

Gender, sexuality, and activism

This is a huge and very exciting area. The strategies employed for political activism through the mobilization of “*women*” shift dramatically in different historical, social, economic, and cultural contexts. Some analyses of such shifts privilege identity politics as a key resource in understanding differences, tensions, and alliances, so that religious “*identities*”, for example, or racialized ones, become central to the theorization of particular activist agendas or initiatives. Others are more interested in the contextual confluence of economic and political realities through which people gendered as “*women*” find themselves deprived of access to power, material resources, and/or political representation. In the past few years, there have been vibrant, critical discussions on the nature, shape and direction of “*women’s movement*” organizing, and in African contexts, and much of this has included - or even prioritized - questions of sexualities.

The review would suggest there are four overarching debates which have circled continually through intellectual writing on “*women’s movements*”, activist organization at several levels, and within numerous fora - workshops, conferences, World Social Forum tents, small rooms and patches of shade in which planning, arguing, and celebrations have been undertaken.

The first debate concerns the meaning of the state. Over the past four decades, considerable energy has been vested in the struggle to hold post ‘*flag-democracy*’ states accountable to ideals of “*gender equality*” within political representation, state-based budget processes, and the delivery of resources and services. In terms of “*sexuality activism*” which has taken gender seriously, this has meant intensive focus on issues of legal reform around gender-based violence and on issues of delivery of services around reproductive health, or access to treatment and care of people who are HIV positive. However, where “*states*” themselves are corrupt, fragmented, in rapid transition, or organized through military rule, there has been debate about the value of this work, and its vulnerability to co-optation by interests far from feminist.

This debate is interlinked with a second: the meaning of the interaction between the North and diverse initiatives concerned with “*women’s human rights*,” “*South-based feminisms*,” and “*gender-alert social justice*”. As Aili Tripp suggests, “*The term ‘transnational feminism’ is sometimes used as shorthand for Western involvement in and influence on feminist movements globally*” (see [Feminist Africa 4, 2004](#)) and although (as she points out) this “*shorthand*

expresses only one dynamic of transnational feminist organizing, it is the dynamic which provokes difficult questions concerning integrity, sustainability, control, and longterm strategy.

A third debate concerns the fact that since the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994, (and in some contexts, earlier), concerns long animating women's organizing - access to reproductive health and freedom from gender-based violence - became embedded into new articulations which linked ideas about sexual health and rights to language addressing reproduction. The link between gender, culture, and sexuality is so intricate and so deeply naturalized within discourses of nationalism, the family, and - indeed - "*being human*" that women's organizing through recognition of sexuality as a political force has been challenging. As Amina Mama notes: "*On the global front, too, it has become clear that in the post-9/11 world, sexual politics - and the morality that underpins dominant discourses on sexuality - can no longer be relegated to the periphery of feminist analysis.*" (Mama, 2005:3 - see [Feminist Africa 5](#)) However, the terms in which "*sexualities*" become introduced into legal and political terrain remain contested - it is easier to insert conceptions of "*sexuality*" into frameworks of health than it is to discuss sexualities as sources of empowerment; constraint and "*management*" are often more audible as political approaches to sexuality than exploration or alliance-building across diverse "*sexual*" constituencies. Nonetheless, as suggested in the introduction, Africa-based debate on theoretical - and activist - engagement with local and continental struggles to understand the links between sexualities, gender, and socio-economic space is vigorous, nuanced, and valuable.

The fourth debate concerns the very existence of a "*women's movement*" (Essof, 2005; see [Feminist Africa](#)). In an era in which WTO policies, the U.S. war on Iraq, and increasing gaps between the world's wealthy and its poor, belie notions of "*progress*" or "*democracy*", there has been a powerful escalation of political protest, demanding alternatives. The place of gender justice within these protests, alongside the seeming intransigence of local gender oppressions, have led to serious reflection, analysis, and a desire for new beginnings, new strategies. Some voices have approached current political and economic contexts of complex gender injustices with renewed vigour, theoretical analysis which seeks to engage a wide array of local and transnational activists, and strategy which encompasses the streets and the screen. The [One in Nine Campaign](#) of South Africa is a young organization which fits into this category, and speaking more continentally, the [African Feminist Forums](#) have sought to bring energy into the meaning of challenging not simply the 'old' (neo-capitalism, the on-going and shifting forms of colonialism, which seek to '*drain*' African contexts of resources, weak and corrupt governance,

and violence) but continually engaging *'the new'*: the demand for bodily integrity, the quest for *'alternative worlds of transaction and exchange,'* and the need to create new alliances in the fight against sexual surveillance as a political weapon.

Gender and sexualities activism should probably be imagined archaeologically. It is one of the *'oldest'* areas of African feminist activism in the c20 (one thinks of Awa Thiam or Nawaal Sadaawi), in which the politics of sexuality were examined as part and parcel of hierarchized relations of gender and where the strategic focus often concerned women's rights to independent adulthood, to freedom from sexual violence, and to education beyond their *'reproductive roles.'* Activism in this area continues unabated. At the same time, however, new challenges have arisen, partly as a result simply of changing material conditions and partly as a result of deeper feminist vision. Thus the need to centralize the politics of gender within debates on the transmission of HIV emerged as a feminist imperative during the 90's. And the need to take on board issues of gender-based violence within war took on an activist life of its own, post the Rwandan genocide, and continues to be a area of innovative and extraordinary work (see [ISIS-WICCE](#), [FAS](#)). The question of sexual orientation towards people of one's own sex/gender was raised in the mid 1990's but it has not been until the twenty-first century that the politics of state, religious, and popular homophobia have come so powerfully on activist agendas. The oldest feminist organization here is Sister Namibia, in Windhoek, which has run a journal and a multitude of training and advocacy programmes on sexual and reproductive rights and health over two decades. The women in these projects have been centrally involved in the formation of the Coalition of African Lesbians, and there is a fragile but passionate network of progressive organizations across the continent fighting for equality between heterosexual and LGBTI (attach [7](#) and [8](#))people (see [Behind the Mask](#) and [Genderdynamix](#)) This struggle deserves its own review, which will be uploaded shortly.

It is also within research that it is possible to witness activist engagement. The [African Regional Centre for Sexuality Resources](#) produces a Sexuality magazine, offers leadership trainings and seminars, and supports research. The internet itself is a major terrain of activism - the [Association of Progressive Communicators Women's](#) projects have included initiatives such as Take Back the Tech!, Feminist Technology Exchanges, and the promotion of Digital Story-Telling as a form of activism around issues of gender and sexuality.

While legal activism around basic health rights (such as the right to choose abortion or have access to PEP after being raped) remains part and parcel of the agenda, new concerns around

the interface between technology and trafficking or about the meaning of '*transitioning bodies*' are now within the playing field of African feminist activism on gender and sexuality. In terms of teaching, it will always be possible in a local context to link the '*traditional*' with the '*new*' - just as there remain NGOs courageously fighting to house battered women and/or care for HIV positive people, so there are simultaneously internet based campaigns which are accessible and empowering (provided internet itself is an option).

Northern here refers, from the perspective of an African country, primarily to countries like the U.S., the U.K., and those within the EEC. There is, of course, huge diversity among these, and the term "*Northern*" is used as an attempt to describe the overarching philosophical ideas so powerful within these regions. The homogenization does blur important debates and distinctions among these ideas.