

Linking concepts of gender with sexualities

An article by Mumbi Machera which explores the interactions of 'becoming gendered' as an African girl in many different contexts and sexuality starts by asking what we mean by sexuality?

She suggests:

"The term sexuality elicits images of belongingness, physically and emotionally. Sexuality is a complex term with multifaceted meaning referring to deep emotional feeling as well as to issues of power and vulnerability in gendered relationships.....the scope of sexuality is socially constructed - i.e. sexual feelings and behaviour are influenced and constrained by cultural definitions and prohibitions rather than by physical possibilities..."

Sexuality is a socio-political arena constantly reshaped through cultural, economic, familial and political relations, all of which are conditioned through prevailing social organizations... in Africa, male and female sexualities have been patterned by cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity.. female sexuality is often seen as something to be contained and controlled"

She also suggest that in many African contexts, femininities and womanhood get constructed through gender in ways that repress women's access to control over their own sexual bodies, desires, and experiences. Many of her arguments hold water but there are also tensions in many contexts around the meaning of femininity and sexuality. In some ways, it is true that femininities involve clear norms around the ways in which "women" should enact their sexual desires, and these norms do often constrain women's access to choice around reproduction, safe sex, and the meaning of looking 'sexy'. There are also debates about these norms, so that we find the shows like "Sex in the City" are popular (these celebrate young (wealthy) women's right to sexual pleasure, knowledge and choices), Nollywood movies which show women in charge of their sexual life even if sometimes these women are also 'punished' in the story lines) and modernized rituals of 'becoming women' which celebrate women's sexuality.

Charmaine Pereira's definition (see bibliography) suggests this:

What are the interconnections between sexuality, culture and identity? And what makes sexuality strategic to strengthening gender and women's studies in Africa? Sexuality is an integral part of the experience of being human yet its visibility in academic discourse in Africa is relatively recent. Its strategic import in gender and women's studies teaching and curricula lies in the way it draws

attention to the failure of analyses and interventions that rely solely on unitary levels of understanding of “the way things are”. Such approaches are unable to address the ways in which social realities are embedded in multiple levels of complexity simultaneously. For example, this could mean addressing social issues - such as sexual violence perpetrated against women - simply at the level of “the state” or “the family”, without considering the implications of the “sexual” at the level of emotionality, subjectivity and social relations (such as age, race, class, ethnicity, religion) or at other institutional levels, such as communities, religious bodies, customary authorities, educational institutions and so on.

More directly, a focus on sexuality connects intellectual and political agendas regarding bodies and the sexualised ways in which gendered bodies are differently treated in and beyond “sexual” arenas; emotional, sensual and psychological experiences of desire, pleasure, pain, intimacy, fulfillment and otherwise; the practices of sexual partners and how the “il/legitimacy” of gendered partners, practices and relationships gets defined by whom, from micro- (e.g. psychic) to macro- (e.g. state) levels; and the meanings and relations of giving and/or exchange, monetary or otherwise, within which sexual encounters are embedded. Sexuality is thus articulated with the ways in which gendered human beings become defined within particular, singular identities and the cultural frameworks that give meaning to such constructions at given historical moments.

These two definitions reveal that sexualities can get explored in many different ways, and there is one particularly prevalent split in research and writing about gender and sexuality. On the one hand, there is exploration about individuals as sexual beings; on the other hand, lies the recognition that sexuality is a realm of political, social, and cultural organization, in which knowledge, norms, meanings, and possibilities are constructed, contested, and controlled. Sexuality is a term which describes the way in which human sexual energy becomes part and parcel of psychological, social, cultural and political life. The terrain thus becomes one in which it is possible to explore connections between gender and sexualities in multiple ways. In the remainder of this review essay, some of the key areas explored by African feminist writers, activists, policy-makers and researchers are described