

Standpoint

Sexual Pleasure as Feminist Choice

Patricia McFadden

Introduction

Across almost all societies, the notions of "pleasure" and "choice" are rarely mentioned or acknowledged as being among the most contentious aspects of human sexuality, particularly female sexuality. For many African women, even the suggestion that sexual pleasure and eroticism have political implications elicits alarm, and it is seldom recognised that sexual pleasure is fundamental to our right to a safe and wholesome lifestyle.

The fears that these concerns often raise constitute what I call "socio-sexual anxiety". The intensity of this anxiety is generated by the fact that there is an extremely intimate relationship between sexuality and power, a connection which is manifested in a range of circumstances and experiences. In fact, the potential for meaningful resolution of socio-cultural crises (such as those generated by the HIV/AIDS pandemic) rests squarely on our ability to confront the intersection of these two templates of human existence.

For the majority of black women, the connection between power and pleasure is not often recognised, and remains a largely unembraced and undefended heritage. Yet an understanding of this connection is one of the most precious legacies passed on to us by our foremothers. In often obscure or hidden ways, it lies at the heart of female freedom and power; and when it is harnessed and "deployed", it has the capacity to infuse every woman's personal experience of living and being with a liberating political force.

The systematic suppression of women's sexual and erotic inclinations has led to the conflation of sexuality and reproduction within a hetero-normative cultural and social matrix. This suppression is maintained through vigilant cultural surveillance, and has led to the muting of what I define as our feminist sexual memory and instinct. The result is a sexual and political cul-de-sac of violation and repression: all too often, women find themselves in a dark, dreadful place, windowless and airless, with seemingly no way out.

This is the place that the HIV/AIDS pandemic has brought many of us to: the edge of the precipice of life. "Living on the edge" in terms of sexual and physical violation, unacceptably large numbers of black women all over the world face the constant threat of infection with the HI virus by males known and unknown. This terrifying existence is exacerbated by the seemingly endless spiral into poverty and deprivation for millions of women around the globe. And there is no doubt that the public debates, campaigns and health care responses generated by this deepening crisis have been underwritten by a long legacy of patriarchal and heterosexist policing of women's freedoms and rights.

My contention is that only by stepping back from the noise and clamour surrounding HIV/AIDS as a disease can we reclaim our agency and begin to move beyond the horrifying places to which sexual domination has driven many women. I argue that our ideas and political instincts are being muffled, and our feminist energies and agencies are being stifled, by patriarchal sexual discourses that appropriate and restructure our debates about sexuality and lifestyles. These discourses mould responses to HIV/AIDS by imposing hegemonic notions of sexual behaviour and heterosexist expectations, while reinforcing the deeply embedded cultural taboos and claims that define sexual pleasure and freedom as "dangerous" and "irresponsible". They have also helped to entrench and conceal the heterosexist and patriarchal identities and relationships that lead to the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS among women.

Our starting point has to be a recognition of the need to reassert feminist agency as the most effective response to sexual violation, abuse, femicide, and all naturalised patriarchal and heterosexist patterns of behaviour that intensify the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS. Challenges to the resulting social, physiological and sexual crises must be based on our reclaiming a vibrant feminist discourse and practice. This bequeaths to us both a critical and radical understanding of power, and a love of oneself. For me, this is the potency of feminist consciousness: that moment when one is able to see one's world clearly, and recognise the capacity to nurture, protect and celebrate the wonder of being a free woman. By drawing strength and vision from long traditions of feminist resistance against patriarchal sexual hegemony and hetero-normative intolerance, we can embrace women's erotic power as a political resource in transforming our various social spaces and ourselves.

As women from every walk of life, we have the resources, the knowledge, the insight and the political acumen to reassert our ownership of the problems and challenges generated by the virulent combination of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and misogynist violation. By reclaiming our sexual energy and power, we can discover reservoirs of personal and political courage that can equip us to envisage and to fight for what lies beyond the prison of life-threatening and oppressive social systems and circumstances. Audre Lorde conceptualised this vital link between political power and a deep inner strength when she made her celebrated claim that it is only as self-loving individuals that we are able to reach into our depths and find the power within us (1982).

Policing Sexuality

Women in this culture live with sexual fear like an extra skin. Each of us wears it differently depending on our race, class, sexual preference and community, but from birth we have all been taught our lessons well. Sexuality is dangerous. It is frightening, unexplored, and threatening... Many of us become feminists because of our feelings about sex... (Hollibaugh, 1996: 64).

This perceptive observation, made in reference to women in North American society over a decade ago, speaks potently to the realities of millions of African women. Importantly, it also addresses the current anxieties and reactions of certain women activists to sexual celebration and eroticism. With the exception of small pockets of radical feminists dotted sparsely around the political landscape of the African women's movement, many activists display a deep fear of anything that relates to sexuality and pleasure.

This fear of sexual pleasure, and of considering the possibilities such pleasure suggests for imagining oneself differently, is directly linked to the construction of women's sexuality as "bad", "filthy" and "morally corrupting" (see Oakley, 1996; Hollibaugh, 1996). These constructions are aggressively invoked whenever women seek to make independent choices, when they become public and visible as aspiring citizens, when they seek social mobility through their educational skills and material resources, and when they transgress cultural and social boundaries defended in the name of "tradition".

Perhaps a personal anecdote will help to amplify this point [1]. I have no doubt that others who have raised the possibility of sexuality as a source of political power for women will find the scenario I describe familiar. The incident occurred in Zimbabwe, after my return from a six-month stint at a German university during the mid-1990s. I was attending a meeting of activists in the Women's Movement, and was thrilled to be back on my "home turf". As I circulated during the tea-break, I was approached by two prominent local activists and asked: "Pat, how many times did you drop your pants while in Germany?" I was flabbergasted, and for a few seconds, I could not respond. Then I replied, "Actually, none", but they looked at one other in disbelief, and burst out laughing.

As I processed the significance of that encounter, I realised how sexualised I had become to some in the Zimbabwean Women's Movement. I was alerted to the fact that assumptions about my "loose sexuality" were not only a source of great amusement and entertainment in certain quarters, but of disgust and resentment in others. Most importantly, I was made acutely aware that liberating discourses on sexuality, pleasure and desire for African women were being deliberately repressed by the very women who should have been championing them.

Later that year, the Zimbabwean government issued me with a deportation order, in which accusations of my betrayal of "Zimbabwean culture" and "family values" featured prominently. I was identified as a lesbian (and therefore automatically vilified), on the grounds that I wrote about women's rights to choose their intimate partners, and because I defended the rights of gays and lesbians. The fact that I am a relatively contented heterosexual (who, as a feminist, tries to come to terms with the contradictions inherent in such a status) was forgotten or ignored. In the face of a blatant invocation of the idea that homosexuality in Africa is inauthentic and criminal, my feminist stance was defined as "dangerous", something meriting my exclusion from political and national sites.

The deafening silence with which this was greeted by the Women's Movement in Zimbabwe spoke volumes about the hegemony of patriarchal nationalism, of the deeply ingrained right-wing definitions of alternative sexual choices as culturally alien, and of the political and discursive silencing of women through the surveillance of their sexuality. Homophobia, xenophobic claims that I constituted a "national threat", and deep anxiety about women's sexual freedom and choices permeated the rumours and statements surrounding efforts to deport me, and strongly informed the suspicion, caution and hostility with which I was treated by many within the Movement.

During the six months in which the state sought to deport me, what was raised especially prominently was the importance of controlling sexuality as a political tool. Use of this tool involves invoking sanctified beliefs, values and practices to demonise all that is perceived as different and difficult. In this way, political conservatism masquerades as what is often considered to be natural, moral and absolute. The resulting hegemony of reactionary beliefs in ostensibly progressive political spaces requires serious attention and an urgent response.

African women know the threat of sexualised terror almost instinctively. This is one of the first forms of coercion they encounter when they enter the public sphere and swiftly realise that cultural boundaries are vigilantly policed by both men and women. They know that while their societies have learnt during the decades since independence to "bend" a little to the demands and claims that women are making, there are cultural zones within their living, working and thinking spaces where the penalties for any transgression on their part are dire and swift.

Discourses on Sexuality

Constraints on cultural and discursive spaces are glaringly manifested in the delimiting of discourses about women's sexuality. Considering the life threats that many women face in dominant hetero-normative sexual relationships, discourses on sexuality in most activist arenas remain largely tied to reproduction and barely interrogated or deconstructed notions of rights. Emphasis has been placed on women's prescribed roles as wives and mothers, with their rights to choices and sexual freedoms all too often ignored or swept aside. In the past, we had to disentangle health from its confounding coupling with reproduction in order to make the argument that women's health involved much more than their surviving the breeding process. Now we face the challenge of disentangling sexuality from its automatic

conflation with reproduction, and insisting that it involves far more than the provision of sexual services within conjugal relationships.

In recent years, there has been a shift, with discussions beginning to link reproductive health with women's rights to safe sexual behaviour. Discourses on sexual rights have also been woven into the burgeoning work on reproductive health and women's well-being, and there is no doubt that African women are increasingly speaking out about their rights to make informed reproductive choices in terms of contraception, safer sex, and safe motherhood. Yet many conversations continue to revolve largely around what is culturally sanctioned and permissible, and most debates and policy recommendations are situated within safe zones. Questions surrounding women's reproduction and sexuality have often been depoliticised, with the focus being on the efficient and pragmatic management of motherhood and family planning, and effective protection from disease and violation.

"Rights" have therefore been explored within the parameters of cultural prescriptions about women's roles and bodies. "Rights" have neither properly addressed fundamental issues of abortion, sexual orientation and pleasure; nor have they been seen to encompass freedom from coercion, violence or punishment as means of sexual surveillance. For African women, the urgency of developing debate and activism around rights that are both fundamental and extremely wide-ranging in relation to sexuality extends beyond the continent. In the US, where large numbers of African women have lived and struggled against a long history of patriarchal impunity and sexual violation, the pressing need to enhance black women's sexuality and rights remains a difficult and complex issue (see Roberts, 1999; Silliman and Bhattacharjee, 2002).

A few years ago, it seemed as if the African women's movement in countries such as Zimbabwe was gathering the political courage to engage the state and the fundamentalist Catholic Church on issues of abortion and sexual pleasure. This was in the wake of the global women's movement campaign to contest the right-wing gag-rule initiated by the Reagan administration (see Petchesky and Judd, 2001; McFadden, 2002). But this glimmer of radical resistance had faded away by the end of the 1990s, and these days one barely hears a squeak about the crucial element of choice as an issue that goes beyond reproduction and safe sex. Many potentially productive debates have been overtaken by the clamour, reflecting a powerful resurgence of patriarchal dominance, generated by the HIV/AIDS pandemic. On one level, emotional calls are being made on women to conform to traditional roles as caregivers and nurturers. On another, their struggles for individual freedoms, social autonomy and bodily integrity are - often in subtle and devious ways - invalidated or curbed by a cultural climate that construes such choices and mobility as dangerous, irresponsible and selfish.

Without a discourse that enables women to step beyond the bounded, limited notions of sexuality as being either tied to reproduction or to the avoidance of disease or violation, we cannot begin to imagine ourselves in new and profoundly life-transforming ways. We have to see the cage for what it is - a set of carefully-placed bars that keeps us locked into suffocating spaces efficiently reproduced by an uncompromising patriarchal system, and often closely patrolled by women from a cross-section of classes and social standings.

Our choices have to involve much more than our options within hetero-normative relationships. We know that many of these are flawed by deep-seated misogyny that generates the despair that characterises so many heterosexual women's lives. Choice also needs to be envisaged as something more than simply options for safeguarding ourselves against sexually transmitted diseases. Choice has to be imagined as going beyond demands for safety and protection from sexualised violation in the private and public spheres. It has to be everything that we have not yet begun to say and do as women who know that our lives

can be different, if we only have the courage to step out of the cages of cultural practices and values that not only oppress us, but also presume to dictate the terms of our "freedom". It is by embracing the notion of "the erotic as power" (Lorde, 1982) that we can redefine sexuality as something beyond conventional or reactionary narratives of efficient reproduction, safe motherhood and defences against disease and violation.

Sexuality and Freedoms

There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives (Lorde, 1982: 88).

A fundamental premise of patriarchal power and impunity is the denial and suppression of women's naming and controlling their bodies for their own joy and nurturing. In all patriarchal societies, women and girls are taught, consistently and often violently, that their bodies are dirty, nasty, smelly, disgusting, corrupting, imperfect, ugly and volatile harbingers of disease and immorality. The redemption of the pathologised female body is seen to come through males of various statuses: fathers, who protect and defend the family honour through them; priests, who experience holiness and godliness through them; brothers, who learn through women and girls how to become authoritative and vigilant; husbands, who realise their masculinity through sexual occupancy and breeding; and strangers, who wreak misogynistic vengeance upon them for an entire range of grievances, imagined and otherwise. A denied right, misinformation, a frown, a disapproving scowl, a raised voice, an angry reprimand, a verbal insult, a shaken fist, a shove, a slap, a punch, rape, a slit throat - these are part of the routine processes of socialisation and gendered identity construction through which girls and women are persistently reminded that they are the chattels of men in our societies.

This brutal and yet routine socialisation explains our tendency to comply with the taboos and strictures associated with women's sexual realities in patriarchal societies. Among the most misogynistic examples of these is female genital mutilation. Through this practice, millions of African girl children and young females are brutalised in the name of purging their "unclean" bodies and protecting men from the "impurity" associated with female sexuality. Seemingly benign examples of taboos include the multitude of self-hating systems couched in the language and practice of culture and traditions (see Heise et.al., 1995). Women are encouraged to conceal what they know about their bodies, to express shame about their bodies, to apologise for their bodies, and to lose touch with what Alice Walker has called the "the secret of joy".

When Walker wrote her unsurprisingly controversial novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), she offered black women a precious gift by opening a window of opportunity through which we could imagine the beauty systematically buried by centuries of hateful, supremacist patriarchal propaganda and violence. In her focus on the misogynistic practice of female genital mutilation, she encouraged us to conceptualise our freedom from centuries of cultural and sexual repression and denial, and from the racial vilification, appropriation and violation of the black female body. In profoundly intimate and often disturbing ways, the novel made me dare to imagine my black, female body in ways that were both disruptive and exhilarating. The book urged me to feel and conceptualise the surge of power and clarity that comes with the revelation that one is beautiful. Her novel can therefore be read as a challenge to African women globally to position themselves in relation to women's sexuality, pleasure and their embrace of joy and self-love. Appropriately, Walker's dedication reads:

"This book is dedicated with tenderness and respect to the blameless vulva."

For me, becoming a feminist has always been about the joy of being free; of owning the pleasure that comes from constantly growing through engagement and enquiry, and knowing that I have the ability to give pleasure at many levels of human interaction - intellectually, socially, intimately, physically, and sexually - and to receive it as a precious gift. It is the joy of freedom that makes it so empowering. Audre Lorde captures this empowerment when she links the erotic to the possibilities of limitless imagination:

Another important way in which the erotic connection functions is the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy That self-connection shared is a measure of joy which I know myself to be capable of feeling, a reminder of my capacity for feeling. And that deep and irreplaceable knowledge of my capacity for joy comes to demand from all of my life that it be lived within the knowledge that such satisfaction is possible and does not have to be called marriage, or god, nor an afterlife. That is one reason why the erotic is so feared, and so often relegated to the bedroom alone, when it is recognized at all (1982: 87).

It is this sense of sexual freedom that feeds our deep instincts and makes us long for a wildness within, a wildness that cannot be caged or marked in any way, and that propels us to search relentlessly for the wonder which we encompass. Clarissa Pinkola Estes describes those who follow this urge as "the women who run with the wolves" (1992). These women have girded themselves both with the political courage to shake off the shackles of patriarchal servitude, and the emotional will to discover new horizons of feeling and being.

At present, we are battling with the immense challenges that the HIV/AIDS crisis presents. These challenges include both the reality of the disease and the way in which it has become a metaphor for the huge social and material disparities between white and black, rich and poor, women and men, youth and the aged, the able and the challenged, the powerful and excluded. In this context, we need to take a deliberate step away from the hubbub of research, debate and "aid", much of which employs discourses that force us back into racial and gender stereotypes, and which reproduces the very relations of exploitation, supremacy and servitude underlying the social and survival crises presently faced by our continent.

African women are not novices when it comes to confronting patriarchal, political, economic or cultural power. But in the present context of crisis, we need to pay urgent attention to the incipient erosion of our energies and freedoms, particularly in relation to issues of choice and personhood. National, communal and familial demands to re-direct our energies towards the human "rescue" effort are persistently made upon our time and resources. The message is both directly and subliminally conveyed through compelling calls that we support, nurture and protect our threatened communities. Yet these precisely are the communities based on relationships and laws that have systematically excluded, silenced and disempowered women. Transforming the meaning of community has been key to our agendas as activists, and crafting discourses and strategies that empower women as autonomous individuals has been central to our acquiring and exercising entitlements as citizens. Owning and managing land and property, acquiring a legal status that is sustainable, interrogating the relationships women have with the state, property and the law, have all been pivotal to our deconstruction of inherited notions of "community", to our efforts to create societies in which restrictive roles and identities are not prescribed by and for others.

This redirecting of women's energies towards "stabilising" communities in the face of HIV/AIDS is not an isolated or incidental process. It feeds into a backlash that is increasingly draining our energies and skewing our dreams. Obscenely, HIV/AIDS has provided the conservative forces of our societies with a windfall. The accompanying galvanisation of "natural" notions about reproductive and social and cultural obligations comes at a time when many women have begun to imagine themselves as being beyond the boundaries of

stifling identities. We obviously cannot walk away from the realities of HIV/AIDS, and the attendant consequences for most of our communities. But the urgency of holding onto and developing whatever gains and political consciousness we have secured must remain paramount in our responses. We will have to embolden ourselves with the lessons and wisdoms of decades of struggle, because we now know that as women who yearn for a liberated tomorrow, yesterday lurks not very far behind us.

Mobilising our strongest energies will allow us to draw on the sexual in ways that open up new possibilities of freedom, creativity and the imagination. As Lorde puts it:

Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama. For not only do we touch our most profoundly creative source, but we do that which is female and self-affirming in the face of racist, patriarchal and anti-erotic society (1982: 96).

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Footnote

[1] The mining of our personal experiences as political narratives that speak to realities beyond our experiences as individual women is a critical feminist resource and analytical tool.

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