

Results of a Contextual Scoping Study: East Africa – Kenya and Uganda

Socio-Political Context: Mapping Current Local Issues in Relation to Sexuality.

In the East African region of Kenya and Uganda, documented patterns of discrimination and abuse persist on the basis of gender identity and sexual identities. In general, victims of harm and disadvantage are often the poorest and most marginalised in our societies and they are already dealing with other layers of discrimination based on their class, ethnicity, gender and disabilities. There is evidence that "...dominant institutional discourses on sexuality and their attendant effects on the issues that are being raised in East Africa with regards to sex work, adolescent sexuality, sexual minorities, and HIV/AIDS have seen a re-moralising of sexuality; and contributed to oppressive gender ideologies and partial Africanist discourses that foreclose or limit discussions and understandings about sexuality"¹. For example, an informant shared a recent story of outright resistance on the part of the political leadership and the media in Uganda against any attempts to hold a meeting on commercial sex work, the venue consequently being transferred to Kenya.

In addition, East African countries have repressive laws related to LGBT rights. Any variation from heteronormativity is considered "pathological," "deviant" and "unnatural", thus sustaining gendered hierarchies² while limiting public debate. Homophobia is reinforced by claims that homosexuality is un-African, and there is a failure to find answers to persistent problems associated with abortion or to grasp the reality of adolescent sexuality. In Kenya, [Sara Jerop Ruto](#) interprets the "prohibitive and restrictive school cultures" as driving young people to resort to graffiti in order to create spaces for communication about sexuality. She concludes that:

"Young people need to be availed with adequate personal information that they can use to chart their transitions to adulthood. Currently, sexuality education is ignored or superficially clothed in different school subjects and offered by teachers who in most cases are ill-prepared, over-worked and feel underpaid. This education especially in the advent of HIV and AIDS has focussed on individual morality and self-restraint with obvious exclusion of the discourse of desire. Teachers are often busy trying to prevent students from doing drugs, getting pregnant, contracting AIDS...as a consequence, learners with any questions on the self, will hardly approach a teacher. School cultures do not give space to sexuality issues being discussed. It is time that versions of the traditional schools, that taught sexuality, were reinvented to offer space to young men and women to explore issues of life in a public forum that can offer healthy communication".

Current dominant development discourses and processes have offered few spaces in which to engage with issues such as the "emotional weight of sex", or "how relations of power typically translate into how sexuality gets organised", or "how people's sexuality develops in interaction with the social axes of gender, age, ethnicity, race, religion, social status, familial

¹ Jacinta Muteshi (2007) 'Keynote Address'. *Sexual rights: Challenges and Opportunities facing the Human Rights, Women's Movement and HIV/AIDS Service Providers*. May 3rd 2007, Naivasha, Kenya.

² Urgent Action Fund Meeting, *LGBT Organizing in East Africa: The true test for human rights defenders*. UAF-Africa, Nairobi. 2006.

responsibilities, ideas about intimacy, love and affection"³. Yet it is also true that HIV/AIDS, a disease that has attracted a great deal of development funding, is the pandemic that has revealed the deficiency of our knowledge about sexuality and the "practical and political consequences of this lack of understanding"⁴, importantly enabling new research into sexual matters; albeit, to address sexuality as a health problem.

Sexuality is a topical issue in both Kenya and Uganda. The social, economic, cultural and political transformations occurring in these contexts are having an impact on the understanding of, and therefore experiences associated with, sexuality and are engendering unease, primarily because of divisive moral reactions. Nevertheless, in both Kenya and Uganda dominant moralising discourses on sexuality are generating contested perspectives that reflect the growing sense that sexuality is central to self-expression and self-articulation. At the same time there is a rejection of the dominant discourses that frame sexuality in the region. For example, Professor Tamale's research in Uganda suggests that traditional *Ssenga* practices (sexual initiation of women by paternal aunts among the Buganda) that once privileged male sexuality have evolved in modern day Uganda in ways that are emancipatory for women. In Kenya one need only listen to the local FM radio stations to see the rise of questioning and exploration that is in direct conflict with dominant normative perceptions of sexuality, creating diverse and contradictory responses. Some examples will suffice here:

- In December 2006, during World AIDS Day, an opportunity was created for the formation of the Gay and Lesbian Coalition of Kenya (GALCK), a membership organisation seeking to promote recognition and understanding.
- The World Social Forum (2007) held in Nairobi, Kenya, saw conflicting media reports that ranged from stories that captured the incitement to violence and threat of arrests of LGBT activists by some religious leaders, and simultaneously media stories that re-educated the public in addressing the myths about LGBT people and putting a human face to homosexuality.
- The year 2007 also saw the eventual inclusion of MSM into Kenya's national strategic plan (2007) of the HIV/AIDS Council.

Sarah Mukasa, writing on "Developments in Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights for Women"⁵, provides an illuminating analysis of how the study of sexuality is positioned in the Ugandan context, a context that is mirrored in Kenya. She notes that:

"In 2005, four organisations attempted to stage the Eve Ensler play, *The Vagina Monologues*, to raise funds for women's support initiatives against gender-based violence in Northern Uganda⁶. The campaign caused controversy, not least within the women's movement. There was the view that women's sexuality is not an issue for African women and that the play was an imposition of 'western radical feminism' with its African agents promoting 'lesbianism, abortion, pornography and other forms of immorality'⁷. The controversy marked a major milestone in the growth of the women's rights movement, and culminated in a retreat for a strategic

³ Rachel Spronk (2006) *Ambiguous Pleasures: Sexuality and new self-definitions in Nairobi*. Amsterdam: Academisch Proefschrift.

⁴ R. Parker and J. Gagon (1995) *Conceiving sexuality: Approaches to sex research in a post modern world*. New York: Routledge.

⁵ Sara Jerop Ruto, Patricia Mbote-Kemeri and Jacinta Muteshi-Strachan, "Promises and Realities: Taking Stock of the 3rd UN International Women's Conference. ACTS, Nairobi (upcoming 2008).

⁶ The organisations were ActionAid International-Uganda, Akina Mama wa Afrika, Isis-WICCE and Uganda Women's Network.

⁷ See Catherine Guma Kanabahita, "This is what I saw in the Vagina Monologues" *New Vision*, February 17, 2005; Lydia Tusiime, "Are we Ready for Radical Feminism?" *New Vision*, March 15, 2005; and Beatrice Bisangwa, "Women Steer Clear of That Western Madness". *New Vision*, April 22, 2005.

thinking session on the way forward for the movement⁸. Although there is agreement that work needs to be done in this area, there is disagreement on the approaches that should be taken. Some of the interviewees felt that the push to address sexuality publicly is a western approach with western liberal attitudes to sex and sexuality. Others felt that the agenda is being forced upon them⁹. Yet others pointed out that an examination of power and morality needs to be done¹⁰ while others were unwilling to address the issue directly”¹¹.

Academic and Broader Context: Pre-Existing Opportunities for the Study of Sexuality in Kenya and Uganda.

Academics and researchers coming out of various disciplinary backgrounds, academic departments, research centres and NGOs and working in the field of critical sexuality studies in Kenya and Uganda have often come together through women’s rights non-governmental organisations such as [Urgent Action Fund](#), and/or regional-international research institutions such as the [Population Council](#) and the [African Population and Health Research Centre](#) which have offices in Nairobi, Kenya. In coming together periodically these researchers, advocates, and academics are beginning to make the study of sexuality more coherent in the region and this needs to be supported and sustained.

In 2004 the [Africa Regional Sexuality Resource Centre](#) (ARSRC) launched the first issue of *Sexuality in Africa Magazine* noting that this was the first publication on the continent to address sexuality in Africa from broad and comprehensive perspectives. In that same year the [Ford Foundation](#) organised a first workshop on *Thinking about sexuality in Kenya: Priorities for Strategy*¹² in a sustained effort to create constructive meanings and understandings around sexuality. Participants at the workshop reflected upon issues associated with sexuality and how these issues are carried forward within their programmes and research. In 2005 the Ford Foundation supported the African Population and Health Research Centre (APHRC) to fill the gaps in theoretical conceptualisations of sexuality. Among activities carried out by APHRC was a synthesis of literature on sexuality in Africa and a workshop on theorising sexuality. These activities culminated in a working paper on “The State of Knowledge on Sexuality in

⁸ J. Ahikire (2005) *Mapping the Women’s Movement in Uganda: Present Relations and Future Directions* (Unpublished paper).

⁹ One interviewee noted: ‘We now have to say that it is okay to be gay, to have oral sex, to masturbate and do whatever. Yet for some of us, rights have to be shaped within the context of morals. Do I have the right not to support those aspects I do not agree with? We are being forced to support things we don’t believe.’ Another noted: ‘I believe in and stand for women’s rights. But I am a born again Christian. There are some issues I feel I cannot support because one day my God will ask me to account. I cannot support such things as lesbianism. On that I choose to remain silent.’

¹⁰ One study participant asked: ‘Who defines what is moral and what isn’t? You will find that it is usually those with power. Those who control decision-making usually have the say on what is moral, and in our patriarchal contexts, it is usually men. Heterosexuality is it. If you do not conform even within heterosexual norms you are in trouble. And as we know, heterosexuality in many cases is problematic for us as women.’

¹¹ For instance, one interviewee observed that: ‘On the issue of sexual rights, we have to make strategic decisions about how far we are going to take on these issues. How far do we go and will it not divert us through the obvious backlash it will cause?’ Another noted: ‘Most NGOs will not campaign for safe abortion for example because it is largely a class issue. Women leading NGOs have access to safe abortion because they can afford it. It is poor, young women who are affected the most by the status quo. It is they who are dying from unsafe abortions in such large numbers. And we have rendered them expendable by our cavalier responses to this reality’.

¹² Jacinta Muteshi (2004) *Final Report – Thinking about Sexuality in Kenya: Priorities for Strategy*. Workshop Report for the Ford Foundation, Nairobi, Kenya.

Sub-Saharan Africa”¹³. This paper highlighted that the urgent need to stem disease has led to an almost exclusive focus on behaviour change, limiting a fuller understanding of sexuality and how it is conceptualised, and how sexuality research is applied in African contexts.

A regional convening by Urgent Action Fund-Africa in June 2006, *LGBT Organising in East Africa: The true test for human rights defenders*, for the first time brought together LGBTI activists from around East Africa and social justice activists and experts on sexuality and human rights. In the same month the [2nd Africa Conference on Sexual Health and Rights](#), organised by the Africa Federation for Sexual Health and Rights and the [Planned Parenthood Federation of America-International](#), was held in Nairobi. The focus of the conference was the enduring obstacles to sexual health and rights faced by African women, drawing attention to Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), HIV/AIDS, and the intersections between perceptions of, and religious and cultural practices associated with, sexuality.

These were the earliest structured and timely initiatives in the field of sexuality studies, responding to the fact that professional approaches to sexuality in Africa had increasingly become limited to development issues and health agendas emerging around fertility/pregnancy, the onset of HIV/AIDS, and violence against women. While these issues legitimised the relevance and importance of working with the concept of sexuality, there was a tendency to frame sexuality as a threat to health and wellbeing, leaving out the complexity of human sexuality and how it is expressed through sex, and gender roles and identities, as well as the experiences associated with pleasure, intimacy and reproduction.

At the end of 2007 [The Sexuality Institute](#), organised by the Population Council and the Africa Regional Sexuality Resource Centre, convened in Kenya and brought together advocates, researchers, medical doctors, policy makers and donors working in the field of sexuality studies in order to strengthen African intellectual resources and to re-think research and practice by way of balancing a concern for disease with issues of positive sexuality such as desire, love and wellness. The aim of the 2007 *Sexuality Institute* was to provide a forum in Africa through which to engage in dialogue, share ideas, generate new knowledge and approaches, and inform a constructive engagement with issues and agendas related to sexuality. The aim was also to identify and promote potential actions related to the support of positive sexualities and to build a constituency of “change agents” to stimulate the entrenchment of a positive sexualities framework in the region¹⁴ and to work towards informing future endeavours in the field.

Sexuality, as an issue associated with contemporary health and rights, needs to be understood and responded to openly and directly and has begun to emerge as an important topic of interest in the region, demanding new vocabulary, new legislation, critical inquiry, and demystification. There are several activities underway and although efforts are fragmented and preliminary there are especially relevant initiatives by human rights and gender equality/women’s rights advocates seeking to transform normative and conceptual frameworks related to sexuality. There are also initiatives by researchers exploring reproductive dynamics that embrace gender and sexual practices in diverse societies, and by sexuality education advocates who aim to address knowledge, silences, and prevailing myths.

¹³ Chi-Chi Undie and Kabwe Benaya (2005) “The State of Knowledge on Sexuality in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Synthesis of Literature”. *JENDA: Journal of Culture and African Women Studies*, 8.

¹⁴ Jacinta Muteshi (2007) *Summary Report of Meeting: 2007 Sexuality Institute*, convened by Africa Regional Sexuality Resource Centre and Population Council, Kenya, October 29th to November 2nd 2007.

CONCLUSION

There are clearly diverse individuals and institutions that have positioned themselves to carry out activities of scholarship, research, teaching, advocacy, legal responses and awareness-creation in the field of sexuality studies in East Africa. These growing efforts have been offshoots of actions to address health concerns or projects that respond to the human rights mandates of the corresponding institutions which encompass common themes such as access and provision of services, raising visibility and removing silence on matters associated with sexuality, ensuring safety from HIV/AIDS and addressing concerns regarding mutually satisfying sexual relations. This forward movement is nevertheless tempered by several concerns such as the following.

- The progress made in the work on sexual rights is often fragile. For example, despite the existence of GALCK in the region, an environment persists where religious leaders, among others, can call the populace to violent incitement against gays and lesbians.
- Gains are not being equally shared. The poor, young women and people with disabilities have often remained outside of this movement.
- Although HIV/AIDS has initiated the need for research on sexuality, matters of desire or pleasure are often excluded from this research.
- The language of rights is often resisted against by those who are duty bearers and this language is not fully understood by those who would claim rights and those who are duty bound.
- The protection of those who take up the work of sexual rights remains inadequately addressed.
- Documenting the emerging grey literature has been challenging in the absence of capacity and resources to do so. Although documenting the critical work in the field of sexuality studies is indispensable, such research and documentation must be attentive to the structures of power with regards to who is naming and giving meaning to the issues associated with sexuality in the region.

According to the findings of this study, a great deal is beginning to happen but it is vital that people and institutions maintain their commitment and strengthen the links between scholars, advocates and service providers in ways that build and sustain the development of skills, knowledge production, and the accessibility of local literature. Further, it is vital to strengthen the capacity of scholars, advocates and service providers to engage critically with emerging issues in the field of sexuality studies in East Africa.