

This review essay is designed to offer a broad introduction to critical concepts before exploring '*gender and sexualities*'. No section is offered as a full review, but as a profile of areas that can be taken up for integration into teaching in different ways.

Introduction

Over the past ten years, there has been an increasing emphasis in African scholarship and research on the importance of understanding sexualities. Several prominent African-based journals have dedicated issues to questions of identity, sexualities, and sexual rights (Southern African Feminist Review, Development Update, Feminist Africa, East African Journal of Peace and Human Rights), the [African Regional Centre for Sexuality Research](#) has been launched in Lagos, and many different workshops and conferences have been held, where connections between rights, gender and sexualities have been debated.

Despite this, Africa has often found herself positioned within international reporting on the Beijing +5 process at the U.N., in June 2000, as predominantly hostile to any discussion of "*sexual and reproductive rights*". Fierce debate then around the wording of the declaration on women's rights to be issued as the Beijing+5 Platform for Action polarized, in print, "*developing*" and "*developed*" countries: "*sexual right activists from the West are also said to be 'blaming' developing countries for holding up the document*". Nigerian and Ugandan ministers were reported as being disconcerted at the thought of lesbian presence within their countries, and Africa was represented mainly as a conservative block of voices connecting dismay at the notion of women's rights to reproductive freedom with disgusted objection to the idea that gay and lesbian people have civic and human rights.

In 2009, it is certainly true that some prominent African state leaders have denounced homosexualities in ways that seem to offer carte blanche to violent homophobia. It is also true that debates around the meaning of cultural practices concerning sexuality have been a vigorous part of African feminisms for decades. While some abjure practices such as virginity testing, female genital mutilation (FGM), widow inheritance or polygamy, others locate such practices within a cultural/post-colonial matrix too complex for simple censure. Where new state policies have made access to the termination of pregnancy easier in a country like South Africa (but not others), support for the legislation has been qualified by deep, often religious, concern about the ethics of abortion. A profile of African-based reluctance to engage with demands for changing

norms of sexualities (demands that are often driven by feminist support for new cultural and legal paradigms affecting women's reproductive and sexual health) can indeed be mapped.

It is worth examining whether such a profile is in any way distinctive to "*developing countries*". In the United States, protest against the right to termination of pregnancy has been vigorous since the passage of *Roe v Wade* in 1973, and British legislation against the influence of gay and lesbians in education is militant. Some of the most powerful "*pro-life*" (anti-the-right-to-terminate-pregnancy) lobbies are from Christian fundamentalist churches in the USA and elsewhere, and many of these strongly encourage young women to take 'virginity oaths' as a means of protecting their spiritual and sexual health. And it was in a "*developed*" country that young Matthew Shepherd was beaten to death in 1998, and Tina Brandon shortly after that.

In the end, of course, simple comparisons between "*developed*" and "*developing*" countries' (or continents') approaches to sexual and reproductive rights are probably unhelpful. Given the intimacy with which sexual practices, norms, struggles and rebellions are woven into the material realities of life, any context (especially contexts characterized by rapidly changing political economies, multi-culturalism, and exposure to mass media systems) can be expected to engage in vigorous - even vicious - debates and dissension around the meaning of sexual bodies, and sexual citizens. Perhaps the most interesting questions for African researchers and teachers are not those framed (partially) through comparative dialogue with the West, but those which emerge from the issues facing men and women engaged in the work of strengthening continental access to material, political, and spiritual health.

There is no denying, however, that the questions raised by a focus on sexualities are often deeply controversial, and this has implications for both research and teaching in African contexts. Where teaching is concerned, the need to create environments in which students are comfortable, and thus open to learning new approaches and ideas is paramount. Where students come from backgrounds where questions of sexuality are not openly discussed, where they themselves work with beliefs that sexual matters are private and that sexual norms are prescribed within clear-cut and unchanging systems of morality, or where they are undergoing critical and often stressful experiences around the meaning of sexualities as they move into their fully adult lives, teaching about sexualities must negotiate a careful path between the introduction of important - and political - theories/activisms and the need to respect the different spaces in which students may be embedded.

This review article is divided into several different sections, taking the reader through a number of critical and interrelated concepts before embarking on debates and discussions possible through linking '*gender*' to questions of '*sexualities*'.