

Profile: Women Crossing the Line: Exploring the politics of gender and sexuality at the University of Cape Town

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Introduction

This profile piece explores the University of Cape Town's (UCT) action research project, one of five such projects implemented in five university campuses in southern Africa, which aimed at building young women's leadership and social organization to confront sexual, raced and gendered inequalities within the university.

There is an enabling national gender legislative and policy framework in South Africa, with the national government promoting policies which facilitate young black women's access to education and other social and economic opportunities. This has increased access to tertiary education for young black women. However, gender relations on campuses continue to be negotiated within a context of economic and racial inequalities. Universities are sites in which the meanings of gendered identities are intensely contested. While the discourse of gender equality and human rights is alive and present on campus, these co-exist and are often contradicted by a university and more general national context which tolerates and normalizes high levels of gender based violence, and valorizes a hegemonic masculinity. This contestation contributes to (an important) instability around gendered and sexual norms, and opens the space for continued negotiations and engagement with the politics of citizenship and human rights.

While South African universities have undergone major transitions associated with the broad political changes in the country and while UCT has been associated with a long-established progressive tradition, the staff and student body remains mainly white and middle class (Sennett et al, 2003). Moreover, while the university in South Africa has been positioned as a site of struggle, old anti-apartheid narratives have been replaced by a discourse of

student activism less concerned with national politics but rather with micro issues such as financial exclusion. Within this context, organization around gender issues and political activism by women's groups has been muted.

"Women Crossing the Line" aimed to create public awareness and debate over 'the line' of convention, which controls women's autonomy and choice, particularly as young women face intensive challenges in universities. The project was conducted collaboratively between the university's African Gender Institute and Centre for Film and Media Studies.

Feminists and women's rights activists, LGBTI activists and activists within the HIV movement have provided the impetus for concentrating on sexuality as a site of research and activism. High levels of HIV, gender-based violence and increased organization around human rights and sexuality for women and LGBTI communities, has led to an increase in academic and activist work on gender and sexuality (Correa & Parker, 2004). In Africa, particularly in South Africa, Bennett and Reddy (2010) posit that the increased engagement in Africa on questions of gender and sexuality arises from the combination of policy and advocacy work around the prevention of HIV/AIDS, the inadequate attention to the ways in which sexuality, culture and identity hinder "policy uptake" (240) and a focus on sexual citizenship. Both internationally and in South Africa, sexuality has been most "easily" addressed and dealt with in the context and from the framework of health and human rights approaches, rather than pleasure and desire, or autonomy. Our project has attempted to focus on the politics of gender and sexuality in a way that moves beyond a narrow focus on HIV/AIDS prevention, with its calls for "responsible sex", and to surface and provide alternative voices to dominant discourses of young women's victimhood, and of being populations "at risk". "Women Crossing the Line" has sought instead to focus on an exploration of experiences of femininities, power and agency in order to surface the multifaceted experiences and issues of young women's sexuality on the university campus.

Methodology

The use of feminist action research methodology in our project was a deliberate attempt to de-centre the interpretive authority of the academic researchers and to create polyvocal texts through which the "researched" would present their own perspectives (Mendez & Wolf, 2007). New methods do not necessarily result in more 'valid' forms of feminist research, but certainly raise issues of voice and

reflexivity, and encourage a research ethic that involves creating and nurturing reciprocal relationships to create empowering forms of “knowledge”.

In this context, the collaborative nature of the group composition meant that students and lecturers were co-researchers, where attention was paid to power relations within the research team, while focusing on the promotion of young women’s agency and leadership, providing them the process and the space to analyze their experiences of campus life, identify the key problems experienced by young women students and to collectively define solutions or actions which attempted to change and/or address the contested meanings of gendered and sexual identities on the campus. The research team comprised two academic researchers, a research assistant and a group of five student researchers from a second year undergraduate gender course.

The first step comprised building a common political and analytical framework within the group through an exploration of our personal experiences and societal context in which women’s sexuality is constrained by patriarchal and heteronormative norms, interrogating how these have played themselves out differently in terms of race and class; and how through our subjectivities and positions we are engaged in a continual process of negotiation with societal norms and power relations – conforming or resisting the norms and power relations. One example of this which emerged in the discussions was the idea that young women students are often gender compliant at home and transgressive at the university, illustrating the process of how women negotiate gendered norms in the different spaces through which they move.

This resulted in the identification of a unifying theme, which underscored the approach and intention of the research project, namely *Women Crossing the Line*¹. The concept of “the line” makes reference to traditional social norms and values with regard to women’s sexuality; and “crossing the line” refers to the process of contestation – and of the need to highlight women’s resistance and subversion of patriarchal sexual and gendered norms.

Through a process of institutional mapping, the gendered, racialized and sexualized norms on campus were surfaced using a specific building used for the teaching of social sciences on campus, and housing several Social Sciences departments and research units, as a microcosm of the university’s institutional culture. Here the group surfaced the different ways in which women’s bodies are allowed to occupy this space – moving within discourses and practices which at the formal level promote a desexualization of bodies,

and promote a certain intellectual knowledge (in which the politics of the body and sexuality are largely absent), and yet which also provide the arena for (hetero)sexuality to be performed. Based on this reading of a key lecture/research space, the project attempted to create processes and spaces through which to analyze the meaning of sexualities, otherness and the public/private dichotomy; and to imagine and realize actions which could shift and/or address structural and embodied injustices.

There were four key elements in our campaign: Body art installations, posters, *sexyuality* dialogues and a final event called “Performing Our Sexualities”, described in further detail below.

Let’s talk about it, how can things be different? The body art installations

The first phase of the project explored the different ways in which women’s sexuality is controlled and placed under surveillance by discourses and practices that promote hetero-patriarchal norms. Students used body art installations to highlight and disrupt, through public performance, the ways in which young women constitute and police their constructions of self, and perform their gendered identities in relation to the patriarchal heteronormative discourses promoted through social institutions.

Images of positive sexualities

The next phase of the project involved the creation of large posters featuring images of ‘ordinary’ looking individuals accompanied with a series of questions related to sexuality. The posters were block mounted and strategically placed on easels around campus. The individuals featured were intended to represent campus personas or characters (the average student) and the questions raised a number of issues related to sexuality for all sexes and genders, and amongst others dealt with issues of autonomy, full and active consent, safe sex, HIV/AIDS, equitable relationships, self and body-esteem, safety, happiness and pleasure. There were three sets of questions that were placed next to different sexes and genders to show that these questions don’t “fit” with any one particular person, but may very well be the concerns of anyone on campus.

This phase initially aimed to explore positive sexualities and provide a space for the sexualization of the “invisible” or desexualized actors on campus, e.g. women students and staff, people living with disabilities; workers; particularly

within the context of the desexualization of the university campus. At this point the project also grappled with ways to engage with sexuality that moves beyond a focus on HIV/AIDS, violence and victimhood.

Sexuality dialogues

Members of the team engaged with students on campus during this period and invited them to the *Sexuality Dialogues* held on campus. The posters were also used to advertise this series of women's dialogues at which women were invited to join a conversation about their sexuality and experiences on campus. The themes that emerged here included young women's experiences of 'the line' and the policing of gendered and heteronormative norms on campus, as well as multiple forms of violence. The response to the sexuality dialogues showed an overwhelming need for women on campus to have a safe and open space to regularly get together and have discussions and develop projects to challenge sexual norms on campus.

The dialogues placed women's everyday experiences at the centre of critical inquiry, drawing on the notion that there is a certain rhythm to the giving of testimony, which usually begins with mundane everyday occurrences and often results in something more significant/ symbolic. Sharing experiences become a way to validate those experiences and create a sense of solidarity.

Performing Sexualities: The final event

The final event showcased the earlier creative products, gave a space for young women to perform feminist music and poetry; and an actual performing of sexuality, which gave the audience the opportunity to 'cross the line'. First, the installations were performed in a modified form based on earlier comments, then a number of gender and sexuality themed poems and musical items were performed. Finally, drawing on the notions of gender as performance, the final event inverted the spectacle-spectator binary by calling on the audience to perform their identities in ways that cross the line and potentially cause "gender trouble" (Butler, 1990). The actual performance gave participants a range of props and clothing items, which they used to "perform" or pose, and which were photographed.

The "performances" were an opportunity for the representation of those sexual identities that are often not recognized by the voices of surveillance and control operating in the public space of the university.

Some issues to consider around process, race and position

Collaborative feminist research is faced by a number of challenges, also reflected in the present study. Patai (1991) questions whether it is ever possible to reduce the power differentials between researchers and researched, in this case academic and student researcher. The close personal relationships resulted in the sharing of intimately personal stories, with the potential for exploitation as they become “data” (Stacey, 1991).

In the present action research process, we faced the latent, power dynamics associated with position within the university (academic researcher/student researcher) as well as power positions associated with race and class, with the resultant differences of power, authority and status, which sometimes created opportunities for solidarity, but also generated tensions. Students’ assignment of power to the academic researchers meant that they did not always take full ownership of the project in terms of taking the lead to set up meetings or participation in decision making; but also that the academic researchers were constantly negotiating and renegotiating the resultant insider/outsider dilemma. There are tensions within projects of this nature – questions arise such as who is actually driving the change agenda? Who decides what kind of change? What kind of agenda? Is it really possible to speak to building democracy and joint decision-making under conditions of such different power relations?

Race was experienced as an issue at different moments within the project, both as a marker ascribing a social position as well as an identity. “The profoundly racialized construction of sexuality in South Africa needs to be recognized as one of the particularities of our ‘politics of location’ (Tamale, 2011: 10). During the evaluation of the project, a student researcher highlighted the significance for her of the “whiteness” of one of the academic researchers, and the power they subconsciously ascribed to her race. There were also quite different notions and relationship to “being coloured” – this could be seen as a generational difference or one of political ideology, or a combination of the two. An example can be found with two “coloured” participants in the project – one a student, the other an academic. The student researcher defines herself as “coloured” and sees this as having quite specific connotations, whereas the older staff member, who had been active in the struggle against Apartheid, defined herself as “black” and purposively did not describe herself as “coloured”. At different moments of the project, the significance of race

and how it affects our experiences of being gendered sexual beings was also raised. During the Sexuality Dialogues, issues of race were foregrounded in discussions around different notions of beauty and who was “seen” as being attractive; and in terms of different experiences of social surveillance and control as illustrated in the experiences of a young, black lesbian student who outlined her experience of black men who felt entitled to approach her and question her sexual identity in a way that was not experienced by white lesbian women. There had also been some limited discussion around why it was mainly black women students who were participating in the project, and where were the white women students? This is an issue that would need to be addressed and explored further, as any theories put forward would be mere speculation.

Whether to foreground the politics of pleasure or the politics of violence, control and surveillance in young women’s engagement and experiences of sexuality was a constant debate within the research team. As Vance (1984) has noted, “danger and pleasure are ever-present realities in many women’s lives”, and the explorations within this research process was no different. In the face of dominant discourses around young women’s sexuality, which foreground the many sexual violations which young women experience, highlighting the ever present dangers which young women face in the form of rape, harassment, surveillance and control, and on notions of women being vulnerable and “at risk”, there was a strong call for the project to spend time surfacing and exploring young women’s positive and pleasurable experiences of sexuality. The argument was that young women are not always victims of male sexual desire, and that they too wanted sex, enjoyed it and were active sexual subjects. This often led to a tension within the group, as it was felt that even if young women did actively engage in and initiated sexual relationships, or actively demanded and experienced sexual pleasure, they did this within an institutional environment of the sexual double standard. In addition, the interactions with the student body and discussions within the *sexuality* dialogues had also revealed young women’s very real fear of and daily experience of sexual violence. What became clear was that the sexual pleasure and the danger are both present in young women’s lives, and that we would need to navigate the multiple and often contradictory experiences of women’s sexuality, and recognize, as noted by Masvawure (2011) that

dichotomies are very problematic, and that any exploration and theorization of young women's sexualities needs to take women's heterogeneity and their multifaceted sexual experiences into account.

The intended aim of the action research process was to work with and empower young women students, contributing to deepening their intellectual and analytical skills and knowledge in the arenas of gender and sexuality within the university space, and to create spaces and processes to promote young women's leadership, in order for them to engage with and promote broader processes of social change within the university (in the first phase). We could safely say that to some extent this has happened. We all, young and not so young women, can speak of feeling more "empowered", to having a stronger sense of self, of feeling more self confident, and of being more able to articulate our concerns and issues more clearly. We can all say that we have a deeper knowledge of how to think critically about a particular issue, consider and develop research questions, plan a campaign and develop organizational skills, and have a sense of what our visions of a more just and equitable society would look like, and what kind of conditions we would like to see in place in order for (young) women to be able to exercise our sexual rights. There would probably not be agreement on all these issues within the group; however, everybody to a greater or lesser extent would be able to articulate their positions. But like all processes of 'leadership building', and participating in processes of action research with a distinctly transformative agenda, it is incomplete, it has been flawed, and there have been tensions and contradictions.

At a general level, however, the action research project contributed to creating an alternative voice and presence on campus – putting the spotlight on the politics of gender and sexuality in a way that no other campus based organization is doing. UCT has some history of student organization, and in the past has had at times quite vibrant young women's movement and networks of feminist activists and researchers. However, sadly these are now distant memories and currently UCT's student organizations are organizing themselves in different ways with different concerns. The institution continues to be deeply patriarchal and this action research process has attempted to create a space and a woman-centred process that is dedicated to exploring the politics of gender and sexuality on campus.

Endnotes

1. Although this was a constant theme in our own discussions and work, we acknowledge the use of this slogan by Just Associates, an international women's rights network.

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