

Travels in “fashionable” sexuality research: thoughts from home¹

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Introduction

Fatou Sow, one of the most renowned and prolific feminist researcher and writers within the continent, tells us of an occasion which took place almost exactly twenty years ago, at the celebration of CODESRIA’s twentieth Anniversary: “*Professor Samir Amin, reflecting on the role of the intelligentsia and ideology in the development crisis, was haphazardly denouncing the struggle for women’s liberation, cultural challenges, environmental concerns, and so on as fashionable strategies*” (Sow, 1997:31). At the time, Amin’s approach to the meaning of taking the study of gender seriously would probably have been shared by many of his colleagues, and his scorn was, as we know, robustly rejected by a very wide range of African-based feminist theoreticians and activists. *Engendering Social Sciences in Africa*, a collection of essays edited by Ayesha Imam, Amina Mama and Fatou Sow, published papers drawn from a diverse set of disciplines (economics, education, history, and others) through CODESRIA in 1997. The collection encapsulated part of the contemporary intellectual response to Amin’s wariness about the project of revolutionizing gender norms and remains, to my mind, one of the most important books within c20 theory on the potential of social sciences research.

It is probably the case that intellectual resistance to the notion of taking gender seriously as part and parcel of the design and creation of excellent research remains in some quarters of continental academic institutions. Whether such resistance would, however, now be expressed as a resistance to what is *fashionable* is doubtful. Different forms of marginalization have arisen (such as the frequent tokenization of the value of research which explores the dynamics of gender), and within feminist circles themselves, powerful debates on the ways in which “gender talk” has become co-opted as a facet

of neo-liberal government policy- making make for interesting reading. Fierce negotiations for credibility, influence, and value characterise all theoretical work worth its salt; within the c21, there is a very rich array of African-based intellectual engagements with the dynamics of gender, in diverse contexts and a vibrant (even occasionally ferocious) network of debates. I had not, however, heard the term *fashionable* used of this work for a long time.

Then, in May, 2012, I did hear it again. The Gender Institute, of CODESRIA, has been the home for high-level teaching on the relationship between gender and many fields of interest (the media, climate change, development, and so on) for over a decade. In 2012, under the directorship of Sylvia Tamale, the Gender Institute sought to tackle the question of researching African sexualities. Applications to participate in the Institute came from a very diverse set of disciplinary and contextual backgrounds, and those selected included researchers working in sociology, religious studies, development, history, geographical sciences, critical literary studies, and public health. Both both men and women, they came from universities across the continent, and were all committed intellectuals and teachers. The focus of the Institute generated immediate debate, as early as the first day of the programme. Several participants suggested that the question of “African Sexualities” as a route into excellent research and theory-building was “*very dubious*”, “*pandering to what is seen as fashionable*,” and “*only of interest in the West; we have more serious things to talk about.*”

Given that the Gender Institute, like other CODESRIA teaching programmes, welcomes controversial and direct input from participants and teachers alike, these perspectives proved simply a useful way of initiating discussion. By the end of the programme, evaluations suggested that none of the participants any longer doubted the value of taking the politics of sexuality seriously within social and humanities sciences. However, the similarity between the 1990’s rejection of the idea that the politics of gender should be taken seriously by African intellectual work and the participants’ vocabulary of resistance to discussion of sexualities (“*fashionable*,” “*Western*,” “*not serious*”) was interesting.

This article seeks to offer a contribution to discussions about intellectual work on sexualities in African contexts as “*Western*” and largely unimportant to the paradigms we need to strengthen social science and humanities in African higher education and research institutions. The paper is organized

into three sections, through which I develop an argument about the need to be wary of the simplistic deployment of an “African”/“Western” binary, while simultaneously asking for a rich and intellectually resilient continentally-driven set of discourses concerning sexualities research. The first section asks questions about the temptation to homogenize “the West”, and the second offers a very brief review of dominant work on gender and sexualities within contemporary African research contexts. The third section introduces ideas about the need to ground our theory on gender and sexualities through a range of frameworks, but more powerfully through current and on-going research activism. This section draws on a particular research project, generated in part through the African Gender Institute, which worked with movement-building, sexuality and gender for young women in higher education in the Southern African region. The conclusion suggests that current economic and political contexts demand that we move beyond name-calling around research-foci (“*fashionable*”, “Western”) and open up research spaces to work which authentically engages with men and women’s socio-political realities.

Sexualities research “*in the West*”?

Globally, over the past thirty years, research focused on questions to which an understanding of sexualities is core has grown enormously, and has been located in several disciplinary areas: demography, health, sociology, and cultural studies. There are leading international journals, grounded in very different approaches, ranging from the renowned *British Journal of Medicine* (a google search of the journal’s contents over the past 20 years using the term *sexuality* comes up with 1034 hits) to *GLQ*, which regularly publish research on the politics, cultures, and dynamics of sexualities. *Culture, Health and Society* and *Sexualities*, in particular, are well known for their editorial support of research which recognizes the importance of medically-grounded work (such as the need to prevent the transmission of HIV between men having sex with other men) but which insist on sexualities research as always engaged with the micropolitics of local, stubborn, and complex contexts in which the possibilities of ready categorization or straightforward generalization are rare. These journals’ work has insisted, too, that while the urgencies of the HIV pandemic continue to deserve the attention of researchers, sexualities research cannot be imagined solely in terms of questions of viral transmission, “vulnerability”, and “risk”. The range of topics catalysed by an interest in

sexualities and their constellation into fields of allied enquiry is directed by political questions of epistemology. Within medical research, of course, research around sexualities may readily deploy concepts of dysfunction, a-typicality, and illness; within postmodern cultural studies, communities of researchers accept ideas about race, intersectionality, margin, or/and economy as critical points of entry into a new question or concern.

The roots of contemporary research and theory on sexualities within Europe, the United State of America are multiple and tangled. While a predictable chasm exists between research on sexual health generated from within the medical sciences and research on meaning of sexualities within political economies and cultural dynamics, the contemporary work of leading researchers (such as Roz Petchesky, Richard Parker, Sonia Correa, Carole Vance, Gary Dowsett, Peter Aggleton, and Diana di Mauro) is informed by public health, economics, political studies, and history. It would probably be safe to say that the influence of Foucault on understanding the interactions between sexualities, language, and power undergirds most canonical theory here. It is also safe to suggest that there are multiple tensions between feminist work (largely rooted in the recognition of reproduction, and the vulnerability to privatised violence, as critical political zones), queer theory (largely driven by the challenge to heteronormative approaches to identity, health, and epistemology), and the work of post-colonial writers (such as Jacqui Alexander, Anne McClintock, and Paul Gilroy) who read the project of colonialisms – and neo-colonialisms – as inherently both sexualized and gendered.

One body of “*Western*” writing on the politics of sexualities, often overlooked, in the homogenization of “the West”, is the extraordinary work done, since the 1970s, by poets, novelists, and theorists who worked from what came to be termed an “intersectional” paradigm (the term was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw). All of these writers identified themselves as African-America, Latina, and/or “women of color,” and their epistemological approach to the creation of knowledge was deeply grounded in the recognition of how the state was organized through the deployment of race, class, and gender. Their analysis work was extraordinarily influential, as they suggested that the DNA of what it meant to experience humanity in the North rehearsed, remembered, and resisted the terms of injustice on which the state had been founded and through which it continued to sustain itself. Theorists here

include Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldua, Cherrie Moraga, Barbara Smith, Beth Ritchie, Barbara Christian and June Jordan, and no curriculum on political questions of sexuality in “the West” can be considered valuable without their voices.

A quite different, but equally serious, body of literature on sexualities is rooted within the (initially) historical work which came to underlie queer theory on the ways in which cultures of heteronormative language about desire and the body have erased the possibility of significantly revising the past. From Jeffrey Weeks’ analysis of the construction of the “invert” within c19 Britain to the work of Gilbert Herdt on what it may be possible to learn from colonial American records of indigenous people’s gender and sexuality categorizations and socio-political organization, the field of what has come to be instantiated as “queer studies” is full of debate. Some of the underlying theoretical insights of this work, such as the notion of sexuality as fluid, inhospitable to categorization, and as a zone targeted for institutional and state-level control, have travelled very widely.

In the first decade of the c21, a final (for this piece) area of “Western’ research needs to be mentioned. In 2010, the report from a global meeting on *“Repoliticizing sexual and reproductive health and rights”*, held in Langkawi, suggested that the broad agenda of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) is still something for which international, national and local actors in the sexual and reproductive health and rights movement have to fight. The programme emphasized the centrality of sexual and reproductive health to sustainable and equitable development processes, and defined “health” with a breadth which allowed researchers, policy advocates, and activists to link notions of rights to questions of sexual and reproductive health. The report is particularly interested with the ways in which macroeconomic frameworks have failed, by and large, to take on board the critical recognition that people’s economic potential is embedded within conditions productive of “the body”. Such conditions may entail questions of security and conflict and/or questions of access to housing or clean water; they simultaneously entail the operation of sexual and reproductive dynamics. While the report concludes with a range of innovative ideas concerning possible re-engagements with the basic ICPD agenda, it is undeniable that a thread of concern about the contemporary shape of access to sexual and reproductive rights, especially those of young women, runs through its pages.

Although the past two decades have seen (often in connection to the attempt to prevent HIV transmission) new discourses on the importance of understanding sexualities, and new medical opportunities (such as the HPV vaccine), the combination of global economic instability, war and conflict, the rise of fundamentalist notions of the human, and rapidly changing knowledge economies have impacted heavily on the possibility of securing global sexual and reproductive health and rights, especially for women and girls.

The ways in which ideas about sexual and reproductive rights flow from Northern-driven development discourses are complex. Nearly 20 years ago, at the ICPD conference through which the notion of sexuality as a right was initiated, support for the connection between taking sexuality seriously and designing policies on health was organized on the continent by Senegal, then in the leadership of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). The OAU's position that reproductive health and sexual health were critically conjoined placed it in alliance with Southern NGOs, such as DAWN, which argued for links to be made between the right for women to have control over their sexual/reproductive bodies and the possibility of economic development. There were also several African states which refused to link ideas about "rights" and "choice" to questions of sexuality, fearing that such ideas threatened religious guidelines on gender, sex, and marriage and fearing, too, that "Western" constructions of individualized rights were aimed at epistemological and material recolonization (Klugman, 2002). The language of the Platform eventually read, "The human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. Equal relationships between women and men in matters of sexual relations and reproduction, including full respect for the integrity of the person, require mutual respect, consent and shared responsibility for sexual behaviour and its consequences".

The vector through which most development research on questions of sexuality in African contexts has been driven since then is, of course, the twenty-year long battle against the transmission of HIV. Although many African delegations at the Beijing Conference on Women in 1995 articulated, through ferocious debate, the possibility of understanding sexualities as part and parcel of women's rights to equality, the epidemic overwhelmed all questions linking health, sexuality and policy for a decade afterwards. In the

North, due to the almost-erasure of heterosexual transmission of the virus, the connection between the language of rights and questions of sexualities circulated primarily around lesbian and gay rights or (increasingly) around questions of the right to the termination of pregnancy for heterosexual women. In sub-Saharan African contexts, however, development discourses constructed an unending flow of “people sexually at risk” for HIV transmission: sex workers, truck drivers, migrant workers, young and undereducated women, men-who-have-sex-with-men. Heterosexuality became a zone under intensive medical surveillance: pregnant women, in dozens of countries, served as the data-base for statistics on prevalence, and heterosexual activity was categorized fiercely through the vocabulary of “safety” and “risk.” In South Africa, a delayed response to the need to address the transmission of HIV and to address the question of treatment for HIV positive people meant that intensive NGO/civil society work had to turn towards a very particular conflict with the state. In most SADC contexts, public health discourses around “populations at risk” for the transmission of HIV came to include dangerously stereotypic notions about masculinity and femininity, such as the idea that “men” are “naturally irresponsible sexual partners” or that marriage was a zone “safe” from HIV transmission because it was young mobile men, sex workers, and young women involved in transactional sex who were the most vulnerable to infection. Much NGO and civil society work sought to tackle naïve readings of gender, poverty, and sexuality but in doing so, it has been argued that the politics of sexual and reproductive health and rights took a back seat to the debates around HIV transmission and treatment (Cornwall, A, Correa, S. and S. Jolly, 2008).

At the same time, there has been vigorous engagement with the need to realize sexual and reproductive rights across diverse spheres: new NGOs have been formed to spearhead educational and policy projects, legal reform continues around questions of the prevention of violence against women, and networks of activists and researchers have continued to insist on connection and strategic co-ordination across the sub-Saharan region (such as the work done by JASS²). Interest in several “constituencies” fuel this work: sex workers, lesbian women, men who are HIV-positive, women affected by gender-based violence, women with HIV and those who care for them (usually also women), and women fighting for reproductive choice and security.

It remains undeniable that – by and large – it is not the state which funds

this kind of work; a wide range of Northern foundations do so. Such funding ranges from the gigantic resources of the United States Government President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) initiative, on which hundreds of NGOs fighting against the transmission of HIV depend, to miniscule grants made under very difficult conditions to marginalized communities (such as those made to GenderDynamix, in Cape Town, which supports refugees from a dozen continental contexts, whose lives have been threatened due to their gender identity choice). Here, the meaning of "the West" becomes more painful than usual – and extremely tangled by threads which criss-cross around questions of power, location, individual and organizational work. It could be argued that the politics of sexualities have become live threads within civil society, research, and advocacy work within our contexts due only to the resources generated from the North.

Could it be the case that where such funding is threatened, NGOs tremble, academic research opportunities disappear, and "the fashionable" relinquishes its allure? Is it the case that our African feminist debates on the politics of sexuality are rooted simply in a different version of "the gravy train"?

To this question, the following section offers a resounding, "no." *To suggest "yes", I would argue, returns one only to one of the crudest (yet one of the most enduring) forms of intellectual racism alive: thinkers and activists, who are women, working in/with African contexts have no minds of their own.*

Contemporary writing on gender and sexualities within African contexts

Numerous writers attest to the vibrancy, complexity and visibility of sexuality as a zone of pleasure and social negotiation within the poetry and oral cultures with which they are familiar; in an article about masculinities within his own "Shona" family, in the 1960s, Chenjerai Shire writes that wives' evocative poetry to husbands on their desirability stressed the pleasure husbands were expected to give them, sexually (Shire, 1994). Despite this, mid c20 African intellectual work which takes sexuality seriously engages with it as a political force through which the most vicious of systemic brutalities can become part and parcel of social organization. Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, published in 1952, uses a psychoanalytic approach to heterosexual desire generated from within the crucible of French colonial epistemology, and argues that "the black man's" desire for "white" includes sexual fantasy, idealization, sexual longing

and a self-hatred that splits him from himself. His demand for a black self-consciousness (a consciousness) ripped away from Manichean notions of race and hierarchy includes faith that “love” itself may be possible: “*Today I believe in the possibility of love; that is why I endeavour to trace its perfections, its perversions*” (Fanon, 1952: 75). Nawal el Saadawi’s *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* (1960), a fictional account of what a “woman doctor” encountered among rural Egyptian villages stresses that heterosexuality for poor women constitutes a terrain of assault, choicelessness, and physical/psychological damage; here, heterosexual norms are shaped by specific patriarchal values about the value of “women’s” bodies, and no sense of sexuality as a zone of intimacy, relational excitement, or joy can be found in the book.

The truth of the matter is that it has sometimes been difficult to manage the politics of gender and sexualities together, especially where development-oriented discourses about “women’s empowerment” have dominated research. Within African feminist writing over the past two decades, there has however been a strong thread of research and writing which seeks to combine epistemological commitment to “undoing” patriarchal and colonial versions of gender with the recognition that sexualities comprise a critical terrain for theory and activism. Leading contemporary research voices here are Amina Mama, Charmaine Pereira, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, Kopano Ratele, Sylvia Tamale, Desiree Lewis, Elizabeth Khaxas, Patricia Mcfadden, Zanele Muholi, and Akosua Ampofo, although many others contribute (in both disciplinary and transdisciplinary work) to the discussions. The researchers named here do not share foci or approaches (Muholi, for example, researches as a visual artist, a photographer, and works mainly with black lesbians in South Africa; Ampofo, now the director of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Legon, Ghana, has a background in development studies but her research has taken on questions of reproductive choice, and of masculinities). But what a survey of their work will show is a passionate engagement with the activism of research, with the urgency of writing which tackles the politics of gender and sexualities within African contexts and with an eye attuned to the fact that researching these politics has often been done in the name of “culture”, the exotic and the sub-human. As Lewis begins her piece on “Representing African Sexualities”, “Although the American cartoon (she reproduces a cartoon of a “black man” gazing lustfully at a “white woman”) ...was produced in the nineteenth century, it features images that still haunt

our conceptual landscape, whether within or beyond Africa. The cartoon portrays recurring stereotypes of black bodies and sexuality: the image of the lewd black man; the pure white female body; the portrayal of the black/African body as grotesque, uncivilized and crudely sexual, even when formally dressed” (Lewis, 2011: 199). It is not only the image of the poor HIV-positive black woman, abused and abandoned, whose hegemony over the meaning of gendered-sexuality-in-Africa deserves deconstruction; it is also the case that a very long legacy of anthropological, epidemiological, and development-oriented research exists, rehearsing notions of gender as static, “traditionally” brutal, irrational and superstitious in matters of sexualities, and identically deployed across African contexts.

In the past few years, a small number of volumes edited by feminist writers, presenting research on the politics of gender and sexualities in African contexts have been published. Some of these volumes have roots in collectively generated research projects, such as “Mapping Sexualities,” convened by Amina Mama in 2004, and in workshops, African Feminist Forum space discussions, and special issues of journals. The books include two by Steyn and van Zyl, from South Africa, *Performing Queer* (2005) and *The Price and the Prize* (2009); *Re-thinking Sexualities in Africa* (edited by Signe Arnfred of the Nordic Africa Institute), *African Feminist Politics of Knowledge* (published in 2010, and edited by Akosua Ampofo and Signe Arnfred), Sylvia Tamale’s *African Sexualities: A Reader* was published by Pambazuka Press in 2011, and *Queer African Reader* edited by Sokari Ekine and Hakima Abbas has just been published. A collection of pieces of qualitative research methodologies and feminist sexualities research, *Jacketed Women*, co-edited by Jane Bennett and Charmaine Pereira, will be published in early 2013.

The collections all profile the possibilities of research which is unafraid to tackle questions of gender and sexualities outside the framework of HIV transmission and “traditional” rites: questions of who is having sex, with whom; questions of pleasure; questions on the impact of post-flag democratic change – or militarism – on sexualities; questions about masculinities; questions about sexual commodification; and about queer theory and experience. As research, the collections offer an enormous amount to those of us also working as writers, and especially to those of us who work as teachers and supervisors of young writers and researchers, whether as independent thinkers, in universities or in research-inclusive NGOs.

African Sexualities: A Reader opens with two chapters, both of which address the question of what it means to research the politics of sexualities and gender in African contexts, both with a sense of the colonial (and indeed occasionally current) gazes which configured African embodiment as simultaneously exotic and bestial and with a commitment to exploring the ethics and methodologies of contemporary work. Tamale writes, “a good sexuality research project does not view methodology as a mere appendage ... or a “way of carrying out an enquiry” (Tamale, 2011; 29) and argues that “researching and theorizing sexualities beyond the tired polemics of violence, disease and reproduction and exploring their layered complexities beyond heterosexual normativity and moral boundaries will lead to fresh conceptual insights and paradigm shifts” (Tamale, 2011: 30).

What this brief survey suggests is that *fashion* is not what is driving an interest in the politics of gender and sexualities in African contexts of research and writing. In the same years during which the collections have been put together (+/- 2004–2012), we have seen many debates within different countries concerning the independence of women, and the meaning of their sexual and reproductive rights. Within the constitutional reform process of Kenya, for example, debates on access to the termination of pregnancy were vocal and integral to voting politics; within the uprisings of Egypt and Tunisia, questions of women’s rights surfaced continually as indices for the meaning of the revolutions underway, and in many countries policy-making and religious discourses have drawn on homophobia to generate support for sitting presidents or aspirant political actors. At the same time, escalating economic challenges have placed heavy burdens on civil society organizing, making it even more difficult to sustain even basic service delivery in programmes targeting survivors of sexual violence or domestic abuse. Far from there being “extra” funding available from international or regional donors for work on gender and sexualities, the 2008 fiscal crisis impacted funding in this arena very heavily – many programmes have seen cutbacks, withdrawals, and enormous battles around the sustainability of projects providing support to sex workers, to MSM projects, to educational programmes, and to organizations supporting research on gender and sexualities. Despite this, research in the area is strengthening, and the reason for this must be acknowledged as the relevance of the issues to questions of economic resilience, democratic governance, and to the ability of those in the social sciences to work with integrity and applied common sense.

Bringing it home

In “Restore, reform, but do not transform: the gender politics of higher education in Africa,” Amina Mama argued a decade ago (African Journal of Higher Education, CODESRIA, 2003) that post-flag democracies’ investment in universities as critical sites of decolonization has long been replaced by the developmental notion that higher education is critical to a country’s economic growth and sustainability (Mama, 2003: 110-113). The latter notion opened up, within the circles of international development policy, a link between gender equality and higher education where gender equality referred almost exclusively to questions of access for women to universities – women as students, women as leaders, women within particular disciplinary zones (science, engineering and technology in particular), women as employees. Mama’s article explores something of the tension between this development-driven discourse and the activism of African-based feminist researchers, whose political analyses of intellectual communities highlighted the occlusion of research by “women” and – who simultaneously – neglected or misunderstood the dynamics of gender as a socio-economic force. Mama notes that policies of “reform”, which shifted the grounds on which some women could access university space through affirmative action policies or which insisted that men and women be “equally represented” on committees relied on neoliberal theories of democratic process, and would not deliver “transform(ation)”: “the signs are that if hegemonic arguments favouring technocratic market-driven notions of efficiency and financial diversification prevail, educational philosophies imbued with a sense of regional history and mission, including those espoused by feminist intellectuals, are likely to be mortgaged” (Mama, 2003: 122).

Such philosophies have their own legacies and trajectories, but can be glossed perhaps by a quotation from a piece by Charmaine Pereira in an early issue of *Feminist Africa*, themed as Intellectual Politics: “Between knowing and imagining – knowing what we know today is limited and imagining more expansive, creative possibilities – this is the space that we must continue to inhabit” (Pereira, 30; 2002).

A dense and contentious set of discussions reaching back to Amilcar Cabral and Leopold Senghor, and including Cheikh Anta Diop, Ngugi wa’ Thiongo, Archie Mafeje, and Ali Mazrui characterise the interdisciplinary and profoundly decolonialist project of shaping education in independent Africa. Pereira’s

voice resonates with these discussions (blind as they are all to the politics of gender), and locates the theoretical drive of her feminism within the debate on what it means to take seriously the project of knowledge creation. It is this debate that Mama fears will be “mortgaged” as the 21st century moves into consolidated forms of managerialist coercion within African university cultures.

In brief, to differing extents, contemporary SADC-based universities face a number of challenges: challenged economies, rising numbers of young people with a strong desire for class mobility through higher education, campus structures which are too small (in many ways) to accommodate these numbers, and the question of the “brain drain” which pulls researchers, teaching faculty and prospective students away from national university spaces towards international ones. At the same time, the gender parity of students admitted to universities has become more equitable, women are increasingly present in non-traditional areas of study (medical science, business, and the sciences more broadly), and women are more visible within higher echelons of university leadership. Women who are accepted into universities in the region as students are thus faced with complex double messages. On the one hand, their academic institutional cultures increasingly recognize their equality with men and their intellectual potential; on the other hand, their contexts include high levels of vulnerability to sexual violence, stereotypes of hypersexual femininity, and strong – usually conservative – expectations around their identities as future “girlfriends”, “wives”, and “mothers”. The territory they negotiate as gendered and sexual people is one fraught with opportunity, challenge, anxiety, and excitement, and it is one which constitutes much of the “informal curriculum” of any higher education institutional culture (Bennett and Reddy, 2008).

Presenting theoretical arguments about the critical importance of understanding the politics of gender and sexuality within African contexts through a review of dominant research voices, such as in the section above, is one way of opening up discussion about how it is possible to bring the politics of gender and sexuality from the “informal” university curriculum to the formal one. A different approach might want to explore students’ ideas, experiences, and activism not through a dichotomized description of their curricula (“informal/formal”), but by working with them as researchers in the terrain. This final section of the article presents aspects of a project, hosted

through the African Gender Institute between 2010 and 2011, which tried to do this. This project (co-ordinated by Susan Holland-Muter, at the AGI) described itself as “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.

Before moving onto discussion of this project³, a few comments on the use of the term “young women” are needed. Over the past decade, a consortium of influences within broad-based activist and advocacy work have drawn upon a category called “young women.” Donor emphases, dedicated transnational groups (such as the Young Africa Women’s Leadership Forum, sponsored by the US and SA governments), specific projects within NGOs (such as the young women’s project in the South African 1-in-9 Project), and organizations built by “young women themselves” (such as YOWLI in Zimbabwe) have adopted this category of “young women” in response to their convictions about the impact of patriarchal, neo-liberal, or fundamentalist forces. The actual work envisaged, and the identities and interests of the women involved, are diverse, and can be motivated as much by notions of “model citizenship” (the Young African Women’s Leadership Forum) as by ideas of revolutionary and direct feminist action against stigmatizing norms (1-in-9 Project). To my mind, the concept of “young women” risks patronage (matronage?), and can easily fall into liberal – even welfare-oriented – analyses of power; and, the term too quickly deploys age as though it were an automatically meaningful index of experience. Despite my theoretical queasiness, we cannot help however but note that the one place – full of “young women” – in which is near-impossible to find, within Southern Africa, organizational efforts (outside those initiated by religious groups) dedicated towards “young women’s leadership” is higher education. In a forthcoming article, I explore the deployment and use of “young women” both as a theoretical and an advocacy-oriented category, but in this article, the concentration accepts the need to take “young women” seriously in zones of higher education.

The AGI 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. University teams of faculty and student researchers were built through careful discussion, over time, and each one developed a research action project which undertook to raise consciousness, as “research”, about what young women were experiencing around questions or sexuality on their campuses, and to trace and theorize “action” initiated by each team which aimed to challenge and transform (if only for a day) the campus.

The question of reproductive security came to play a powerful role in the project. Although their country contexts differed, the young women involved worked with 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 teams, they developed fascinating action research projects in these areas, as the *Feminist Africa 17* pieces show. Within the team-discussions, and within the large workshops in which all project participants came together, certain topics emerged with regularity

To the surprise of many of the faculty-based researchers, the meaning of “sexual education”, mandated in many secondary school curricula, arose as a key zone of tension around what it was, and was not, possible (at first) to discuss openly. A generation of young women with access to globalized MTV-imagery, to education about “the biological body”, and (widely promoted) access to contraception was nonetheless often embedded in “sex education”’s repressive discourse about morality and conservative gender scripts, directly based on religious moralism. Tales were told about biology classrooms, where questions about access to contraception are treated as indices of girls’ “immorality”, where young women who knew what they would like to experience as sexually pleasurable self-organized as “secret clubs” to exchange information and experience, and where the heterosexual desire of young men was talked of as “naturally aggressive.” As Muhanguzi suggests of Ugandan “sex education” secondary school curricula, the interlock between Christian-based ideas about sexual morality and gender, and those offered within secondary education classrooms, targets young women; and, especially those who reach the top echelons of secondary school achievement – likely to access higher education – have been colonized by what one participant described as “*this stuff; this stuff which won’t leave my brain; no matter how much I read or talk, I still want to have sex with him and then I feel so so bad*” (Muhanguzi, 2005).

This theme led to our recognition that, across contexts, there was a need for sophisticated and practical information about reproductive health. The impact of HIV discourses on young women's understandings of sexual pleasure, sexual choice, and reproductive health, linked to the negativity about women's sexual desire voiced by the biology teacher or the religious studies one, has been – the participants agreed – to complicate access to fundamental information. Despite ideas about advances in SRHR access (through legislation or policy), participants discussed passionately their “initiation” stories about how they learned to “manage” their fertility, how they contained their fears and excitement about sexual encounters, how they struggled with finding ways to get and use condoms without “losing respect,” and how much they distrusted the Student Health Service, (sometimes) other young women, and their teachers when it came to reproductive health information. While information on “how to please him,” could be discovered through reading magazines, information on the effects of different contraceptive options was much harder to gather. And the question of access to abortion, in countries where it remains illegal and within South Africa, plunged participants into “taboo” zones of talk.

The growth of “virginity” discourses (the church and school emphasis on girls' virginity as sacred, reinforced – for some participants – by beliefs grounded within family norms and cultures) did nothing to alleviate the sense of ignorance for young women about their reproductive and sexual bodies. Participants spoke of negotiating “sexual knowledge creation” as a “*computer game: you are running, dodging, winning, losing, but you are always in the game, you have to keep thinking, keep planning*”. Discussion in one workshop about the need to negotiate for particular forms of sexual interaction (such as anal sex, oral sex, web-camera based sex) as a “choice” against the danger of conception suggested sophisticated sexual and reproductive planning; but at other moments, participants spoke with one another, in small groups, for hours about the management of periods, their experiences with contraceptives, and their own pregnancies and motherhood (only one participant was a mother, but a few spoke in a workshop about wanting to become pregnant and having been pregnant).

These topics all demand refocus on the “reproductive health and rights” areas of our gender and sexuality discourses. While these areas are, of course, deeply embedded into questions of sexuality (choice, identity, orientation,

behaviours, norms, knowledges), the “older” researchers (the faculty) in the project were sometimes taken aback by the levels of distress spoken of by the younger women in relation to reproductive health concerns. The politics of condom usage, the fear of “becoming sterile” if one masturbates, the stigmatization suffered by becoming pregnant when a teenager, and the need to negotiate for one’s own reproductive safety without making this a topic of conversation with a male partner, were among both the workshop and some of the “late-night discussions” within the project. What was dramatically clear was the disjunction between the young women participants’ academic confidence and their sense of impotence around the possibility of controlling their own bodies sexually. A equally clear disjunction was visible, despite the participants’ diversity, between their relative willingness to explore ideas of sexual pleasure and their reluctance (initially) to take active leadership within campus cultures around the promotion of ordinary (by now; the Beijing Conference was held in 1995) ideas about women’s rights to control their own fertility, sexual pleasure, and sexual experience.

Conclusion

This article was stimulated both by the dynamism and research of the work done within the AGI project, and later by the opportunity to work with the CODESRIA Gender institute in 2012. Its argument is simply, in the end, that it is important to have at one’s fingertips a general sense of what has actually been created “in the West” around questions of sexuality and how this both does, and does not, influence research in our own contexts. Much of what has been written in the past few years, especially by African feminist scholars on questions of gender and sexualities, is well aware of “Western” scholarship but rooted in the dominant political, economic, legal and cultural debates of African contexts and seeking cross-continental synergy. The importance of this synergy cannot be overstated; without it, we risk the attrition of our most vivacious, innovative, and self-assured young scholars.

Notes

1. This article is based on a currently unpublished paper written for the Gender Institute, CODESRIA, June 2012, and I have permission to draw from it here. I am also indebted to discussion and co-writing with Charmaine Pereira; see the introduction of *Jacketed Women: Researching the Politics of Gender and Sexuality in African Contexts* (edited by Bennett, J. and Pereira, C; UNUP and University of Cape Town Press, forthcoming)
2. JASS is the name of Just Associates, an international NGO with hubs in four regions. Its mission is to connect local women's activism to global policy debates. www.justassociates.org
3. Aspects of this project are differently presented by the researchers who participated, within *Feminist Africa* 17; and their viewpoints and wisdom, attuned to the specifics of their own institutional cultures, constitute a conversation with this article. It has been an honour to work with all of them, and the project co-developed is planned to continue in 2013.

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