

## Thinking about approaching the term 'sexuality'

Because, as Pereira tells us, it is only in the past ten years that debates about the links between gender and the politics of sexuality have become foregrounded within policy and activism in many African contexts, it is useful to break the term down into different components in order to explore the complexities of '*being sexual/performing sex*' in different historical and cultural contexts:

- Sexual desire
- Sexual behaviours
- Sexual capacity
- Sexual orientation
- Sexual fantasies
- Sexual knowledge
- Sexual ideologies/beliefs
- Sexual experience/s
- Sexual identity

Each of these terms deserves unpacking in order to get a rich perspective on what '*sexualities*' mean. Historical context, place and cultural norms influence what each term might entail, and gender plays a very powerful role in influencing the shape of people's sexual experiences, knowledges, behaviours, and beliefs.

In contemporary debates about sexual orientation, for example, the term refers predominantly to the sex/gender of the person to whom someone's sexual desire gravitates (in other contexts - past and present - issues of religion, race, ethnicity and national origin also might play a role here - South African apartheid legislation was draconian around policing '*cross-racial*' sexual desire and sexual relationships; there are still many parts of the world in which playing out your sexual desire with someone of the '*wrong culture*' or '*wrong ethnicity*' or '*wrong religion*' will ensure stigma and even legal punishment). Integrating the term '*gender*' into '*sexuality*' through the recognition that becoming gendered always involves predictions about sexuality (desire, behaviour, relationships) means that heterosexuality is part of those predictions. The assumption that '*becoming gendered*' as a '*man*' or a '*woman*' entails heterosexuality is so powerful that it can be thought of as a political system in its own right. This is called:

## Heteronormativity

Heteronormativity is the 'generalization' of the idea that becoming gendered should lead to heterosexuality on the part of people gendered as '*men*' and as '*women*'. This generalization means that heterosexuality is '*naturalized*' and other ways of linking becoming gendered to sexuality are '*pathologized*'. This generalization means that '*heterosexuality*' comes to involve systemic and political power over other forms of sexual relationships, cultures, and ideas.

There are some theorists who identify sexual orientation/sexuality as a force with the same kind of political potential as class, caste, or race. In the model we noted that becoming gendered involves a set of predictions about sexuality - heterosexuality is considered normative, and within that (a) "*women*"-people are assigned particular responsibility for reproductive labour (b) gender impacts heavily on what kinds of heterosexual behaviour is possible/conventional for "*women*" and for "*men*". This approach to sexual orientation/sexuality would see homosexuality as a refusal (consciously so, or not) to co-operate with gender norms, and a route to the development of alternative masculinity or alternative femininity. This is certainly one useful way of thinking about sexuality, and a clear route to the connection between '*gender*' and '*sexuality*'. In a later section of this review, material on African activist engagements with lesbian and gay realities are covered.

There are other ways of seeing at once that being gendered as a man or as a woman would have an impact on different aspects of sexuality. For example, "*sexual knowledge*" is likely to be highly mediated by gender. It remains the case that sex education programmes in schools which offer this (see Florence Muhanguzi and Fatima Chege's work), present '*sexual information*' as biologically based information which privileges reproduction as "*sexuality*." Knowledge about sexuality is also mediated by religion, in which there are norms about men and women and how they should engage sexually (again, with a focus on reproduction, and in Christianity, on the idea that sex itself is sinful). Peer engagement, cultural norms, access to the media and internet, and personal experiences will all involve gender as a key element of knowledge building, both in terms of what is "*known*" about men and women, in terms of their sexual roles, responsibilities and identities and in terms of who is '*supposed*' to know what.

In the same way, sexual experiences will be highly mediated by gender at every level. A clear example of this is the vulnerability of people gendered as women to sexual violence, and the widespread lack of recognition that in contemporary contexts, women's sexual pleasure is a very

under-researched area in African contexts. Despite the efforts of research centres such as the ASRC to foreground issues of sexual pleasure, there is still much more writing on women's experiences of pain and disempowerment through their sexuality than there is about their experiences of pleasure, adventure, and power. Patricia McFadden (see [Feminist Africa 2, 2003](#)) argues that this lack of theory and activism connecting feminist agendas to the power of the erotic damages visions of what could be possible for the transformation of gender dynamics in African contexts. An example of the influence of gender on men's sexual experience might be the pressure on young men to prove their masculinity through the overt and public display of their heterosexual prowess. This is something Richard Sswakiryanga's piece on young men at the University of Makerere discusses, and Rob Pattman's work on masculinities at the University of Zimbabwe and at the University of Botswana also names (see article).

At every level through which sexualities are woven into human life, gender mediates the experiences, meanings, possibilities, representations and visions of what constitutes '*the sexual*'. However, given that gender itself is constructed through multiple relations with class, culture, time, and context, it is often useful to explore the links between gender and sexuality under a particular theme, which can help a teacher ground an approach to the area historically and empirically. This review essay cannot (yet) offer material on all the spaces in which gender and sexuality could be explored: culture, globalization, militarism, health, activisms, law, arts, religion, development, media, history and archaeology, urbanization, conflict, education, and so on. What emerges in all these areas are political dynamics, routes towards the corralling and shaping of power, which deploy gender and sexuality as a means of social control and as a means of ensuring that material, political, and symbolic power accrues to a minority of a population. While this may be seen as too broad an overarching generalization, introductory unpacking of gender and sexuality within a few key areas below will illustrate the point. What this means is that any teaching in the area needs to be aware that the material is deeply political, and likely to raise controversies.