has facilitated new forms of access to higher education for some young women, over the past fifteen years, this vocabulary –stripped of its feminist roots – cannot theorize sexuality as political. It cannot, thus, offer protection to young women fighting for their rights to the termination of pregnancy, to sexual pleasure and choice, for their humanity as people whose sexuality and genders cannot be deployed against them. Security may entail active networks of safe-houses, liaisons, mobilization, and living space but it also demands its own language. This issue of *Feminist Africa* hopes, through the conversations generated not only with Shereen Essof but among all the pieces, to contribute to the growth of such a language.

## References

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