

# Feminist Africa 17 Researching Sexuality with Young Women: Southern Africa

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# Editorial: Researching Sexuality with Young Women: Southern Africa

Jane Bennett and Hope Chigudu

Every woman is a chameleon; she changes her colour to suit the situation; she adjusts and adapts to face the pressing challenges. She wears a different face but the essence of who she is remains the same. That's how we have to be as young feminists fighting on multiple fronts and living and working in the world ([www.jassblog.org/2010/11/i-am-chameleon-young-feminist-in.htm](http://www.jassblog.org/2010/11/i-am-chameleon-young-feminist-in.htm))

The quotation comes from a publically accessible blog created within JASS Southern Africa (Just Associates, an international community of popular educators, activists and writers dedicated to feminist political engagement at a number of levels); the blog features inputs from a global range of young women activists. It's hard to tell exactly, but the words seem to come from Rudo Chigudu (calling herself a proud Vagina Warrior), a fiercely passionate activist telling the blogger about YOWLI, the Young Women's Leadership Initiative in Zimbabwe. Filtered through the blogger's words, we learn that YOWLI emerged out of conversations among young women in which their analysis of the experiences in their lives came to foreground the politics of sexuality as core to the ways in which they were fighting for new versions of freedom – not nationalist, not “post-democratic”, and not “conditional”.

In 2012, Rudo Chigudu kicked off a discussion at a session on sexuality in a three day Open Forum organized by OSISA by moving away from the people with whom she was seated on a panel, and transforming the front of the large lecture hall into a stage. Dancing herself flat onto the ground, she performed (part Shona, part English) the narrative of a Zimbabwean woman, fighting for her right to sexual pleasure, to the control of her own reproductive choices and to the fullness of her own life in a way which first alarmed – and then delighted – the audience. The alarm was generated by Chigudu's invocation

of what it might mean to be sexually hurt or frightened; up until that point, the Forum discussions had been fascinating but decidedly focused on the intellectual. The delight was recognition of embodiment as a zone through which to illuminate the influence of embattled political and economic forces. Rudo Chigudu's way of asking the room (some 500 people, men and women, from diverse regions and organizational locations) to rethink what it means to discuss sexuality insisted on the poetic presence of her body – noisy, unpredictable, disruptive, volatile, full of movement and language, and full of the capacity for pleasure.

Dominant writing about the politics of gender and sexuality for young women in Southern Africa rarely foregrounds the energy, courage, and innovation of Rudo Chigudu's performance that day. Young women are overwhelmingly positioned as pinioned between the demands of diverse patriarchies and those of neo-capitalist economies thriving on the commodification of femininities which police women's bodies while simultaneously suggesting that (under 'new' nationalisms) the same women have unprecedented access to education, political authority, and professional opportunity (Lewis, 2009). As Bennett explores in her article in this issue, the category of "young women" has been constructed over the past decade of research on HIV-transmission, gender-based violence, and reproductive health. She is, in South Africa, explicitly racialized as black, and across Southern Africa as poor and vulnerable. Many NGOs have sympathized with the notion that the fight for access to reproductive rights or for advocacy which supports sexual healthcare must prioritize young women. Sometimes, this is linked to demographic profiles; across Southern Africa, people under the age of 24 comprise 60% of the regional population (Williams, 2012). Sometimes, the focus on "young women" is generated by savvy local, often feminist, analyses of policy moves or popular debates (such as those driven by the One-in-Nine Project in South Africa, or Katswe Sistahood in Zimbabwe). Very occasionally, activism is galvanized by those willing to name themselves, for political reasons, as "young women" (such as the community theatre collective, the Mothertongue Project, or the Ignition Project in Cape Town).

And of course, "young women" form one of the core constituencies to which *Feminist Africa* directs its writing. An academic journal born of the desire to support and nourish the vibrant feminist intellectual community within universities, research centres, NGOs and activism, *Feminist Africa*

has consistently interpreted higher education, and its associated spheres of research, teaching and scholarship, as a zone in which activism alert to the imperatives of decolonization should be part and parcel of daily work. Although only a very small proportion of any Southern African country's girls register within higher education institutions, these young women represent the hopes of many more. In themselves, they constitute a very diverse constituency, all of whom are powerfully linked to sisters, cousins, friends, partners, families and communities far beyond the campus of a university, technikon, or training college. They and their families have usually struggled hard to afford the fees of a higher education, and all its attendant costs – transport, living expenses, communication. What they are offered in terms of education and professional training differs vastly, depending on the programmes with which they enlist, the institution's own mission and national context, and the resources available. But, as Teresa Barnes suggests, most higher educational institutions are actively hostile to feminist notions of what it may mean to strengthen women's independence, and simultaneously wary of the use of gender within socio-political education (Barnes, 2007).

A handful of universities in Southern Africa run academic courses or programmes which actually offer students the opportunity to study feminist approaches to gender and sexuality formally, and only three, all in South Africa, offer the option of doctoral level work in this terrain (the University of KwaZulu/Natal; the University of the Western Cape, and the University of Cape Town). The paucity of academic programmes for students is paralleled by the pressure for young women who are already working in higher education as writers, researchers, teachers and trainers to concentrate in the fields of science and technology, and to avoid research which explores the politics of gender (Mohlakoana, 2010). What this means is that despite the relative privilege of higher education, young people – men and women – registered as 'students' encounter many of the same expectations about masculinities, womanhood, sexuality, and power faced by those without access to higher education. These expectations include ideas about gender conformity, religious pressure around sexual morality, and very strong popular opposition to homosexuality. The cultures of higher education institutions may, in themselves, add particular rituals, norms, and expectations to the mix (see Hames, in this issue).

A number of socio-economic realities need consideration when taking the lives and experience of young Southern African women seriously. At the risk of

homogenization (clearly, given vast political diversity across Southern Africa, it is not altogether wise to conflate “Southern African” in this way), current constructions of gender – the meanings of “manhood” and “womanhood” – are currently in intensive contestation. The negotiation of “masculinities” and “womanhood” intersects with the dynamics of escalating poverty and unemployment, juxtaposed against the concerted efforts by the State to facilitate people’s access to new opportunities.

As is well-known, a second issue which colours all contemporary exploration of sexualities and reproduction in Southern Africa is the prevalence of HIV and the numbers of people dying of AIDS. The challenges of HIV and AIDS can be readily enumerated: the struggle to contain and prevent new transmissions, the politicized and fraught terrain of treatment, the economic implications of home-based care for the ill and dying, the challenge of loving and nurturing children (and others) left in the wake of death, the imminent collapse of certain hospital systems and the strain on all medical resources, the disappearance of teachers, nurses, labourers, fathers, politicians, singers, from their posts. It is also true that significant victories have been achieved: some excellent legislation on non-discrimination towards HIV positive people, vibrant (if occasionally infuriating) debate at governmental and NGO levels, and on-going work at every level of society to illuminate the severity of the epidemic as a threat to the very foundations of democracy. Those engaged as feminist activists and researchers have for the past decade been vigorously embedded into the work of addressing the challenges of living in a country in which issues of sexualities and gender are dominated by the realities of the HIV and AIDS epidemic.

There has been some success here, and it is now recognized in many circles that most South African women, especially young women and married women (categories which may overlap) do not have enough power over the negotiation of heterosexual sex to create conditions of “safety” for themselves and their partners. This is also especially true for poor women. There is also increasing recognition of the ways in which escalating poverty is transforming sexuality (heterosexualities and other performances of sexuality) into the terrain of transaction, where all players are vulnerable to commodification – who buys, and who sells, what are contextually defined, vulnerable to “market volatility”. “Masculinity” is bartered among and between bodies, and gets constructed as most powerful when most visibly heterosexual;

“femininity” – within bodies owning both penises and vaginas – purchases a vast range of resources: phone time, electricity, school fees, taxi-fares, jeans, status, groceries, networking opportunities...such transactions are not coded as sex work but as legitimate, expected, exchange within sexual (especially heterosexual) relationships. These dynamics present particular challenges to young men and women, placing them at the forefront of SRHR (sexual and reproductive health and rights) challenges.

These challenges encompass, of course, the vulnerability of young women to gender-based violence. It is recognized that confronting gender-based violence entails not only a solid set of legal instruments and an excellent system for their implementation, but simultaneously knowledge of women’s and girls’ rights *not* to be targeted as sexual prey. The corollary of this would be to say that SRHR work in Southern Africa demands a focus on women’s and girls’ confidence, authority, and capacity to negotiate relationships in terms of their own survival and safety.

Questions of reproductive health and rights are intertwined with all discourses on young women’s sexuality. Even in contexts such as South Africa, where access to information and contraception is fairly easily available, it remains an expectation that reproduction is a “woman’s business”, and negotiating the dynamic between health, pleasure, reproductive choice, and security is part of all sexually-active young women’s lives. As a political space, this has been undercut by questions around “safe sex” which pertain to the prevention of the transmission of HIV (except in debates about the termination of pregnancy), but just as new fundamentalist discourses have stressed the immorality of having sex outside marriage, so have they also deepened opposition to young women’s unquestioned access to contraception.

Between 2010 and 2011, the African Gender Institute hosted a project funded by the Ford Foundation on strengthening the SRHR leadership of young women based at five different SADC universities: the University of Zimbabwe, the University of Botswana, the University of the Witwatersrand, the University of Namibia, and the University of Cape Town. The project was based on previous work aimed at supporting African feminist writers, researchers and NGO activists in their understanding of the politics of sexuality and gender and in their deployment of different concepts, including that of SRHR, in their own work. We recognized the need to move into work directly engaging the young women who were so frequently the topics of discussion

about gender-based violence, the impact of economic stress on options for sexuality, and the meaning of reproductive rights in politically troubled contexts. Because so much of this research assumes that it is poor, rural, or working-class women who should be the focus of exploration, we deliberately chose to work with (not “on”) young women with largely lower-middle class backgrounds, on higher education campuses, and with very diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds.

This issue of *Feminist Africa* is a special edition which foregrounds the research created, with the young women, through the five different teams. Jill Bradbury and Peace Kiguwa, working with a team of young women, write about their own visual mapping of the University of the Witwatersrand as a way of re-seeing campus streets and surroundings in terms of sexual pleasure and sexual vulnerability. Sethunya Mosime, Poloko Ntshwarang, and Godisang Mookodi from the University of Botswana focused on the use of personal story-telling to generate dialogue about sexual conventions and the negotiation of gendered expectations for young women on campus, and off. Pieces by Tanja Bosch and Susan Holland-Muter, of the University of Cape Town, Lucy Edwards-Jauch from the University of Namibia, and by Naomi Wekwete and Charity Manyureke of the University of Zimbabwe add texture and diversity to the articles’ analysis of the work with young women on questions of gender-based violence and policy, the politics of space and sexuality, the meaning of HIV-prevention campaigns, and the politics of gender and sexual pleasure. In five teams, very interesting, cross-generational action research projects were developed, and the material presented in *Feminist Africa 17* is rich with potential for theory on what it means to take up SRHR work where young women’s lives are concerned.

The material generated through the project is embedded within a range of pieces which ask important questions about researching young women’s experiences of sexual and reproductive health and rights. The article by Mary Hames explores aspects of the work of the Gender Equity Unit at the University of the Western Cape, arguing that the Unit’s activist approach to fighting for the safety and dignity of young black lesbian, gay and transgendered people on campus constitutes a radical pedagogy, impossible in formal academic space. Rishita Nandigiri, of the Women’s Global Network on Reproductive Rights challenges the category of “young women” as homogenizing and unhelpful to feminist activism, and the complementary standpoint pieces of

Simukai Chigudu and Athenkosi Sophitshi, both “young” people suggest that the strongest route into the theorization of young Southern African men and women comes through their own self-representation.

In the *In Conversation* piece between Shereen Essof, director of JASS Southern Africa, and Jane Bennett of the African Gender Institute, Shereen Essof suggests that the question of security needs to be taken seriously – more seriously than it has ever been – by feminists working towards sexual rights in our contexts. Her analysis comes from a sense that the vocabulary of gender equality is too thin, in contemporary discourses around the ownership of women’s and girls’ bodies, to manage the threats against the right to choose one’s sexual partners, one’s own reproductive path, one’s own sources of sexual pleasure, and one’s right to accessible sexual and reproductive healthcare. While it may be the vocabulary of gender equality which has facilitated new forms of access to higher education for some young women, over the past fifteen years, this vocabulary –stripped of its feminist roots – cannot theorize sexuality as political. It cannot, thus, offer protection to young women fighting for their rights to the termination of pregnancy, to sexual pleasure and choice, for their humanity as people whose sexuality and genders cannot be deployed against them. Security may entail active networks of safe-houses, liaisons, mobilization, and living space but it also demands its own language. This issue of *Feminist Africa* hopes, through the conversations generated not only with Shereen Essof but among all the pieces, to contribute to the growth of such a language.

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# Travels in “fashionable” sexuality research: thoughts from home<sup>1</sup>

Jane Bennett

## Introduction

Fatou Sow, one of the most renowned and prolific feminist researcher and writers within the continent, tells us of an occasion which took place almost exactly twenty years ago, at the celebration of CODESRIA’s twentieth Anniversary: “*Professor Samir Amin, reflecting on the role of the intelligentsia and ideology in the development crisis, was haphazardly denouncing the struggle for women’s liberation, cultural challenges, environmental concerns, and so on as fashionable strategies*” (Sow, 1997:31). At the time, Amin’s approach to the meaning of taking the study of gender seriously would probably have been shared by many of his colleagues, and his scorn was, as we know, robustly rejected by a very wide range of African-based feminist theoreticians and activists. *Engendering Social Sciences in Africa*, a collection of essays edited by Ayesha Imam, Amina Mama and Fatou Sow, published papers drawn from a diverse set of disciplines (economics, education, history, and others) through CODESRIA in 1997. The collection encapsulated part of the contemporary intellectual response to Amin’s wariness about the project of revolutionizing gender norms and remains, to my mind, one of the most important books within c20 theory on the potential of social sciences research.

It is probably the case that intellectual resistance to the notion of taking gender seriously as part and parcel of the design and creation of excellent research remains in some quarters of continental academic institutions. Whether such resistance would, however, now be expressed as a resistance to what is *fashionable* is doubtful. Different forms of marginalization have arisen (such as the frequent tokenization of the value of research which explores the dynamics of gender), and within feminist circles themselves, powerful debates on the ways in which “gender talk” has become co-opted as a facet

of neo-liberal government policy- making make for interesting reading. Fierce negotiations for credibility, influence, and value characterise all theoretical work worth its salt; within the c21, there is a very rich array of African-based intellectual engagements with the dynamics of gender, in diverse contexts and a vibrant (even occasionally ferocious) network of debates. I had not, however, heard the term *fashionable* used of this work for a long time.

Then, in May, 2012, I did hear it again. The Gender Institute, of CODESRIA, has been the home for high-level teaching on the relationship between gender and many fields of interest (the media, climate change, development, and so on) for over a decade. In 2012, under the directorship of Sylvia Tamale, the Gender Institute sought to tackle the question of researching African sexualities. Applications to participate in the Institute came from a very diverse set of disciplinary and contextual backgrounds, and those selected included researchers working in sociology, religious studies, development, history, geographical sciences, critical literary studies, and public health. Both both men and women, they came from universities across the continent, and were all committed intellectuals and teachers. The focus of the Institute generated immediate debate, as early as the first day of the programme. Several participants suggested that the question of “African Sexualities” as a route into excellent research and theory-building was “*very dubious*”, “*pandering to what is seen as fashionable*,” and “*only of interest in the West; we have more serious things to talk about.*”

Given that the Gender Institute, like other CODESRIA teaching programmes, welcomes controversial and direct input from participants and teachers alike, these perspectives proved simply a useful way of initiating discussion. By the end of the programme, evaluations suggested that none of the participants any longer doubted the value of taking the politics of sexuality seriously within social and humanities sciences. However, the similarity between the 1990's rejection of the idea that the politics of gender should be taken seriously by African intellectual work and the participants' vocabulary of resistance to discussion of sexualities (“*fashionable*,” “*Western*,” “*not serious*”) was interesting.

This article seeks to offer a contribution to discussions about intellectual work on sexualities in African contexts as “*Western*” and largely unimportant to the paradigms we need to strengthen social science and humanities in African higher education and research institutions. The paper is organized

into three sections, through which I develop an argument about the need to be wary of the simplistic deployment of an “African”/“Western” binary, while simultaneously asking for a rich and intellectually resilient continentally-driven set of discourses concerning sexualities research. The first section asks questions about the temptation to homogenize “the West”, and the second offers a very brief review of dominant work on gender and sexualities within contemporary African research contexts. The third section introduces ideas about the need to ground our theory on gender and sexualities through a range of frameworks, but more powerfully through current and on-going research activism. This section draws on a particular research project, generated in part through the African Gender Institute, which worked with movement-building, sexuality and gender for young women in higher education in the Southern African region. The conclusion suggests that current economic and political contexts demand that we move beyond name-calling around research-foci (“*fashionable*”, “Western”) and open up research spaces to work which authentically engages with men and women’s socio-political realities.

### Sexualities research “*in the West*”?

Globally, over the past thirty years, research focused on questions to which an understanding of sexualities is core has grown enormously, and has been located in several disciplinary areas: demography, health, sociology, and cultural studies. There are leading international journals, grounded in very different approaches, ranging from the renowned *British Journal of Medicine* (a google search of the journal’s contents over the past 20 years using the term *sexuality* comes up with 1034 hits) to *GLQ*, which regularly publish research on the politics, cultures, and dynamics of sexualities. *Culture, Health and Society* and *Sexualities*, in particular, are well known for their editorial support of research which recognizes the importance of medically-grounded work (such as the need to prevent the transmission of HIV between men having sex with other men) but which insist on sexualities research as always engaged with the micropolitics of local, stubborn, and complex contexts in which the possibilities of ready categorization or straightforward generalization are rare. These journals’ work has insisted, too, that while the urgencies of the HIV pandemic continue to deserve the attention of researchers, sexualities research cannot be imagined solely in terms of questions of viral transmission, “vulnerability”, and “risk”. The range of topics catalysed by an interest in

sexualities and their constellation into fields of allied enquiry is directed by political questions of epistemology. Within medical research, of course, research around sexualities may readily deploy concepts of dysfunction, a-typicality, and illness; within postmodern cultural studies, communities of researchers accept ideas about race, intersectionality, margin, or/and economy as critical points of entry into a new question or concern.

The roots of contemporary research and theory on sexualities within Europe, the United State of America are multiple and tangled. While a predictable chasm exists between research on sexual health generated from within the medical sciences and research on meaning of sexualities within political economies and cultural dynamics, the contemporary work of leading researchers (such as Roz Petchesky, Richard Parker, Sonia Correa, Carole Vance, Gary Dowsett, Peter Aggleton, and Diana di Mauro) is informed by public health, economics, political studies, and history. It would probably be safe to say that the influence of Foucault on understanding the interactions between sexualities, language, and power undergirds most canonical theory here. It is also safe to suggest that there are multiple tensions between feminist work (largely rooted in the recognition of reproduction, and the vulnerability to privatised violence, as critical political zones), queer theory (largely driven by the challenge to heteronormative approaches to identity, health, and epistemology), and the work of post-colonial writers (such as Jacqui Alexander, Anne McClintock, and Paul Gilroy) who read the project of colonialisms – and neo-colonialisms – as inherently both sexualized and gendered.

One body of “*Western*” writing on the politics of sexualities, often overlooked, in the homogenization of “the West”, is the extraordinary work done, since the 1970s, by poets, novelists, and theorists who worked from what came to be termed an “intersectional” paradigm (the term was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw). All of these writers identified themselves as African-America, Latina, and/or “women of color,” and their epistemological approach to the creation of knowledge was deeply grounded in the recognition of how the state was organized through the deployment of race, class, and gender. Their analysis work was extraordinarily influential, as they suggested that the DNA of what it meant to experience humanity in the North rehearsed, remembered, and resisted the terms of injustice on which the state had been founded and through which it continued to sustain itself. Theorists here

include Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, Barbara Smith, Beth Ritchie, Barbara Christian and June Jordan, and no curriculum on political questions of sexuality in “the West” can be considered valuable without their voices.

A quite different, but equally serious, body of literature on sexualities is rooted within the (initially) historical work which came to underlie queer theory on the ways in which cultures of heteronormative language about desire and the body have erased the possibility of significantly revising the past. From Jeffrey Weeks’ analysis of the construction of the “invert” within c19 Britain to the work of Gilbert Herdt on what it may be possible to learn from colonial American records of indigenous people’s gender and sexuality categorizations and socio-political organization, the field of what has come to be instantiated as “queer studies” is full of debate. Some of the underlying theoretical insights of this work, such as the notion of sexuality as fluid, inhospitable to categorization, and as a zone targeted for institutional and state-level control, have travelled very widely.

In the first decade of the c21, a final (for this piece) area of “Western’ research needs to be mentioned. In 2010, the report from a global meeting on *“Repoliticizing sexual and reproductive health and rights”*, held in Langkawi, suggested that the broad agenda of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) is still something for which international, national and local actors in the sexual and reproductive health and rights movement have to fight. The programme emphasized the centrality of sexual and reproductive health to sustainable and equitable development processes, and defined “health” with a breadth which allowed researchers, policy advocates, and activists to link notions of rights to questions of sexual and reproductive health. The report is particularly interested with the ways in which macroeconomic frameworks have failed, by and large, to take on board the critical recognition that people’s economic potential is embedded within conditions productive of “the body”. Such conditions may entail questions of security and conflict and/or questions of access to housing or clean water; they simultaneously entail the operation of sexual and reproductive dynamics. While the report concludes with a range of innovative ideas concerning possible re-engagements with the basic ICPD agenda, it is undeniable that a thread of concern about the contemporary shape of access to sexual and reproductive rights, especially those of young women, runs through its pages.

Although the past two decades have seen (often in connection to the attempt to prevent HIV transmission) new discourses on the importance of understanding sexualities, and new medical opportunities (such as the HPV vaccine), the combination of global economic instability, war and conflict, the rise of fundamentalist notions of the human, and rapidly changing knowledge economies have impacted heavily on the possibility of securing global sexual and reproductive health and rights, especially for women and girls.

The ways in which ideas about sexual and reproductive rights flow from Northern-driven development discourses are complex. Nearly 20 years ago, at the ICPD conference through which the notion of sexuality as a right was initiated, support for the connection between taking sexuality seriously and designing policies on health was organized on the continent by Senegal, then in the leadership of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). The OAU's position that reproductive health and sexual health were critically conjoined placed it in alliance with Southern NGOs, such as DAWN, which argued for links to be made between the right for women to have control over their sexual/reproductive bodies and the possibility of economic development. There were also several African states which refused to link ideas about "rights" and "choice" to questions of sexuality, fearing that such ideas threatened religious guidelines on gender, sex, and marriage and fearing, too, that "Western" constructions of individualized rights were aimed at epistemological and material recolonization (Klugman, 2002). The language of the Platform eventually read, "The human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. Equal relationships between women and men in matters of sexual relations and reproduction, including full respect for the integrity of the person, require mutual respect, consent and shared responsibility for sexual behaviour and its consequences".

The vector through which most development research on questions of sexuality in African contexts has been driven since then is, of course, the twenty-year long battle against the transmission of HIV. Although many African delegations at the Beijing Conference on Women in 1995 articulated, through ferocious debate, the possibility of understanding sexualities as part and parcel of women's rights to equality, the epidemic overwhelmed all questions linking health, sexuality and policy for a decade afterwards. In the

North, due to the almost-erasure of heterosexual transmission of the virus, the connection between the language of rights and questions of sexualities circulated primarily around lesbian and gay rights or (increasingly) around questions of the right to the termination of pregnancy for heterosexual women. In sub-Saharan African contexts, however, development discourses constructed an unending flow of “people sexually at risk” for HIV transmission: sex workers, truck drivers, migrant workers, young and undereducated women, men-who-have-sex-with-men. Heterosexuality became a zone under intensive medical surveillance: pregnant women, in dozens of countries, served as the data-base for statistics on prevalence, and heterosexual activity was categorized fiercely through the vocabulary of “safety” and “risk.” In South Africa, a delayed response to the need to address the transmission of HIV and to address the question of treatment for HIV positive people meant that intensive NGO/civil society work had to turn towards a very particular conflict with the state. In most SADC contexts, public health discourses around “populations at risk” for the transmission of HIV came to include dangerously stereotypic notions about masculinity and femininity, such as the idea that “men” are “naturally irresponsible sexual partners” or that marriage was a zone “safe” from HIV transmission because it was young mobile men, sex workers, and young women involved in transactional sex who were the most vulnerable to infection. Much NGO and civil society work sought to tackle naïve readings of gender, poverty, and sexuality but in doing so, it has been argued that the politics of sexual and reproductive health and rights took a back seat to the debates around HIV transmission and treatment (Cornwall, A, Correa, S. and S. Jolly, 2008).

At the same time, there has been vigorous engagement with the need to realize sexual and reproductive rights across diverse spheres: new NGOs have been formed to spearhead educational and policy projects, legal reform continues around questions of the prevention of violence against women, and networks of activists and researchers have continued to insist on connection and strategic co-ordination across the sub-Saharan region (such as the work done by JASS<sup>2</sup>). Interest in several “constituencies” fuel this work: sex workers, lesbian women, men who are HIV-positive, women affected by gender-based violence, women with HIV and those who care for them (usually also women), and women fighting for reproductive choice and security.

It remains undeniable that – by and large – it is not the state which funds

this kind of work; a wide range of Northern foundations do so. Such funding ranges from the gigantic resources of the United States Government President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) initiative, on which hundreds of NGOs fighting against the transmission of HIV depend, to miniscule grants made under very difficult conditions to marginalized communities (such as those made to GenderDynamix, in Cape Town, which supports refugees from a dozen continental contexts, whose lives have been threatened due to their gender identity choice). Here, the meaning of "the West" becomes more painful than usual – and extremely tangled by threads which criss-cross around questions of power, location, individual and organizational work. It could be argued that the politics of sexualities have become live threads within civil society, research, and advocacy work within our contexts due only to the resources generated from the North.

Could it be the case that where such funding is threatened, NGOs tremble, academic research opportunities disappear, and "the fashionable" relinquishes its allure? Is it the case that our African feminist debates on the politics of sexuality are rooted simply in a different version of "the gravy train"?

To this question, the following section offers a resounding, "no." *To suggest "yes", I would argue, returns one only to one of the crudest (yet one of the most enduring) forms of intellectual racism alive: thinkers and activists, who are women, working in/with African contexts have no minds of their own.*

## Contemporary writing on gender and sexualities within African contexts

Numerous writers attest to the vibrancy, complexity and visibility of sexuality as a zone of pleasure and social negotiation within the poetry and oral cultures with which they are familiar; in an article about masculinities within his own "Shona" family, in the 1960s, Chenjerai Shire writes that wives' evocative poetry to husbands on their desirability stressed the pleasure husbands were expected to give them, sexually (Shire, 1994). Despite this, mid c20 African intellectual work which takes sexuality seriously engages with it as a political force through which the most vicious of systemic brutalities can become part and parcel of social organization. Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, published in 1952, uses a psychoanalytic approach to heterosexual desire generated from within the crucible of French colonial epistemology, and argues that "the black man's" desire for "white" includes sexual fantasy, idealization, sexual longing

and a self-hatred that splits him from himself. His demand for a black self-consciousness (a consciousness) ripped away from Manichean notions of race and hierarchy includes faith that “love” itself may be possible: “*Today I believe in the possibility of love; that is why I endeavour to trace its perfections, its perversions*” (Fanon, 1952: 75). Nawal el Saadawi’s *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* (1960), a fictional account of what a “woman doctor” encountered among rural Egyptian villages stresses that heterosexuality for poor women constitutes a terrain of assault, choicelessness, and physical/psychological damage; here, heterosexual norms are shaped by specific patriarchal values about the value of “women’s” bodies, and no sense of sexuality as a zone of intimacy, relational excitement, or joy can be found in the book.

The truth of the matter is that it has sometimes been difficult to manage the politics of gender and sexualities together, especially where development-oriented discourses about “women’s empowerment” have dominated research. Within African feminist writing over the past two decades, there has however been a strong thread of research and writing which seeks to combine epistemological commitment to “undoing” patriarchal and colonial versions of gender with the recognition that sexualities comprise a critical terrain for theory and activism. Leading contemporary research voices here are Amina Mama, Charmaine Pereira, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, Kopano Ratele, Sylvia Tamale, Desiree Lewis, Elizabeth Khaxas, Patricia Mcfadden, Zanele Muholi, and Akosua Ampofo, although many others contribute (in both disciplinary and transdisciplinary work) to the discussions. The researchers named here do not share foci or approaches (Muholi, for example, researches as a visual artist, a photographer, and works mainly with black lesbians in South Africa; Ampofo, now the director of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Legon, Ghana, has a background in development studies but her research has taken on questions of reproductive choice, and of masculinities). But what a survey of their work will show is a passionate engagement with the activism of research, with the urgency of writing which tackles the politics of gender and sexualities within African contexts and with an eye attuned to the fact that researching these politics has often been done in the name of “culture”, the exotic and the sub-human. As Lewis begins her piece on “Representing African Sexualities”, “Although the American cartoon (she reproduces a cartoon of a “black man” gazing lustfully at a “white woman”) ...was produced in the nineteenth century, it features images that still haunt

our conceptual landscape, whether within or beyond Africa. The cartoon portrays recurring stereotypes of black bodies and sexuality: the image of the lewd black man; the pure white female body; the portrayal of the black/African body as grotesque, uncivilized and crudely sexual, even when formally dressed” (Lewis, 2011: 199). It is not only the image of the poor HIV-positive black woman, abused and abandoned, whose hegemony over the meaning of gendered-sexuality-in-Africa deserves deconstruction; it is also the case that a very long legacy of anthropological, epidemiological, and development-oriented research exists, rehearsing notions of gender as static, “traditionally” brutal, irrational and superstitious in matters of sexualities, and identically deployed across African contexts.

In the past few years, a small number of volumes edited by feminist writers, presenting research on the politics of gender and sexualities in African contexts have been published. Some of these volumes have roots in collectively generated research projects, such as “Mapping Sexualities,” convened by Amina Mama in 2004, and in workshops, African Feminist Forum space discussions, and special issues of journals. The books include two by Steyn and van Zyl, from South Africa, *Performing Queer* (2005) and *The Price and the Prize* (2009); *Re-thinking Sexualities in Africa* (edited by Signe Arnfred of the Nordic Africa Institute), *African Feminist Politics of Knowledge* (published in 2010, and edited by Akosua Ampofo and Signe Arnfred), Sylvia Tamale’s *African Sexualities: A Reader* was published by Pambazuka Press in 2011, and *Queer African Reader* edited by Sokari Ekine and Hakima Abbas has just been published. A collection of pieces of qualitative research methodologies and feminist sexualities research, *Jacketed Women*, co-edited by Jane Bennett and Charmaine Pereira, will be published in early 2013.

The collections all profile the possibilities of research which is unafraid to tackle questions of gender and sexualities outside the framework of HIV transmission and “traditional” rites: questions of who is having sex, with whom; questions of pleasure; questions on the impact of post-flag democratic change – or militarism – on sexualities; questions about masculinities; questions about sexual commodification; and about queer theory and experience. As research, the collections offer an enormous amount to those of us also working as writers, and especially to those of us who work as teachers and supervisors of young writers and researchers, whether as independent thinkers, in universities or in research-inclusive NGOs.

*African Sexualities: A Reader* opens with two chapters, both of which address the question of what it means to research the politics of sexualities and gender in African contexts, both with a sense of the colonial (and indeed occasionally current) gazes which configured African embodiment as simultaneously exotic and bestial and with a commitment to exploring the ethics and methodologies of contemporary work. Tamale writes, “a good sexuality research project does not view methodology as a mere appendage ... or a “way of carrying out an enquiry” (Tamale, 2011; 29) and argues that “researching and theorizing sexualities beyond the tired polemics of violence, disease and reproduction and exploring their layered complexities beyond heterosexual normativity and moral boundaries will lead to fresh conceptual insights and paradigm shifts” (Tamale, 2011: 30).

What this brief survey suggests is that *fashion* is not what is driving an interest in the politics of gender and sexualities in African contexts of research and writing. In the same years during which the collections have been put together (+/- 2004–2012), we have seen many debates within different countries concerning the independence of women, and the meaning of their sexual and reproductive rights. Within the constitutional reform process of Kenya, for example, debates on access to the termination of pregnancy were vocal and integral to voting politics; within the uprisings of Egypt and Tunisia, questions of women’s rights surfaced continually as indices for the meaning of the revolutions underway, and in many countries policy-making and religious discourses have drawn on homophobia to generate support for sitting presidents or aspirant political actors. At the same time, escalating economic challenges have placed heavy burdens on civil society organizing, making it even more difficult to sustain even basic service delivery in programmes targeting survivors of sexual violence or domestic abuse. Far from there being “extra” funding available from international or regional donors for work on gender and sexualities, the 2008 fiscal crisis impacted funding in this arena very heavily – many programmes have seen cutbacks, withdrawals, and enormous battles around the sustainability of projects providing support to sex workers, to MSM projects, to educational programmes, and to organizations supporting research on gender and sexualities. Despite this, research in the area is strengthening, and the reason for this must be acknowledged as the relevance of the issues to questions of economic resilience, democratic governance, and to the ability of those in the social sciences to work with integrity and applied common sense.

## Bringing it home

In “Restore, reform, but do not transform: the gender politics of higher education in Africa,” Amina Mama argued a decade ago (African Journal of Higher Education, CODESRIA, 2003) that post-flag democracies’ investment in universities as critical sites of decolonization has long been replaced by the developmental notion that higher education is critical to a country’s economic growth and sustainability (Mama, 2003: 110-113). The latter notion opened up, within the circles of international development policy, a link between gender equality and higher education where gender equality referred almost exclusively to questions of access for women to universities – women as students, women as leaders, women within particular disciplinary zones (science, engineering and technology in particular), women as employees. Mama’s article explores something of the tension between this development-driven discourse and the activism of African-based feminist researchers, whose political analyses of intellectual communities highlighted the occlusion of research by “women” and – who simultaneously – neglected or misunderstood the dynamics of gender as a socio-economic force. Mama notes that policies of “reform”, which shifted the grounds on which some women could access university space through affirmative action policies or which insisted that men and women be “equally represented” on committees relied on neoliberal theories of democratic process, and would not deliver “transform(ation)”: “the signs are that if hegemonic arguments favouring technocratic market-driven notions of efficiency and financial diversification prevail, educational philosophies imbued with a sense of regional history and mission, including those espoused by feminist intellectuals, are likely to be mortgaged” (Mama, 2003: 122).

Such philosophies have their own legacies and trajectories, but can be glossed perhaps by a quotation from a piece by Charmaine Pereira in an early issue of *Feminist Africa*, themed as Intellectual Politics: “Between knowing and imagining – knowing what we know today is limited and imagining more expansive, creative possibilities – this is the space that we must continue to inhabit” (Pereira, 30; 2002).

A dense and contentious set of discussions reaching back to Amilcar Cabral and Leopold Senghor, and including Cheikh Anta Diop, Ngugi wa’ Thiongo, Archie Mafeje, and Ali Mazrui characterise the interdisciplinary and profoundly decolonialist project of shaping education in independent Africa. Pereira’s

voice resonates with these discussions (blind as they are all to the politics of gender), and locates the theoretical drive of her feminism within the debate on what it means to take seriously the project of knowledge creation. It is this debate that Mama fears will be “mortgaged” as the 21st century moves into consolidated forms of managerialist coercion within African university cultures.

In brief, to differing extents, contemporary SADC-based universities face a number of challenges: challenged economies, rising numbers of young people with a strong desire for class mobility through higher education, campus structures which are too small (in many ways) to accommodate these numbers, and the question of the “brain drain” which pulls researchers, teaching faculty and prospective students away from national university spaces towards international ones. At the same time, the gender parity of students admitted to universities has become more equitable, women are increasingly present in non-traditional areas of study (medical science, business, and the sciences more broadly), and women are more visible within higher echelons of university leadership. Women who are accepted into universities in the region as students are thus faced with complex double messages. On the one hand, their academic institutional cultures increasingly recognize their equality with men and their intellectual potential; on the other hand, their contexts include high levels of vulnerability to sexual violence, stereotypes of hypersexual femininity, and strong – usually conservative – expectations around their identities as future “girlfriends”, “wives”, and “mothers”. The territory they negotiate as gendered and sexual people is one fraught with opportunity, challenge, anxiety, and excitement, and it is one which constitutes much of the “informal curriculum” of any higher education institutional culture (Bennett and Reddy, 2008).

Presenting theoretical arguments about the critical importance of understanding the politics of gender and sexuality within African contexts through a review of dominant research voices, such as in the section above, is one way of opening up discussion about how it is possible to bring the politics of gender and sexuality from the “informal” university curriculum to the formal one. A different approach might want to explore students’ ideas, experiences, and activism not through a dichotomized description of their curricula (“informal/formal”), but by working with them as researchers in the terrain. This final section of the article presents aspects of a project, hosted

through the African Gender Institute between 2010 and 2011, which tried to do this. This project (co-ordinated by Susan Holland-Muter, at the AGI) described itself as “strengthening the SRHR leadership of young women” based at five different SADC universities: the University of Zimbabwe, the University of Botswana, the University of the Witwatersrand, the University of Namibia, and the University of Cape Town.

Before moving onto discussion of this project<sup>3</sup>, a few comments on the use of the term “young women” are needed. Over the past decade, a consortium of influences within broad-based activist and advocacy work have drawn upon a category called “young women.” Donor emphases, dedicated transnational groups (such as the Young Africa Women’s Leadership Forum, sponsored by the US and SA governments), specific projects within NGOs (such as the young women’s project in the South African 1-in-9 Project), and organizations built by “young women themselves” (such as YOWLI in Zimbabwe) have adopted this category of “young women” in response to their convictions about the impact of patriarchal, neo-liberal, or fundamentalist forces. The actual work envisaged, and the identities and interests of the women involved, are diverse, and can be motivated as much by notions of “model citizenship” (the Young African Women’s Leadership Forum) as by ideas of revolutionary and direct feminist action against stigmatizing norms (1-in-9 Project). To my mind, the concept of “young women” risks patronage (matronage?), and can easily fall into liberal – even welfare-oriented – analyses of power; and, the term too quickly deploys age as though it were an automatically meaningful index of experience. Despite my theoretical queasiness, we cannot help however but note that the one place – full of “young women” – in which is near-impossible to find, within Southern Africa, organizational efforts (outside those initiated by religious groups) dedicated towards “young women’s leadership” is higher education. In a forthcoming article, I explore the deployment and use of “young women” both as a theoretical and an advocacy-oriented category, but in this article, the concentration accepts the need to take “young women” seriously in zones of higher education.

The AGI project was based on previous work aimed at supporting African feminist writers, researchers and NGO activists in their understanding of the politics of sexuality and gender and in their deployment of different concepts, including that of SRHR, in their own work. We recognized the need to move into work directly engaging the “young women” who were so frequently the

topics of discussion about gender-based violence, the impact of economic stress on options for sexuality, and the meaning of reproductive rights in politically troubled contexts. University teams of faculty and student researchers were built through careful discussion, over time, and each one developed a research action project which undertook to raise consciousness, as “research”, about what young women were experiencing around questions or sexuality on their campuses, and to trace and theorize “action” initiated by each team which aimed to challenge and transform (if only for a day) the campus.

The question of reproductive security came to play a powerful role in the project. Although their country contexts differed, the young women involved worked with questions of gender-based violence and policy, the politics of space and sexuality, the meaning of HIV-prevention campaigns, and the politics of gender and sexual pleasure; in teams, they developed fascinating action research projects in these areas, as the *Feminist Africa 17* pieces show. Within the team-discussions, and within the large workshops in which all project participants came together, certain topics emerged with regularity

To the surprise of many of the faculty-based researchers, the meaning of “sexual education”, mandated in many secondary school curricula, arose as a key zone of tension around what it was, and was not, possible (at first) to discuss openly. A generation of young women with access to globalized MTV-imagery, to education about “the biological body”, and (widely promoted) access to contraception was nonetheless often embedded in “sex education”’s repressive discourse about morality and conservative gender scripts, directly based on religious moralism. Tales were told about biology classrooms, where questions about access to contraception are treated as indices of girls’ “immorality”, where young women who knew what they would like to experience as sexually pleasurable self-organized as “secret clubs” to exchange information and experience, and where the heterosexual desire of young men was talked of as “naturally aggressive.” As Muhanguzi suggests of Ugandan “sex education” secondary school curricula, the interlock between Christian-based ideas about sexual morality and gender, and those offered within secondary education classrooms, targets young women; and, especially those who reach the top echelons of secondary school achievement – likely to access higher education – have been colonized by what one participant described as “*this stuff; this stuff which won’t leave my brain; no matter how much I read or talk, I still want to have sex with him and then I feel so so bad*” (Muhanguzi, 2005).

This theme led to our recognition that, across contexts, there was a need for sophisticated and practical information about reproductive health. The impact of HIV discourses on young women's understandings of sexual pleasure, sexual choice, and reproductive health, linked to the negativity about women's sexual desire voiced by the biology teacher or the religious studies one, has been – the participants agreed – to complicate access to fundamental information. Despite ideas about advances in SRHR access (through legislation or policy), participants discussed passionately their “initiation” stories about how they learned to “manage” their fertility, how they contained their fears and excitement about sexual encounters, how they struggled with finding ways to get and use condoms without “losing respect,” and how much they distrusted the Student Health Service, (sometimes) other young women, and their teachers when it came to reproductive health information. While information on “how to please him,” could be discovered through reading magazines, information on the effects of different contraceptive options was much harder to gather. And the question of access to abortion, in countries where it remains illegal and within South Africa, plunged participants into “taboo” zones of talk.

The growth of “virginity” discourses (the church and school emphasis on girls' virginity as sacred, reinforced – for some participants – by beliefs grounded within family norms and cultures) did nothing to alleviate the sense of ignorance for young women about their reproductive and sexual bodies. Participants spoke of negotiating “sexual knowledge creation” as a “*computer game: you are running, dodging, winning, losing, but you are always in the game, you have to keep thinking, keep planning*”. Discussion in one workshop about the need to negotiate for particular forms of sexual interaction (such as anal sex, oral sex, web-camera based sex) as a “choice” against the danger of conception suggested sophisticated sexual and reproductive planning; but at other moments, participants spoke with one another, in small groups, for hours about the management of periods, their experiences with contraceptives, and their own pregnancies and motherhood (only one participant was a mother, but a few spoke in a workshop about wanting to become pregnant and having been pregnant).

These topics all demand refocus on the “reproductive health and rights” areas of our gender and sexuality discourses. While these areas are, of course, deeply embedded into questions of sexuality (choice, identity, orientation,

behaviours, norms, knowledges), the “older” researchers (the faculty) in the project were sometimes taken aback by the levels of distress spoken of by the younger women in relation to reproductive health concerns. The politics of condom usage, the fear of “becoming sterile” if one masturbates, the stigmatization suffered by becoming pregnant when a teenager, and the need to negotiate for one’s own reproductive safety without making this a topic of conversation with a male partner, were among both the workshop and some of the “late-night discussions” within the project. What was dramatically clear was the disjunction between the young women participants’ academic confidence and their sense of impotence around the possibility of controlling their own bodies sexually. A equally clear disjunction was visible, despite the participants’ diversity, between their relative willingness to explore ideas of sexual pleasure and their reluctance (initially) to take active leadership within campus cultures around the promotion of ordinary (by now; the Beijing Conference was held in 1995) ideas about women’s rights to control their own fertility, sexual pleasure, and sexual experience.

## Conclusion

This article was stimulated both by the dynamism and research of the work done within the AGI project, and later by the opportunity to work with the CODESRIA Gender institute in 2012. Its argument is simply, in the end, that it is important to have at one’s fingertips a general sense of what has actually been created “in the West” around questions of sexuality and how this both does, and does not, influence research in our own contexts. Much of what has been written in the past few years, especially by African feminist scholars on questions of gender and sexualities, is well aware of “Western” scholarship but rooted in the dominant political, economic, legal and cultural debates of African contexts and seeking cross-continental synergy. The importance of this synergy cannot be overstated; without it, we risk the attrition of our most vivacious, innovative, and self-assured young scholars.

## Notes

1. This article is based on a currently unpublished paper written for the Gender Institute, CODESRIA, June 2012, and I have permission to draw from it here. I am also indebted to discussion and co-writing with Charmaine Pereira; see the introduction of *Jacketed Women: Researching the Politics of Gender and Sexuality in African Contexts* (edited by Bennett, J. and Pereira, C; UNUP and University of Cape Town Press, forthcoming)
2. JASS is the name of Just Associates, an international NGO with hubs in four regions. Its mission is to connect local women's activism to global policy debates. [www.justassociates.org](http://www.justassociates.org)
3. Aspects of this project are differently presented by the researchers who participated, within *Feminist Africa* 17; and their viewpoints and wisdom, attuned to the specifics of their own institutional cultures, constitute a conversation with this article. It has been an honour to work with all of them, and the project co-developed is planned to continue in 2013.

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# Thinking Women's Worlds

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With Ayanda Khumalo, Mabogoshi Matlala,  
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## Introduction

This paper presents an analysis of the process and products of an action research project focused on exploring young women's experiences of student-life in South Africa in the early years of the twenty-first century. The paper presents 1) a visual ethnographic account of the spaces of campus and how young women navigate these spaces of belonging or alienation, particularly with reference to sexual "safety"; 2) an analysis of points of (dis)identification with the world of the university or the academy and how other dimensions of identity, including "race", gender and sexuality, intersect or conflict with student and intellectual identity; and 3) reflections on how the visual narrative medium adopted challenged us as researchers to explore the process of meaning making in an unfamiliar mode, enabling us to see the academy through the eyes of our students. The research process made evident the ambiguities and ambivalence in university experience for young women who, on the one hand, feel a sense of institutional pride and personal achievement, and on the other, a pervasive sense of being outsiders, not "at home" in the work and play spaces of campus, despite their legitimate status as students.

The research team at the University of the Witwatersrand interpreted the broad rubric of the Africa Gender Institute project as an opportunity to explore the meanings of intellectual identity and academic life for a group of senior undergraduate / junior postgraduate women students, to think about the worlds of "thinking women". Working in a participatory action-research paradigm (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Maguire, 2000) meant that the women students in the team were both subjects and objects of their own research process, thinking about their worlds in a critically reflexive way. It is the stated aim of the University of

Witwatersrand to create a “university we can call our own”. Our participation in this project afforded us an opportunity to explore to what extent young women students experience the university in this way, and to actively engage with making this vision a reality. Our explicit aim was to create conditions for the students to generate new perspectives on their experiences, to learn new ways of “reading the world” (Freire, 1972, 1973), creating articulations between the lived experience of being a student and the formal academic tasks of theoretical work, between life and learning. This is our understanding of the ubiquitous phrase “critical thinking” which is advocated as the central task of university study and provides the pedagogical orientation for apprentice researchers.

## Methodology and Process

### *Participants*

The project was conducted under the leadership of the authors of this article, Peace Kiguwa and Jill Bradbury, from the department of psychology, School of Human and Community Development at Wits. Five young women students were identified as co-researchers. The team members were Ayanda Khumalo, Mabogoshi Matlala, Hlengiwe Mchunu, Daphney Mogopudi and Zandile Ngubeni. We wish to acknowledge their active participation in the project, collection of extremely valuable data and their insightful analysis of the university world, both in the creative process of photographic documentation and in the next layer of interpretation. For this reason, the usual convention of anonymity in research participants has not been observed, with the permission of the participants who wish to assert their voices here in the text.

Two of the women were from the psychology honours class, the only two black African women in this cohort. The remaining members of the group were all participants in the International Human Rights Exchange (IHRE) Programme. Participants were therefore selected in terms of three primary criteria: 1) proven undergraduate academic track record indicative of potential future contributions as intellectuals and researchers; 2) disciplinary area: the question of identity is central to programmes of study in psychology and human rights; 3) marginalized gendered identities: the project created an opportunity to engage young African women in research, encouraging this under-represented target group to participate in knowledge production and to consider research careers.

### *The Process of data collection: interpreting and documenting the world*

We held a series of seminars and workshops, mostly over weekends, constrained by timetables and the long distances that some members of the group had to travel daily to and from campus. Even in these logistical practicalities, the structural effects of gender and “race” made their impact felt: working in the evenings was simply not an option for the group due to the risks for women travelling long distances to apartheid dormitory townships at night. The reading programme for these seminars was of necessity modest as all of the students were in their final year of study and the demands of their formal studies increased as the year progressed. All students in the group had previously completed modules on gender and sexuality as part of their degree studies, and were therefore able to bring a relatively high level of theoretical and conceptual engagement into discussions. We read and discussed papers about action research (e.g. Maguire, 2000) and narrative theory (e.g. Freeman, 2003) and university policy documents about equity and transformation. Quite early in the process, we settled on visual autobiography (Squire, 2011) or reflexive photography (Schulze, 2007) as a methodological approach. Squire’s work in the UK suggests ways in which narrative methodologies might be augmented by visual methodologies, particularly where the focus is space and place. Schulze’s project documented the experiences of white, male academics at the University of Pretoria, identifying aspects of the physical world that had symbolic significance for this group’s attachment to academia and their sense that their power was being eroded by processes of institutional transformation. Our project raised a question as a counterpoint to this study: if academic spaces are documented from an-other perspective, from the perspective of black women students, what dimensions of power, belonging and loss might then emerge? We began working with a professional photographer and filmmaker, Iris Dawn Parker, who offered basic photography skills workshops and facilitated critical discussions about the personal and political possibilities of documenting the world in images.

### *Institutional collaboration and Audiences*

One of the stated aims of the project was to engage young women not only in research but also in activism, seeking to impact upon institutional culture. The

Transformation Office<sup>1</sup> of the University was a supportive collaborative partner and the Wits Arts and Language Experience (WALE), an annual festival in the faculty of Humanities, provided a focal point for the preparation of the work to be communicated to a wider institutional audience of fellow academics and students. The process of learning to attend to the world in new ways, to “see” the world (Sontag, 1966) and document these experiences, entailed layers of interpretation for multiple audiences: 1) individual participants photographing their worlds and writing up journal entries, “private” documents for the self, textualising experiences that are usually simply lived, and in the process “rewriting the self” (Freeman, 2003); 2) the sharing of these texts in the research team, exploring lines of similarity, thinking about how individual stories articulate with wider social stories; 3) the selection of particular storylines and images for presentation at the Africa Gender Institute workshop in Cape Town with the other participating universities (Universities of Cape Town, Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe) in which important points of similarity and critical contextual differences emerged in dialogue; 4) the Wits university audience for the exhibition which included members of the hierarchy of university management, academic teachers and students, all sharing the common identity of “witsies” but quite differently positioned and interpellated (Althusser, 2000) by that identity.

These different audiences, both imagined in anticipation and in their engagement with the images and texts produced, created and shaped the telling and re-telling of the students’ experiences (Reissman, 2008). The process therefore entailed an adaptation of Freire’s (1972) generative codes which, in our case, were generated by the learning community themselves, rather than created by educators, creating texts for conscientising ourselves and others. Iris Dawn Parker, who worked alongside us in the process, enabling these beginner photographers to develop both technical skills and critical acuity in generating the images, curated the final WALE exhibition in April 2011. From her “outsider” position as neither a formal member of Wits staff, nor a South African, she provided an important “audience” in the process, requiring articulation of things that might otherwise have been taken-for-granted, encouraging the team to see the world through new lenses, to articulate it in new ways. Iris coined a new interpretation of the “witsie” identity, seeing an acronym that none of us had spotted, “Women

Intellectuals Transforming Scholarship in Education” which became a new thread for weaving our identities within the institution. Her comment on final products of words and images for the exhibition reflects the impact created:

The work of the student photographers has exceeded my expectations. These emerging scholars have produced images that reflect a wide range of experiences and fire the imagination. By capturing and recording brilliant moments and personal experiences, the students have contributed to documentation and history making. They have occupied the academic space and through that process and this exhibition are sharing their perspectives with peers, mentors, the academic community and the world at large. Making the exhibition has been a process of engagement with family, with political student activists, with academics, and with fellow South Africans, even on the long taxi rides to and from campus.

### *Intersectionality*

The project was framed in terms of our recognition of the intersectionality of identity. Although the explicit focus of the Africa Gender Institute project was on gendered experiences of university studies, more particularly, on questions of sexuality and reproductive health, we proceeded on the understanding that women are always “more than (just) women” and that the selection of a single dimension of identity as most salient is always contextually contingent and fluid (Ndlovu, 2012). The initial phase of the process was therefore very open and unstructured, with participants themselves identifying the critical dimensions of their university experience to be documented and interpreted.

The first sets of images reflected fragmentation and multiplicities of experiences across the group but also for each individual woman. The narrative accounts of the images entailed attempts at coherence, both diachronic, linking the images to tell a story of movement in time, and synchronic, across multiple roles and dimensions of identity (McAdams, 2000). These stories revealed home as a territory that one leaves (Billington et al, 1998) and the future as aspirational, as a destination. University is quintessentially a transitional space, a liminal identity, away from the home of childhood, orientated towards the future of adulthood. The accounts of the student experience made evident the multiple roles enacted by these young women, often contradictory and entailing simultaneously centred, insider and outsider “other” positionings: home and away, women and students, black

and upwardly mobile, “witsies” and yet not. These lines of (dis)identification are complex and fluid, requiring constant negotiation.

### “Race” and Class

The first forays out with the simple instruction to “photograph your experiences of being a student” produced accounts that primarily focused on the racialised spaces of the university. Despite the enabling contexts of constitutional democracy and institutional policies, the group described their experiences at university as highly racialised. The *Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions* (Soudien, 2008) made it evident that participation in the sector as a whole remains racially skewed, that the apartheid profile of institutions catering primarily for distinct “race” groups remains relatively intact and that practices and experiences within institutions are characterised by racism and a lack of thorough-going transformation. Soudien (2008) has argued that universities are historically “white spaces”. The Schulze project at the University of Pretoria provides the perspective of white, male academics and their perceived loss of power and sense of belonging in the context of institutional transformation. However, the perspective of the young black women students in our team, suggest that these power dynamics have been less radically altered or eroded.

Figure 1: Racialised spaces: Ayanda Khumalo



Ayanda: ... racial division still occurs and people do not talk about it but by observing student culture and tendencies such as the places where they relax when not busy, one begins to see these dynamics. ... When one walks from the Matrix building to Senate House ... the dominant race is Black, students sitting in large groups smoking hubbly bubbly. Moving towards the grass, it is mainly white students who are playing soccer, sitting under the trees or playing in the pond. As you move up the steps ... Indian students in large groups, likely to be playing cards.

It was particularly sobering for us to hear from students who had attended “Model C” schools that their experience of university had re-racialised their social spaces rather than diversifying their relationships. However, the Wits of today is in some ways dramatically different to its racially homogenous white history and access for all “races” is open on the basis of academic merit. This meritocratic system is highly valued by the students, who recognise even their entry into the university as an achievement, as a mark of academic success.

Daphney: It was always my dream to study at this university, this opportunity was an honour and a privilege and it marked a new phase in my life and identity.

Mabogoshi: ... it is a prestigious university where an excellent club of students are accepted.

However, achieving entry is of course only the starting place and the students commented on persistent financial anxieties throughout their studies.

**Figure 2: Gaining Entry: Mabogoshi Matlala**



Mabogoshi: ... the glass doors at the university offer an illusion of transparency in the system whereas if one takes a closer look inside, one finds that doors of learning are only half-open and financial means serves a transparent exclusionary measure.

Daphney: In order to study at an institution like Wits you have to be able to pay fees, buy books, pay for photocopying, transport money and residential fees. For me, the lack of sufficient financial resources was the most challenging part of being a student in this institution. The challenge was not simply about doing the assignments well but included constant anxiety of having sufficient funds to print the assignment.

The rhetoric of increasing access both in terms of entry into the institution and what Morrow (2009) has termed “epistemological access” for academic success is a pre-eminent objective of the university which prides itself on balancing the objectives of excellence and equity, aiming to transform the institution into a place that all “can call their own”. This is however a complex process and historical inequities of “race” and class intertwine in the narratives of these students who ambivalently experience access and exclusion.

Figure 3: Wasting Time: Daphney Mogopudi



Daphney: Transport-related difficulties have been at the core of my most memorable experiences and encounters. Manoeuvring from home to school, part-time jobs and NGOs where I was volunteering, required frequent use of public transport. This involved long queues waiting for transport and spending approximately four to five hours on the road every day. By the time I got home I was usually exhausted and ready to call it a day.

Ayanda: Leaving university late would mean being stuck in long queues at the bus stop or at the Bree taxi rank ... This strips one from having the ability to fully enjoy what university has to offer (outside lectures and tutorials) and also a chance to make new friends.

**The students did not feel that the university always takes these more subtle forms of exclusion on the basis of class seriously and recognised that the fight for transformation is not over. The spaces of political action were described as integral and defining of their university experience, including for one participant, a formal role in student governance:**

Zandile: ... Constant engagement with University staff and management made it clear that some battles were better fought militantly as well as intellectually. Having to play dual positions in one space, often left me tired but the experiences were priceless.

Ayanda: This is the place [the steps of the Great Hall] where people gather when there are strikes on campus, a place where you can meet up with friends when lectures are over and also the prestigious place that you take pictures after you graduate.

**Figure 4: Student Protest: Zandile Ngubeni**



Identifications of class and “race” might supercede other hierarchical divisions within the university and in this context, student or intellectual identity is secondary.

Figure 5: Solidarity: Daphney Mogopudi



### Gender and sexuality: space and embodiment

In this section we present an analysis of space, focusing on the issue of sexual safety on campus. We discuss the role of space, not only as subsequent to the social or structured by symbolic power but as constitutive of such symbolic social power. Our argument is thus grounded on the idea that social space is integral to the production of gendered identities and subjectivities. One way that such production occurs is through personal negotiation of social and material spaces imbued with power differentials. According to feminist geographer Doreen Massey, space is not an independent dimension but rather “constructed out of social relations: that what is at issue is not social phenomena in space but both social phenomena and space as constituted out of social relations, that the spatial is social relations ‘stretched out’” (1994: 2). We briefly discuss the consequences of such a gendered system for identity and interaction.

We use the term “body” to refer to the biological and social character of the person and “embodiment” as defined by “perceptual experience and mode of presence and engagement in the world” (Csordas, 1994: 12). Thus, we are here concerned with *embodied space*, that nexus where both human experience and consciousness come to assume both material and spatial form.

The spaces which our bodies occupy, and the simultaneous perceptions and experience of those spaces are intertwined in multiple social and psychological networks of meaning. In this sense, Bryan Turner, as early as 1984 argued that biological reductionism prevents meaningful analysis of how the body is inherently both social and cultural. Likewise, Pandolfi (1990) asserts that the biological and psychological do not produce gendered body spaces but rather it is *the inscription of the socio-political and cultural* on the body that are significant in such production and representations. Feminists, theorizing on the female body have explored this notion further by highlighting not only the varied forms of positionality and inscription of women's bodies but also how the body itself may become a site for action and agency (see Haraway, 1991).

The images below depict spatial sites of location that reflect participants' concerns and anxieties at the ways the female [and non-feminine] body is excluded from public space, particularly how the actual and "potential" threat of sexual violence works to control women's participation not just within the academic enterprise but also the social field more generally. In this way both the passive and active presence of hegemonic masculinity effectively works to maintain domination of space and controls the movement of women within these spaces that in turn impacts their academic citizenship. The team produced several images of spaces on campus associated with anxiety about gendered based violence; a few illustrative examples are presented here.

Figure 6: Safe Zone? Mabogoshi Matlala



The image above depicts the drop-off location for students at a student residence situated in downtown Johannesburg's Hillbrow. It is a mixed student residence occupied by both male and female students from the University of the Witwatersrand. The residence is a self-catering unit and is primarily occupied by undergraduate students. The photograph above was taken by one of two participants who lived in this residence and was a trigger for several similar stories about personal safety, both on and around campus, particularly for women students. Although students utilize the free Wits bus service each day to travel to and from campus, this drop-off zone is the space that must be crossed between the relatively safe university spaces, the bus and the residence itself and has been the scene of violent attacks. The idea of the residence as a place of belonging as "home" is undermined by these fears and anxieties. While inside the residence is considered a relatively secure space, the sense of being barricaded against the community in which the residence is located re-inscribes the material and symbolic distance between academia and "ordinary" life, between intellectuals and "ordinary" people. The student residents of this particular residence feel that they are "looked down upon by most Wits students as they are stereotypically branded to be hooligans if they are male students and promiscuous if they are female students ... it's coined "hell-bro"!" (Mabogoshi).

Figure 7: (In)Security: Mabogoshi Matlala



Symbols of (in)security such as this bolted door are definitive of life in South Africa; the university is not a distinct enclave but part of this wider social world, a world that remains racialised and fraught with extremely high levels of gender-based violence. Significant practices of academic citizenship, utilizing library facilities in the evening, participating in study groups after hours, participating in student club events on campus in the evening, have to be negotiated in relation to this gendered anxiety about personal safety. “Even after years of democracy, as a woman, you cannot walk freely without fearing for your safety” (Ayanda).

Figure 8: Free to walk? Peace Kiguwa



The image above depicts a tunnel situated near the Wits Theatre, the location of a specific altercation for one of us that instantiated the importance of both gender and sexuality in navigating specific spaces on campus. The threat of violence, not only compounded by her gender as a woman but also as a lesbian, illustrated the often invisible and at times ambiguous experience of occupying material space that reflect power differentials.

Peace: Following a late show at the Wits Theatre, a female friend and I were standing in the parking lot just outside the tunnel when we were accosted by a group of rowdy and very drunk young men. Although they had initially walked past us, one of them suddenly turns back and speaking directly to me and pointing at my friend tells me to “fuck her”. His mates also stop and with hoots and cheers seem to egg me on and that is when

it dawns on me that not only have I been mistaken for a man, but was also caught up in some form of amorous pursuit with my female companion. In that instance, these drunken men seemed to be participating in what they perceived to be a “male bonding” practice of encouraging me, as a man, to make my move, so to speak. It equally dawns on me that I cannot ‘give the game away’, that is reveal my identity as female for fear of violence but more than that the very possible realization that if I wasn’t ‘lesbian’, I was engaging in some kind of ‘gender-bending’ (by virtue of my attire and style as ‘non-female’). I shake my head at them (with a smile) and they move on with a parting shot: “Get your game on bra!”, confirming my suspicion that I had been mistaken for a man.

The images presented in this section and their particular meanings for the participants demonstrate how hegemonic bodies, the masculine and heterosexual body, are extended and come to take on an omnipresent *facticity* that is accomplished, either through violence or the threat of violence. In the latter sense, violence does not require actual enactment in order to effectively control movement of “feminised” and/or “queer” bodies. Violence is inherent in [heterosexual] space – that implicitly marginalizes and creates specific [gendered] bodies. In his classic text *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Pierre Bourdieu (1977) makes the point that habits of the body implicitly produce both cultural features and social structure. His notion of *habitus* is used to describe the simultaneous inscription of the body, mind and emotions as part of the self and to explain the intricate ways that social status comes to be embodied in our lives. Feminists expanding on this approach to embodiment have referred to a “gendered habitus” that is created through the coordination of bodily practices and social dispositions with gendered subjectivity (Skeggs, 2004). The photographs presented illustrate participants’ production within specific spaces on campus as “vulnerable women” and further, inscribe dominant, heteronormative modes of being within those spaces. The implications for women’s active participation within the academic and social fields of the university are highlighted as problematic and a site for further engagement.

## Ambivalence and Agency

The student researchers’ accounts of the world of university study reveal how ostensibly innocent spaces are deeply inscribed by social structures and unequally experienced. This points to the extraordinary violence of ordinary life in a deeply

unequal society. In much the same way that “everyday racism” (Hayes, 1998) continues to surface in multiple ways, so too everyday practices reinscribe gendered and heteronormative exclusions and constrain participation. However, it is also clearly evident that this group of young women students have been successful at finding fault-lines in these structures that allow for movement and both personal and social transformation. Identifications are ambivalent: critique of the institution in no way precludes an agentic interpretation of their lives as students and personal pride in academic achievements.

Figure 9: Aspiration: Daphney Mogopudi



Daphney: Wits University has added value to my life and changed the way in which I view life. It has made me an independent thinker who is able to analyze my world critically. I believe that I can do anything I want as long as I put effort into it. Most of all it taught me that I should be the change and innovation I want to see in the world.

Hlengiwe: Coming from a township school and suddenly going for my practicals in an actual science laboratory, using the internet whenever I wished and having access to big libraries was very exciting for me. It was my dream come true.

Mabogoshi: From someone who was unable to express herself in tuts for fear of being laughed at or misunderstood to having my own tutorial group that I aim to nurture – hardwork and determination builds character. But most importantly, I have learnt that you are only a failure if you allow low marks that you may get along the way to dictate who you can become.

This sense of movement was not only about personal achievement or individual progress and is reflected also in comments about the ways in which new forms of social practices and interactions became possible at university.

Zandile: But with that came the realization that as a young woman in a student political organization I had to quickly reconcile whether it was a place for me, as it was predominately male. Or would I allow myself to fade into the background? Having to juggle my academic and student responsibilities proved to be a little more than I could handle at times. The responsibility I carried on my shoulders often took its toll and came with the realization that sometimes attempting to solve the world's problems results in your own, accumulating. In addition, to add to the stress, I was not just a student, but I was a black woman student, placing extra demands on me to prove my skills and abilities time and again.

Mabogoshi: The diversity and vibrancy of Wits life was something totally alien to me, interacting with people from various walks of life, different races and religions. Based on my background with my family I realize that my parents and grandparents had a different experience with white people than me. So for me it was like "no!" And I remember when I came here I was talking to this friend of mine and I remember saying, I wish my grandmother could see me now. I'm speaking to white people and what not". They'd be very scared.

**In addition, anxieties about sexual safety and the gendered quality of university spaces, were juxtaposed with even greater constraints in these respects in "home" spaces, suggesting that being a student has offered new vantage points for rethinking taken-for-granted roles and possibilities for new versions of identities that may have seemed fixed.**

Zandile: I had managed to find my own special way to show that young women were a force to be reckoned with.

**Figure 10: Women in Leadership: Zandile Ngubeni**



Hlengiwe: Being a University student offers me an environment in which I can express my femininity without fear of being ridiculed or judged. I find myself wearing outfits that I am not supposed to wear elsewhere which makes me a different kind of woman. In many ways, I am a woman who is free and knows no boundaries as a university student.

**Figure 11: Freedom of Expression: Hlengiwe Mkhize**



Hlengiwe: There are many signs of gender equality on campus; this picture [inside the residence earlier described as "hell-bro"! ] is an example thereof and it gives me hope that things can change. This, however, does not extend beyond the walls of our institution. In the "real world", women prepare the food, they take care of everything and everyone in the home and most importantly, they groom the younger generation of women into the same role.

**Figure 12: Bending Roles: Hlengiwe Mkhize**



## Reflexivity and conclusions

We are both experienced academics, steeped in the world that we wanted to look at through the eyes of our students and we share a common commitment to inclusivity in the academy. Our lines of insider / outsider status vary: one author is a well-established Witsie; one is a newcomer to the institution; one is higher up in the institutional structures, the other more junior but with a long academic employment history. Our positioning along the lines of “race” and sexuality differs but is shared in terms of gender. These lines of identification and difference (Hall, 2000) made for fluid (dis)connections between us and with the students. Our participation in the project was fuelled by the desire for our students to follow us into academia as co-producers of knowledge, at the very least into higher levels of postgraduate studies. Barriers to this longer term, overarching objective were encountered at the end of the project, despite the highly creative and “successful” results within the confines of the project. Although all the students graduated, only one of the students continued into an honours programme at Wits in 2011 and then on into Master’s in 2012. One student “just missed” the cut-off for entry into honours, for another, the tensions between student politics and studies, despite all talk of full academic citizenship, had too great an impact on her fulfilling her evident academic potential. For the two psychology honours students, the obstacle to master’s study was their below average performance in one aspect of the programme: quantitative methods. The definition of research in the discipline is premised on the pre-eminence of these masculine modes of knowledge production, reinscribing the earlier exclusionary effects of gendered and racialised access to maths in South African schools and precluding different commitments and research questions – this is an African feminist issue!

Essed’s (2004, 2005) concept of “cloning” in organisational cultures, including institutions of higher education suggests that rather than opening pathways for new enquiry and knowledge construction we may be effectively gate-keeping and seeking to reproduce others in our own image. However, despite exclusion from these higher levels of study at Wits, the four students who left the institution have not stopped engaging in the world of ideas and critical action: they are studying for higher degrees part-time and engaged in political and community activism through political structures and in the NGO sector. We are confident that these young women will go on to make important contributions to transforming our social world. The project has

enabled us to learn from marginalised subjects how to read a world that we belong to, through using a visual medium with which we were not familiar. This provokes us to continue creatively finding ways to teach for transgression (bell hooks, 1994).

## Endnotes

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# Mapping Sexualities and Sexual Body politics on University of Botswana Campus: A Feminist Action Research Approach

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## Introduction

I have a lot to say, and I feel there is a tape across my lips stopping me from speaking my mind. I wish to have the tape removed (Young team participant)

It is generally agreed that higher education in Africa is in crisis. At the 2011 annual general assembly in Rabat, Morocco, the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) explained some of the challenges to be “a result of both deep crises and twenty years of structural adjustment, brain drain and sheer negligence on the part of the State” (<http://www.codesria.org/spip.article1321>). Studies on women students on university campuses have focused on “objective” studies to prove that universities are patriarchal, gender insensitive, have lower enrolments of female students, rampant sexual harassment of female students, transactional and intergenerational sexual relationships with older men, and draw attention to their bleaker job prospects after university (Gaidzanwa (ed), 2001; Hallam, 1994; Teferra and Altbach, 2004). This has led to some gender reforms including the implementation of sexual harassment and affirmative selection policies in countries like Botswana, Malawi and Zimbabwe (Bennett, 2005).

Despite the recognition of patriarchal cultures on campuses in earlier studies, many of the conclusions often drawn about young women regarding their lifestyles, sexuality, sexual and reproductive health tend to portray them as relatively ignorant, vulnerable and powerless. We are interested in exploring issues of gender and sexualities *with* young women (as opposed to *through* them) by engaging them directly in co-operative action and research, where the ultimate goal is to build and strengthen their voices and their sense of practical activism, especially around sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Against the backdrop of long years of research at the University of Botswana on gender equality and sexual harassment, and with the continued sense of an institutional climate hostile to independent thinking among young women, we chose to explore the women students' experiences of their sexual body politics and how they "come alive" or "get muted" in the different spaces on campus.

## The Context of the University of Botswana

The University of Botswana remains the single university within a country where the demand for higher education grows yearly. In the past decade, as an educational and political space dialogue between the academic staff and the students reveals that the physical spaces on campus have evolved and the infrastructure has changed – the UB campus has more buildings and facilities; the UB student population has grown substantially; student politics have changed. In the 1980's students identified more with common regional and international movements and action – with frequent solidarity activities arranged against Apartheid and imperialism. This line of student activism has been displaced by more partisan politics in the 1990s. Campus has become a microcosm of the national political landscape. Student political activities appear to be "controlled" from outside by the main political parties. Student elections are also run much in the way that national elections are conducted. Students also have shifted towards mobilising around more individual concerns such as monthly allowances. Females play a limited role in student politics; and although UB commitment to gender equality has been demonstrated by the launching of the Sexual Harassment Policy in 2000, the implementation was poor. The University of Botswana (UB) campus is no exception to the crisis of higher learning in Africa, and least of all, an exception to the patriarchal bias of higher education institutional cultures.

Issues specifically affecting young women at the University of Botswana were identified by the researcher participants as *inter alia*: lack of safety for women on campus; higher failure rates; high pregnancy rates, and poor conditions for student mothers such as no provision for maternity leave; sexual violence including femicide or 'passion killings'; sexual harassment; lack of sexual education on sexual rights and reproductive health that specifically focus on young women and young mothers; and disability and HIV and AIDS related discrimination. They also identified the abuse of young women among Islamic cultures.

We decided to build a process which would include faculty and young women students within a feminist research action project to explore whether the physical campus offered young women space in which to control their own gendered and sexual lives. We understood feminist action research as a tool that helps researchers and participants to understand women's issues in a critical way because participants are part of the research team and they bring action and social change (Reid, 2004). Feminist action research recognizes that personal experience cannot be simply understood as anecdote, and in turn, encourages researchers to go beyond institutional "regimes of truth" about who has access to power and why.

Informed by a feminist action research approach, a UB team of faculty and students designed several events aimed at creating occasions where women students could speak about their experiences in supportive, but simultaneously, high-energy environments. The research team at UB was comprised of 3 staff members from the departments of Social Work and Sociology, and altogether 13 women students from different disciplines including Law, Sociology, Social Work, Psychology and Business Studies between 2010 and 2012. The number of participating students has fluctuated overtime as some students dropped out and others completed their studies.

We called ourselves the Young Women's Leadership (YWL) Research Action team. Activities we designed included a *Poetry Nite* which focused on opening up public institutional space for young women's creativity in their representation of their sexual "selves"; a *Girls' Nite* which was a follow-up discussion on some of the issues emerging from the Poetry Nite; and a *Shine Event* titled "*Find Your Sexual Voice*". All the events were documented, with the permission of all the team members, and the material was corralled into a number of different genres. The "Find Your Sexual Voice" event presented the "research findings" from the previous events through drama. "*I*" *Stories* were also collected where the young women participants in the team spoke about their experiences since they had joined the YWL team. Finally we did *Self and campus profiling and mapping* exercises. Team participants kept journals of their campus lives and from that, produced short documentaries about how they negotiate their embodied selves within campus.

This article addresses two interconnected themes that have emerged in the body and campus mapping exercises. The first theme is around the

centrality of the family environment in the way young women come to experience their new lives on campus and the relative “shock” encountered at UB where new expectations about gender and sexuality are part and parcel of campus culture. A second major theme is the lack of power and control within intimate relationships; connected to this, and discussed within the theme, is a kind of heterosexual fundamentalism among young women on the UB campus. Between home and campus, young women have to negotiate between safe and unsafe social spaces on campus. They have come to university to challenge their ideas about self and other, but in the process of this negotiation, they have also come to occupy hegemonic and often fundamentalist ideas about their available sexual options as heterosexual women. It also became apparent that UB was gender-dichotomised in favour of masculine and hetero-sexualities. Through the various processes, some of the institutional, physical and emotional barriers for young women in African universities that could hamper their leadership potential were better understood. Most importantly, it became evident that there is a strong case for feminist action research that not only helps identify barriers, but is also a self-empowerment process. In their “*I*” stories, young women in the project testified to how the project became their bridging platform between their families that were silent on issues of sexuality, and university spaces that are hypersexual, yet oppressive to female students.

### **The Sexual Baggage We Bring From Home, and the Baggage We Find at UB**

My life in the University of Botswana is really like the weather, it varies and changes over time. Sometimes it's fun and lively, other times it's cold, grumpy and not a pretty sight! (one of the participants in the team)

The “*I*” stories were compiled at the end of Phase One of the project in May 2010. The process of recording was semi-structured, as we had aimed to use them as a means of getting some insights into the students’ overall experience of the Young Women’s Leadership Action Research Project. In the process they gave brief insight on family experiences and their expectations of UB.

The narratives analysed reflected variations in experiences of gender and sexuality within family environments:

**Lesego:**

I grew up with in a large extended family. I grew up with my paternal uncles – I was the only girl at home. I learned from a very young age to be this assertive strong girl – tomboyish who always got what she wanted...

**Rather than pointing to conscious gender-role assignment by her family, Lesego's narrative reflects gender self-assignment as part of her lived reality. While this was evident in her formative years, it seems to have come to odds with sex-gender assignment as she grew older:**

Then I grew up, started having feelings, started knowing that I am a girl and should behave in a certain way – I learned all of that in school in an unconscious manner that a woman has to behave in a certain way. I shouldn't sit with my legs apart – but rather I should sit with my legs in a decent manner, and there is a way as a woman that I have to speak – I don't just speak in this loud voice that I grew up using. Yeah, so that is how I discovered that I am a woman at school through my peers and teachers. At home I was just a tomboyish kid playing with my boy cousins.

**Bonolo's story refers to struggles of being raised by a single parent without guidance on sexual matters from her mother:**

Growing up for me was a bit difficult – especially being bred by a single parent. Growing up was quite difficult – especially regarding my sexuality. My mother is not that type of person who likes to open up to me to talk about my sexuality or issues that concern me as a young woman, or me as a young person, especially when it comes to issues like sex or HIV and AIDS. She feels that it is a taboo to talk about such things because when they grew up their parents never talked to them about that stuff. It continued onto me...

**Naledi experienced "silences" around sexual discourse in her upbringing:**

I lost my mother when I was doing Form 4 so I had to play that role – I had to play that adult role in my life...I had to advise myself about issues that surround young people at that age. I had relatives who were playing the role of parents. When it came to sexual issues they didn't really have the courage to talk to me about sexual issues so again that was the stage where it was very easy to be influenced by my peers...

Fako's quantitative study of the interface between poverty, sexuality activity and knowledge about HIV and AIDS among a sample of young people in Botswana (2010) refers to the significance of families as important socializing agents that ultimately shape young persons' sexual behaviour. While underscoring the significance of 'stable' family background as reducing the chances of young people engaging in risky sexual behavior, Fako's study neither problematises the concept 'family' nor provides insights into the internal dynamics of families in a rapidly changing socio-economic environment in Botswana.

Feminist studies of families, households and gender inequality in Botswana (van Driel, 1994; *Women and Law in Southern Africa Botswana*, 1997; Mookodi 1999, 2004) have documented the emergence of unmarried motherhood as a family form over time, as well as the predominance of female-headed households among the poor. Using the *Women and Law in Southern African country studies of family forms* [conducted between 1994 and 1997] as a basis of methodological and theoretical analysis, Mvududu and McFadden (2001) allude to the significance of re-visiting conventional notions of family around gender politics. While their discussion of gender hierarchies was based on culturally-based patriarchal male dominance, the use of feminist action research methodologies could unearth important information about mothers and daughters – especially the interface between power, powerlessness and the shaping of sexual identities and behaviour.

Coming from their diverse family backgrounds, Lesego, Naledi and Bonolo all alluded to expectations of UB as a(n) [exclusively?] serious academic environment:

My expectation of the University was that it is all about people who are very serious about life – people who know what they need and want in life – people who are hard workers, responsible and mature – people who come here to get their degrees and leave – that is what I thought.

My expectation of UB was that clever people – those 'Intelligent ones' go to. So as I saw myself I didn't fit into those intellectuals or anything. I thought that when you go there you have to be very intelligent [in] everything you do...

I thought UB is a place where people are really intense into academic stuff...

Using a combination of structured survey and qualitative methods, a study of knowledge, attitudes and behavioural aspects of HIV and AIDS among students at the University of Botswana identified some of the issues as contributing to students' vulnerability to infection as unprotected sex, frequent change and exchange of partners, sex for financial gain, peer pressure, and sex for good grades (Jack, et al, 1999).

Subsequent studies conducted by Chilisa and others (2001) revealed the limited impact of knowledge on HIV transmission on behaviour. Chilisa notes factors responsible for limited behavioural change as high levels of alcohol consumption, which leads to irresponsible behaviour; students sometimes relieving 'academic stress' by engaging in irresponsible behaviour; prostitution and promiscuity around campus; and students engaging in moonlighting activities that entail high-risk, "irresponsible" sex (Chilisa, 2001: 34).

The "*I*" stories revealed an element of "shock" on the discovery of the variety of sexual identities and behavior at UB:

...when I came here [to UB] it was more like what we call 'mma pereko' [laissez faire] in Setswana. I just felt that people were just too crazy. I mean -- you would have young girls as young as 19 -- very small -- in a mini skirt -- getting into a car with an older man, and I was like -- what is that? because where I came from we didn't do things like that, so I thought -- ah, these are city girls -- that is why they are so 'clever' and 'smart'. Yeah, most girls fell prey to that, they joined that route of not studying but getting into cars with older men, going clubbing, drinking,

...Seeing young women pregnant was a very big shock for me because back home one would not see teenagers being pregnant -- it was a rare thing to see. When I came here I found that young girls go out with older men because they want money to catch up with the fashion-frenzy thing that is going on.

It was not only the "*I*" stories which highlighted the tensions of gendered and sexual expectations in which UB women students negotiate their lives. The research action project revealed at every stage the suggestion that the move away from home was rarely one that offered less restrictive notions of sexual pleasure or sexual possibility. The shape of the restrictions simply shifted from those about being a "good wife" some day to those of being a "sexually desirable woman" now.

## Young Women's Experiences of Power Within Intimate Relationships

In this section, young women's experience of power within intimate relationships is discussed based on "a girls' Nite talk show" -an activity that was carried out as part of the process. The talk show was a follow up of the event which involved poetry, dialogue and music as a way of collecting data about young women's reproductive health and sexuality issues on campus. The main show included both female and male University of Botswana Students. After that, it was then decided that since the focus of the research is targeting young women, a follow up session involving young women students only was organized.

The session was recorded using a video recorder which was later analyzed using thematic analysis. The video tapes were watched and patterns of issues and experiences of young women were identified.

Most of the participants were in agreement that young women lacked power and control within intimate relationships. They indicated that sometimes they become victims of violence in intimate relationships because of lack of assertiveness. They mentioned that the lack of assertiveness silences young women; hence they fail to communicate their concerns and feelings to their partners. One of the participants became specific about the tendency of young women not to talk freely about sex to their partners by saying:

It is not easy for all of us to say no to sex.

Another participant pointed out:

High pregnancy levels at UB tell that people are not assertive to say No to sex.

These examples not only identify challenges of assertiveness but also reflect the assumption that women have minimal power over their own sexual bodies. Young women's silences in relationships therefore resonate with Parker (2003) who argued that unequal power does not only manifest in physical, mental and verbal abuse but it also relates to socially accepted behaviours and arrangement. In this situation neither partners may see the situation as a problem because women's silence about their own sexuality is an accepted norm, not simply in popular terms but within the university culture too.

Furthermore, the young women participants associated their lack of power in intimate relationships with limited financial resources, especially as compared to their partners'. They were of the view that the university setting

often requires them to live a certain lifestyle which they cannot afford with the limited funds they get from their student allowances and support from their parents. Often they find themselves having to rely on their partners who have the “cash power”. As an example, one young woman said:

Yes we are pressurized by ourselves to have sex with other people. Because we want to live the life that we are not supposed to live. That is we aspire to live certain kinds of lifestyles that we cannot afford.

Some students indicated that they not only use their allowances for themselves but they also assist in paying the bills at home, so their reliance on their partners for financial gain helps them to meet family needs too.

As a result of power inequalities in intimate relationships, research has suggested that women usually have limited choices in heterosexual decision making (Van Wormer, 2008). The participants in the girls’ Nite show suggested that most of the time having “sex is not usually a choice for women even those who are at university”. Despite their legal empowerment as citizens, these young women cannot readily communicate their own sexual choices within a university space (Gqola, 2007).

Many young women expressed a powerlessness and were unhappy in their heterosexual relationships. “*Your body betrays you*”, one said. Most of the other young women clapped and giggled to that claim that when it comes to saying no to men, their bodies refused to cooperate! A young woman worried that “*be pure for your man is preached in the church, but I don’t trust the men making these statements.*”

They were concerned about transactional and intergenerational sex: “*My expectation was that at UB people would be focused on their studies and serious about life. But people were playful, getting into cars with older men.*”

The young women expressed shock at the high pregnancy rates in UB, a space they thought only the most intelligent people came. One woman said it bluntly: “*I don’t want to offend anyone, [but] these mother fuckers did it to them and the girls were not assertive enough to demand safe sex.*”

There were some dissenting voices, and one of the young women expressed a wish that: “*In future I hope the club teaches that life is not simply about the dogma of getting married, that there is more to life than that.*” Marriage, she argued, can lead women to forget “self” or give up “me” for “us”.

Pragmatic concerns were that “*sometimes when a girl chooses to wait*” on any grounds including religious ones, “*a man may not respect that*

*and find other girls*”: Women then ended up “surrendering” or facing the prospect of going back to “*square one*”. We often have to choose between “*Empowerment, having to go back, empowerment, having to go forward*”.

What we noticed within the team was the interaction between ideas about women’s power and control in intimate heterosexual relationships and a fear of homosexuality in the UB campus. At the *Girls Nite* questions around homosexuality were spoken about as the *difficult* questions. What is particularly intriguing about the discussions around homosexuality and queer issues was that the young women were as uncomfortable talking about LGBT issues as they felt about their lack of power in intimate relationships. One of the young women said about herself: “*I’m a leader...a volunteer (for breast cancer and other health issues)...an activist...and I can pose nude for charity...and a sexual heterosexual!* [her emphasis]”. They confidently denounced homosexuality; however, they were not able to denounce abusive intimate relationships with men with the same level of confidence. Another said: “*We are young and beautiful, and we should be able to say no to gay sex if we feel we are simply heterosexual*”. Within the same breath, she proceeded to say that it was difficult for a girl to “*refuse a guy sex*”.

Many of the young women perceived homosexual relationships as a “*new fashion*” that some of their “*formerly straight*” ex-schoolmates were adopting as part of the university sub-culture. The group participants strongly disapproved of this. This appears not to be the minority view of young women in this project. One Mannathoko, claiming to be an MA Student at UB posted an opinion piece in a local newspaper, Mmegi, calling homosexuality “a disgraceful practice”. He castigated the human rights approach used by LeGaBiBo (Lesbians, Gay and Bisexual People in Botswana) as promoting “immoral acts”. This kind of heterosexual normativity leaves young women with no option but a kind of self-hate where they seem to believe men were entitled to some “perfect” female bodies and constantly agonized about the shortfalls of their bodies. This became evident in their revelations about their body image-issues, concerns around virginity and keeping the “rare commodity” safe so that they are desirable to men. One of them said, “*we want to lose our virginity to the man we want to end up marrying and when the relationships ends, the attachment stays on...Even in economics, we know that when a rare commodity is just given out, it loses worth*”.

One result of this heterosexual fundamentalism is lack of knowledge, and lack of tolerance, about other types of sexuality. *“This is new to me”*, said one of the young women.

Homophobia and patriarchy appear to need each other, as Tamale (2006) argues. However, it is more unsettling when homophobia is expressed by young university women. Earlier, a connection has been made between young women’s family environments and how they come to engage with sexualities on campus. Coming from largely homophobic and religious families, it should not come as a surprise that they found discussions around sexual difference unsettling. Uncomfortable as they were, the young women also sometimes showed an interest to better understand the issues. One young woman opened the discussion by asking,

What is the difference between being gay and lesbian, ‘go diragala eng’  
– what happens?

The first response came cautiously:

No offence, we need to ask ourselves difficult questions.

There was a discussion around how some girls were of the view that it was easier to be with another girl than a man because women better understood each other. *“There is a lot more trust and communication”* one young woman proffered. A different view was quickly provided: *“The girls are worse than boys, they are even more manipulative than boys because they know exactly what buttons to press to hurt you or make you happy...she knows when to dump you and make you want her back.”*

## Conclusion: The Process Deepens

The action research project revealed that despite the protection offered to young heterosexual women legally (in terms of protection from sexual violence, access to sexual health care, and encouragement around access to political power), they are by no means secure within their own gendered and sexual lives. Ideologically, they are prey to very conservative notions of what they can expect of their own right to control their sexual bodies, and while they are interested in “empowerment” and “leadership,” challenging the men to whom they are sexually attracted is a near-impossibility.

Through the use of the Feminist Action Research approach, however, this project has benefitted the participants, team leaders and some of the young people in the university who attended the events, especially the young women.

The project created an open space for the young women who were involved in the process to talk about their personal experiences from childhood up to university level. The team witnessed a tremendous growth in the participants' interpersonal and communication skills. The process built their self image and self concept. Some of those who were very shy and reserved at the beginning of the project had become very assertive, confident in expressing themselves and very eager to take part in various leadership roles. For example, the students were given a chance to organize the "girls" only nite show without the assistance of the team leaders. All the team members had an active role to play, and displayed a high level of confidence and cooperation.

One of the participants had emphasized the importance of the project by saying:

This project gave me a platform to boost my self confidence. It also taught me to know where I stand, especially in issues that we do not usually talk about, mainly sex and reproductive health.

The team leaders equally benefited from the process because they were able to compare the current university lifestyles with the time when they were students. They were also able to reach out to those students who needed help in terms of processing and dealing with issues they were struggling with. We concluded with the knowledge that the project had, in a sense, only just begun; deepening a culture of open and respectful discussion on the interaction between "higher education" and young women's sexual rights.

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# Embodying the Learning Space: Is it Okay if I bring my sexuality to class?

Mary Hames

## Introduction

On my return from the XIX Annual Lesbian Lives 'Masquerades' conference (17-18 February 2012) which was held at the University College of Dublin in Ireland I reflected on the progressive nature of our legal framework and made comparisons with the so-called "gender-sensitive" laws in other countries. I realised how much common ground there was between Northern Ireland's post-conflict quest for the equality of its (homo)sexual citizens and South Africans' continuous search for equality despite its "progressive" constitution. Both countries struggle with the persistent discrimination and homophobia against lesbian and gay people. The experience made me rethink the notion of equality as it is applied to South African homosexual citizens and it made me realise how quickly we, as lesbian and gay people, have opted to assimilate into the notion of heteronormativity by striving for the "same" privileges that were always the automatic right of those regarded as heterosexual. I argue for the urgency of ensuring that lesbian and gay people retain their political and subversive identities and believe that we have to develop pedagogies and strategies of difference rather than ideas about assimilation. This article discusses the teaching methodologies that are applied by the Gender Equity Unit (GEU), within the University of the Western Cape, to raise awareness as to why the politics of homosexual identity still matter. Critical to the process of imagining such methodologies is the importance of feminist pedagogy that specifically engages questions of sex, sexuality and sexual orientation.

The article describes the experiences of some of the lesbian, gay and transgender students at the University of the Western Cape in recent years, and goes on to discuss the deployment of pedagogical approaches that are applied outside the formal academic project. The academic project rarely appreciates

the fundamentally important roles that non-academic spaces within the university context may play in the development and implementation of innovative pedagogical methods, which may teach very difficult concepts concerning the complex realities of students' lives. The article argues that it is often in these marginalised places (units on HIV, disability, student welfare, or – in our case – 'gender equity) where cutting-edge research and teaching take place. In her recent work on African sexualities, Sylvia Tamale notes that she has drawn on the workshops in which she participated with other African feminist researchers and teachers (hosted in 2005 by the African Gender Institute (AGI), located at the University of Cape Town and the Institute of African Studies (IAS) at the University of Ghana) in order to develop a participatory gender, law, and sexuality curriculum for her law students at Makerere University. (Tamale, 2011:607). The link between academic departments, research units and institutes and civil society should not be under-estimated, and the workshop described by Tamale included the recognition that there is a continuous and symbiotic relationship between academy and civil society. Such relationships may include ideas on the design of curricula, and suggest particular pedagogical approaches (Middleton, 2000: 473).

In the Gender Equality Unit at the University of the Western Cape, a non-academic unit, the socio-economic and political realities of the South African context, led us to the imperative to create teaching, learning and social spaces that were safe for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) students. Historically the University of the Western Cape (UWC) has been on the forefront of the struggle against the elimination of racial apartheid. And since the mid-1980s feminists have actively driven the struggle against oppression and discrimination of women on campus and have made enormous strides towards the eradication of career and economic inequalities. UWC was one of the first higher education institutions to develop and implement a Sexual Harassment Policy which included a section on same-sex harassment. Nationally post-1994 legislation became 'women-sensitive' and with the continued litigation by lesbian and gay individuals and organisations for their political, bodily and economic rights, the law became more 'gender sensitive' often against great personal cost. The meaning of LGBTQ students and staff was not, however, explored within the university setting until very recently; this article looks at what prompted the Gender Equity Unit's decision

to highlight the hostility of the climate faced by people on campus living beyond the borders of heteronormativity and at the processes of pedagogy and research we developed as part and parcel of changing that climate.

### Writing “(homo)sexuality”

Shortly after the first democratic elections in 1994 there was an explosion of research publications and other written and photographic material to corroborate the existence of homosexuality in South(ern) Africa. Like elsewhere on the globe much of the writing focused on the history of gay men; lesbians were very rarely mentioned. The first set of publications mainly framed the history of same-sex intimate relationships in Africa and South(ern) Africa and aimed to prove that homo-eroticism was always part of African culture and rituals. Thereafter the discourse shifted from the anthropological, psychological and medical gaze to sexual orientation as an essential component in the understanding of human rights and social justice issues. The now iconic work, *‘Defiant Desire’* edited by Mark Gevisser and Edwin Cameron (1994) reflected on the history and experiences of the gay and lesbian individuals and movement in South Africa.

More recent writings are either preoccupied with the prevalence of homophobia that is directed at Black lesbians<sup>1</sup>; or deal with HIV and AIDS<sup>2</sup> or cover personal coming-out autobiographies, biographies and various life stories<sup>3</sup>. Current publications differ from the first post-1994 ones in significant ways, ranging beyond the attempt to create a visible homosexual subject into a wider set of questions about political organizing, the place of individual autobiography, and the meaning of ‘culture’ and commodification in debates about justice. New organisations which focused on specific sexualised and racialised identities<sup>4</sup> were formed that resulted in new careers, for some, as sexual rights activists.

Deborah Posel refers to the period shortly after 1994 as the era when sexuality became a terrain of public commodification in ways that were totally unimaginable during the apartheid era. She mentions the abundant sudden circulation of sexually explicit movies, magazines and pornography, the urban institutionalization of the sex shop and strip clubs (Posel, 2011:131-132). The apartheid Publications Board had been zealous in the application of protestant-Calvinistic values and morals in censoring and banning all types of publications or media that remotely referred to sex or sexuality. After 1994,

the scenario shifted. Media, technology and billboards using hypersexualized imagery have become common, and I would argue have a profound influence on the awakening of sexual interest among young people and children. High school learners and even younger children are exposed to both the visual and audio material on sex as never before. Popular culture plays a major role in advancing knowledge of previously forbidden subjects. Billboards scream messages of condomising and safe sex – nobody is immune to the instant messaging about sex. Despite this explosion of sexual representation, the public media remains firmly heterosexual and heteronormative. The massive media advocacy around the prevention of HIV concentrated exclusively on heterosexual penile-vaginal sex as a means of transmission. When legal reform moved the age of consent for gay sexual acts from 19-16 (the age at which legal consent to heterosexual sex could be given), public media profiled the concern, especially from education officials :

By implementing such a Bill you are indirectly encouraging the youngsters to get it on at an early age. At 16 one cannot really understand the complexities of having a sexual relationship. Then there is the issue of HIV and AIDS. We are struggling to sensitise children to the pandemic. But we have not really succeeded – and now we are faced with something like this (Maphelo Ntshanga, principal of Kayamandi High School, Stellenbosch).

and

It is certainly not upholding the moral standards and value systems that we want to inculcate. We all know that the youth are consenting to sex at an early age. They [lawmakers] are bowing to that pressure by decriminalising it because so many are doing it at an earlier age. I am sure it will involve many problems (Tom Clarke, principal of Parktown Boys High School, Johannesburg) (Davids, 2006).

These messages suggest the South African secondary school system is in state of denial that homosexuality exists within the teaching and learning environment. An example that underscores the prevalence of sexual violence in schools is a report by the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) in which the NGO the Community Action Toward a Safe Environment (CASE) reported that violence had become such a part of the children's identities that they played such games called '*Hit me, hit me. Rape me, rape me*' on the school grounds. The report further stated that in most incidents the violence

in schools is perpetrated against girls by both male teachers and learners. In fact, the report stated that 1,227 female students were victims of sexual assault and that 8.6% were assaulted by teachers. Toilets are regarded as the most dangerous spaces in schools. In its submission to the SAHRC the OUT LGBT Wellbeing, an organisation working with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people, reported that a research project they conducted has established that gay and lesbian youth experienced high levels of prejudice and discrimination resulting in exclusion, marginalisation and victimisation (SAHRC, 2008: 1, 7-9). Much of the formal research on violence in the educational environment has been conducted at schools, rather than at universities, but I would argue that the research on violent school cultures suggests linkages between homophobic assaults and cultures in which girls risk hypersexualization and attack.

Despite the fact that lesbian and gay social movements have actively and successfully struggled for the inclusion of the right to sexual orientation in the 1996 South African Constitution and that legal reform around access to child custody, civil union, and housing have created unprecedented civil rights for lesbian and gay people, the hate and discrimination continue. The progressive rights within the legal framework of South Africa do not impact upon school learners, and teachers, or upon staff and students in higher education institutions. South African learning and teaching environments remain some of the most conservative and untransformed spaces in the country, even when several academic studies and publications have concentrated on demystifying sexuality and sexual orientation in South Africa.

### **Transitioning to university: campus cultures and homosexuality**

It is important to make the connection between school learner and the university environment in part because the new university student simply exchanges one highly hetero-sexualised environment for another. Students come to the university with various sexual identities and their movement into a new educational environment offers them an opportunity to experiment more openly with these identities. Years of experience led us, at the Gender Equity Unit at the University of the Western Cape, to believe that the first semester of the university academic year is usually the most challenging time for any first year student. The heteronormative environment is confounding

for the gay or lesbian student. I have noted elsewhere that the campus culture and environment is not particularly prepared or welcoming for the needs of lesbian, gay, and transgendered people (Hames, 2007: 68). During this period they have to transition from school to university and try to “find” themselves, a “finding” process which includes sexuality. While sexual harassment opened up the initial conversation and policy development on sex and sexuality in the higher education environment in the early and mid-1990s, HIV and AIDS overtook that conversation in the current century. The conversation on homosexuality within educational environments has never really been open. Lesbian and gay people insisted that the equality clause should formally include sexual orientation in the Bill of Rights but there has been no pressure on the academic institutions that *all* policies should include a clause pertaining to sexual orientation. It seems that there is an assumption in the academy that policies are inclusive of the needs of same-sex needs. Are university policies in line with the legal changes and have they explicitly written these rights into these policies?

Twelve years ago when the GEU organised its first Open Day for UWC lesbian and gay community only one law lecturer was prepared to share his experiences. During the preparation of the Anti-prejudice Awareness Week in 2006 we approached the then Student Development Department, who asserted “*We know nothing about prejudice reduction*”. And when we asked the Human Resources department to assist with preparations we were informed that there was “no problem with gay people because they are so artistic”. Something in the system was very wrong.

With the maturing of democracy, the increase in lesbian and gay organisations country-wide and on our campuses, and the unlimited possibilities that were provided in the enabling legal framework, the scene was set to ensure that institutional cultures were transformed. The need arose to teach and learn about sex and sexuality in ways that differ fundamentally from what how we were taught. There are ample printed and visual material and research opportunities to support Reddy’s argument for “institutionalising the sexuality discourse within an epistemological dynamic to expose the silences, challenge prohibitions and problematize oppressive constructions” (Reddy, 2001:167). It was clear that this need was one the Gender Equity Unit needed to tackle.

## Sex, sexuality and pedagogy

The question that underpins this section is how we can teach sexuality and sexual orientation as matters of political interest without pathologising homosexuality? How do we connect the activism outside with the theoretical inside? How do we raise consciousness about the injustices against Black lesbians in a situation when those who teach are mainly white and when research turns those who are being taught into spectacles? What processes do we follow to maintain dignity and ask the difficult questions about being Black and being homosexual or transgender?

It is important to have a sound knowledge of the intricacies and nuances that prevail in the South African academic environment. Each of the higher education institutions comes with its own apartheid baggage and all universities remain essentially heteronormative. In order to initiate new pedagogies around lesbian and gay experiences on campus, the GEU chose to work with students themselves, outside the formal academic curricula of the campus. This approach has been successful: in 2012, UWC is the only Historically Black University (HBU) that has *two* visible and active lesbian and gay organisations, Loud Enuf and Gayla. Gayla is a fairly new political organisation for cross-dressing, transgender and transsexual students. Loud Enuf has been in existence since 2006 and is one of the GEU's programmes. The majority of the students that belong to either of these organisations are not Women's and Gender Studies students. However, some of the students who became involved in Loud Enuf progress to enrol in the WGS department. Some of the lesbian and gay identified students from the neighbouring Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) find community within these two organisations and they join the GEU's volunteer projects and activities.

Through Loud Enuf the UWC and the CPUT lesbian and gay students become involved in the human rights focus of the GEU and attend meetings and rallies within the community. There is a focus on the building on solidarity. As part of the GEU's programme we raise critical consciousness about sexuality and race through community involvement and discussions. The question of how to do this, with integrity, remains one worth exploring. How do we endeavour to create a suitable and confidential learning environment, inside or outside academic forums, that affirms the studying of sexualities that is not confined to individual(istic) post-graduate research or limited to academic research projects?

Few people in South Africa have written about pedagogy and (homo) sexuality. The following section discusses the approaches of two South African academics, Reddy and Bennett, who argue for pedagogy that problematizes sexuality and sexual orientation<sup>5</sup>.

Reddy has long been interested in a pedagogical approach to lesbian and gay studies in the South African academy. He argues that there is an indelible link between activism and academia and that the latter is not a privileged space that is immune to social change. His knowledge of the history of the lesbian and gay movement in South Africa and his positioning within the academic environment gives him a unique insight into the importance of pedagogies that addresses the visibility of gay and lesbian people. He argues that 'queer studies' should not only be restricted to queer scholars but should be interdisciplinary and widely accessible, although he recognises the hostility and homophobia present in the academy (Reddy, 2001: 181). Reddy is aware of the complexities involved in the teaching of sex and sexualities outside the medical, psychological and anthropological models and he is attuned to the hidden agendas in the heteronormative academic institutions and this is something that I will return to when I discuss the institutional culture and arrangements at UWC.

Heterosexual sex and sexuality are discursively discussed and treated as "normal" within the academy whilst homosexuality is still largely dealt with as abnormal as the examples in this article will show. Studies about homosexuality remain an oddity in the academy and in my own experience, disdainful remarks in academic committee meetings about research on lesbian and gays still abound. Jane Bennett argues that much of the teaching, training and the designing of workshop material on sexuality is done within the NGO sector, rather than the academic one, and she points to the lack of reflexivity on pedagogical practices with regard to sex, sexuality and sexual orientation within the mainstream heteronormative academic environment. She writes that although seminal work is done outside the academy the perception prevails that real "education" happens within. I agree with her when she notes that the important transformative and educational work is mainly done in settings outside the formal learning environment. She argues when it is taught with the necessary understanding, empathy and analysis within the academy it is usually done by feminists or people who have had experience of the NGO environment. Bennett is of the opinion that it is imperative that sex

and sexuality should be taught in the academy and she says that “pedagogies of sexualities must prioritise the destabilisation of heteronormativity, as a precondition of their integrity”. But she, like Reddy, admits that it is easier said than done. (Bennett, 2006: 68, 70-71).

Amina Mama proposes an “activist scholarship” that focuses on the development of a curriculum that is globally informed and locally grounded and that recognises and includes the diverse struggles of women (and gender?) in the region (Mama, 2011: 77). The overall consensus (Reddy, Bennett, Mama) is that the artificial divide or binary between praxis/activism and theory/intellectual should be undone. This is a recurrent discussion by various writers concerned with the pedagogy of sex and sexuality.

There are numerous examples of how activism pertaining to sexual rights and consciousness raising both inside and outside the academy has contributed to the development of training material within the higher education environment. An excellent example is the “*Southern African higher educational institutions challenging sexual violence/sexual harassment: a handbook of resources*” which is one of the very first practical pedagogical examples how to teach and train about sexuality and sexual violence within the southern African institutions (Bennett, 2002). This is also an example of how Mama’s notion of the locally grounded has developed into “activist scholarship” and how through these concerted efforts people across the academic divide could conceptualise a common pedagogy to teach about sexuality and sexual rights. This handbook, however, is explicitly devoted to teaching about sexual harassment and while this may be important, pedagogies of sexuality should also address desire, pleasure and nonconformity.

## Pedagogical challenges

### *Confronting the medical gaze*

The sex and sexuality debate remains a difficult one as Bennett and Reddy show in their research on the teaching of gender, sexuality and sexual orientation across South African campuses of higher education. They were curious about the connection between the constitutional inclusion of “gender equality” and the pedagogical practices in the different academic departments and faculties. Bennett and Reddy were particularly concerned how the “representation of the ‘body’ is being taught to young doctors, anthropologists, lawyers, cultural critics, and economists” (Bennett and Reddy, 2007:48).

New ways of combining teaching and activism are, in fact, discovered and applied where it is sometimes least expected as Lynette Denny and Nomonde Mbatani show through their work when they intertwine medical care and compassion for women rape survivors. They point to a very important aspect that is particularly relevant for this article namely that the gendered nature of rape needs to be addressed differently by medical practitioners and that male rape survivors are not the responsibility of gynaecologists. Denny and Mbatani suggest that while “gynaecology is the specialisation on the female reproduction system”, knowledge of gynaecology is simultaneously knowledge of the way political and cultural meanings about women’s bodies come into the medical arena (Dosekun, 2007:114).

### *Pedagogic distance*

At the GEU we asked: “How do we teach young women and men about their (homo)sexuality?”. Not many university teachers are formally educated in pedagogies of teaching and learning, let alone teaching and learning about sexuality. The fact is that many of UWC’s students are first generation university students and that a large percentage are daily commuting to campus from townships, outlying towns and peri-urban areas and *carry* their own daily experiences about sexism, sexuality, racism, ethnicity, nationality, violence, xenophobia, (dis)ability and homophobia *in* their *bodies* to the classroom and campus. So does the lecturer.

Feminist pedagogues teaching sexuality should be alert to what sexualities may enter the classrooms in those bodies.

I concur with Bennett when she writes that “very few of us have learned about sexuality from academic-controlled pedagogic spaces”. She points to the fact that the “admission to these spaces is constrained by rigid, and competitive discourses on the ‘intellect,’ ‘academic merit,’ and where long colonisation of academic space by the elite (in South Africa, white, wealthy men)” (Bennett, 2006:76). Her observation contributes to my analysis of the “pedagogic distance” as UWC is an institution that was historically designed for a specific race group and continues to be loaded with political innuendos about race, gender and sexuality.

Pedagogic distance is not only present between lecturer and student but between student and student. Anecdotes by students show how they had to negotiate situations in the classroom and how vulnerable they often feel when

the issue of homosexuality comes up. There is much subjective evidence on how homophobia slips out during both staff and student conversations and interviews. While there is some kind of sensitivity with regard to race there remains intense hostility towards those who are perceived as homosexual.

### *Institutional culture*

Institutional culture is best understood by those who experience it. There are the unspoken ways, symbols, the various spoken, written and electronic evidence that makes up the prevailing culture. In this respect I find Dorothy Smith's notion of institutional ethnography useful – her view is deeply embedded in feminist standpoint theory. According to Smith “institutional ethnography is located in people's experience in the local sites of their bodily being and seeks to discover what can't be grasped from within that experience, namely the social relations that are implicit in an organization” (Smith, 2001:161). Smith's view is that the day-to-day experiences, social interactions and communication say a great deal about the institutional atmosphere and culture.

Jonathan Jansen writes about “institutional perspective” and he says it is much more than just the accumulation of modules and credit hours but it is also about the concealed knowledge within the institution. It is learning about both the penalties and strictures for moving outside the institutionally legitimated knowledge and about the advantages of “slotting in” to the dominant knowledge forms (Jansen, 2009: 173). Lesbian and gay lives and studies are the opposite of “slotting in” or “assimilating”; they disrupt the existing norms.

Although higher education and research institutions may sometimes teach about and conduct research on sex, sexuality and sexual orientation, very little is “formally” done to improve the social life of homosexual people or the inclusion of homosexual orientation in- and outside the classroom context. In many instances there is a disjuncture between what is taught inside the classroom and the lived experiences of the students outside those walls.

When Yvette Abrahams conducted a survey on the lives and experiences of lesbian and bisexual women at UWC in the 90's, she could not find students to share their experiences and ended up speaking to alumni (Abrahams, n.d.:10). This was an indication of the hostile institutional environment that existed thirteen years ago. Women were too scared to identify as lesbian or bisexual

and preferred to complete their studies and once they have “made it” in their respective professional lives they were much more comfortable to speak about their experiences. The survey by Abrahams led to the development of an annual awareness campus campaign by the GEU against anti-homoprejudice and anti-homophobia. It started in 2006 and is usually one week long. The campaign and critical consciousness raising have been so successful that a formal programme Loud Enuf was established which is now headed by student representatives, networks were developed with various organisations (lesbian and gay supportive faith-based organisations, the Triangle Project, and Kaleidoscope, the inter-university student organisation for LGTBQIA students) and it has become the contact for all lesbian and gay activities on campus, it conducts workshops on sexuality with other organisations and institutions on campus and it lobbied the HIV and AIDS programme to be more inclusive of the needs of the lesbian and gay student population.

Although Loud Enuf and the GEU have crossed important divides in the institution it does not mean that the university is now free from prejudice and that it has become a “home for all”<sup>6</sup>.

## **Institutional “home”**

*“‘Home’ is a four-letter word” (Holland, 2005: ix)*

Women’s Studies has traditionally been the institutional home for the teaching of sexualities. However, as Reddy has noted, it makes sense to have lesbian and gay (or queer) studies across disciplines and I would argue that the law, political science, government studies as well as the faculties of medical and health sciences amongst others should have curricula which teach beyond the traditional frameworks about sex, sexism and sexualities. While WGS is the institutional home for the formal theory at UWC, the GEU has become the physical, activist and grounded theoretical home for lesbian, gay, and transgender students to think through the politics of gender, race, and sexuality. As a “non-teaching” department we have become the activist home for the critical thinker and we have designed programmes for all the marginalised politicised concerns (homosexuality, violence against women, disability, and poverty), housed at the GEU. We firmly believe that the GEU is the safest space on campus.

As feminist staff we are aware that “home” is often the most dangerous and dysfunctional place. Our GEU version of “home” is both a cerebral and a

physical space where body and intellect meet. In 2010 we conducted a survey amongst lesbian and gay students to ascertain whether they felt that the university is a safe space and whether they regarded it as “home”. The survey questionnaire was titled ‘UWC LGBTQ Climate Survey’ and was a collaborative project between the GEU and WGS. The purpose was to gather the experiences and perceptions of LGBTQ students at UWC in order to develop “safe spaces on campus free from prejudice and discrimination”. The analysis of the questionnaires gave us a sense of what students who identified as lesbian and gay thought of UWC. Our sense was that there is an “imagined home” for the students and this home was located within their respective lesbian and gay friendship circle. In this small circle they could be who they are and not fear the backlash from the rest of the campus community. The research made us aware that there are certain safe spaces on campus where lesbian and gay students gather in numbers, and they “own” those spaces where they knew each other and knew that the students who frequent those spaces are lesbian or gay. Creating their own spaces allowed them to combat isolation but they were also very vocal about the fact that the university authorities should create official “safe spaces” for them. There was also the fear amongst some of being isolated and for them a safe space did not necessarily mean a “loving environment” but “a place where I would feel protected” from the heteronormative gaze and hate. For this group “safe space” translated into “a place where I could hide”.

Why is the notion of home of such importance to us? For the students there is such a strong desire for belonging that they yearn to embrace the university slogan “home away from home’ although this was never meant to include homosexual people. We often hear students say with relief when they enter our offices (our offices are incidentally located in a *house* on campus) and hear about our work and programmes: “We feel at home”. The GEU provides space where they can imagine their institutional home and construct it themselves. Home is not always a physical construction but can be an intellectual or spiritual place.

### *Spiritual home*

Religion plays a big part in the lives of many students. This can cause much agony in the process of accepting the self. At the end of formal classes and over weekends the campus comes alive with all kinds of Christian faith and

religious-based activities. Soon after Loud Enuf was established one of the Muslim gay students resigned from the programme as he was afraid that his fellow Muslim community would ostracize him. One of the biggest struggles for students is to reconcile their religious upbringing with their sexuality.

There are numerous Christian student organisations on campus and many charismatic organisations preach the link between “sexual sin” and fire and brimstone, calling homosexuality an abomination. His People<sup>7</sup>, one of the biggest and most influential charismatic organisations, started as a student religious organisation but have grown and have massive impact on the homophobic messages of its followers. This organisation has a weekly Sunday church service in one of the biggest lecture rooms on campus. On 4 August 2006 in anticipation of the changes to the Marriage Act the Department of Religion and Theology in partnership with the GEU, WGS and the Triangle Project hosted a conference, “Revisiting Intimacy: The Challenge of Homosexual Relationships to Church and Society”. The main purpose was to unlock vigorous debate amongst church and society on aspects of inclusiveness, respect for difference, and tolerance (Hames, 2007: 65). One Dutch Reformed Church minister stormed out of the conference because he could not “accept” homosexuality as part of the church.

On the 9 of August 2006, National Women’s Day, a group of students affiliated to one of the Christian student organisations marched on campus holding placards that read amongst others “Homosexuality is a sin”. The irony was not lost because that year we commemorated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the March of Women to Pretoria. For the lesbian and gay students this was a threat to their safety, security and freedom to exercise their sexual choice and rights on campus. One lesbian student took photos of the march and brought the evidence to the GEU. Did this action constitute hate speech? Legal opinion informed us that that action could not be interpreted as hate speech as the right to religious freedom is extremely broad and very difficult to litigate against. We had to resort to an even more vigorous campaign with the assistance of the supportive religious student organisations such as Anglican Student Society. Fortunately the Emeritus Archbishop Desmond Tutu was the Chancellor of UWC and we used his message of support.

So where and how would students find their “spiritual home” on campus? During our annual awareness weeks against homoprejudice we have a standing agreement with the lesbian and gay inclusive churches to conduct an

interfaith service on campus. We have found that most mainstream churches have a very welcome and inclusive message and that all churches have known lesbian and gay members as part of their congregations.

The GEU and Loud Enuf have close relationships with three faith-based organisations the Good Hope Metropolitan Community Church (GHMCC), the Inclusive and Affirmative Ministries (IAM) and Inner Circle which is an organisation that service the needs of mainly Muslim LGTB people. These organisations offered their assistance to give spiritual guidance in case students need to overcome their internalised fears of spiritual or religious rejection.

### *Coming out (of the closet?)*

Since 2005 there has been a change of atmosphere on campus and students are championing their right to be sexually active and to love, learn and live on campus without fear<sup>8</sup>. The confidence in students in their own sexuality has grown and especially when they know their professors are “just like them”. Students are coming out in the classroom and even come to campus in drag.

The 2012 Pride March in Somerset Green Point is the third Pride event that the Loud Enuf students attended and this year they had their own banners, painted their own T-shirts and placards and gyrated with the music as the Beef Cake float passed them by. The sounds of Lady Gaga’s lyrics ‘*Born This Way*’ bouncing off the hot tar:

Don't hide yourself in regret  
Just love yourself and you're set  
I'm on the right track, baby  
I was born this way.

No matter gay, straight or bi  
Lesbian transgendered life  
I'm on the right track, baby  
I was born to survive

Don't be a drag, just be a queen, don't be a drag, just be a queen.

Lady Gaga’s song ‘Born this Way’ must have been the lesbian and gay anthem for 2011 and especially for the members of Loud Enuf and Gayla at UWC. Thanks to the activist pedagogy of the GEU, and of the lesbian, gay and transgendered students themselves, there has been a remarkable shift in the confidence of lesbian and gay students on campus. In 2010 some gender questioning students would sit in the student centre dressed in dresses and

during 2011 certain gender questioning students would attend their classes in dresses. One lecturer in WGS reported that during the student presentations in her Sex and sexuality class one of the students was brave enough to come by taxi in drag. In conversation with the students they reported that they were extremely comfortable with themselves.

And while this may be part of the gender performance, it proved that students are claiming important social and geographical spaces on campus. Part of the annual awareness week in 2010 was devoted to a Drag Show in the Student Centre. It was well attended and the show was twice repeated in 2011 once during lunch time in open air. These performances are mainly organised by the gay students; lesbian students have yet to organise such a public event for themselves.

Despite this, campus discourses continue to generate homophobic speech and attacks. *"I have nothing against gays but they should not touch me. They should not enter my space."* (Student during an awareness raising workshop, GEU:2011). During the period of writing this article, certain public homophobic incidents occurred at both our neighbouring campus as well as on our own campus<sup>9</sup>. This has reinforced the resolution to continue with the debates and awareness raising with regard to the understanding of sexuality and sexual orientation to interrogate the issue of "inclusive citizenship" for lesbian and gay people on campus. Most recently it was reported that some of the members of Gayla were brutally attacked by fellow students so we have to be ever vigilant for the backlash and consistent prejudice and hatred. The time for awareness-raising and education is not over. The positive aspect of this experience is that the students publicly stood up for their rights, something that was only dreamt of before we institutionalised the awareness campaigns. We are reminded that "any praxis, and pedagogy, is by definition, selective" and it is our choice to continue advocating for the inclusion of sexual orientation in and outside the formal curricula (Price-Spratten, 2001:63).

UWC is far from the city centre with its lesbian and gay friendly shops, LGTBI NGO's, inclusive churches, bars, bookshops and clubs and other social networks. It was therefore critical to develop a programme that is not part of the formal academic programme because not all the university staff teaches in the Women's and Gender Studies Programme on lesbian and gay studies, or in the Languages Department on lesbian and gay representation in literature or even in the often problematic departments of Psychology, Sociology and Anthropology.

I started to bring my own personal books, TV series and popular films and documentaries to work. In order to make the books more accessible to lesbian and gay identified students we kept a record when they borrowed a copy. I tried as far as possible to purchase popular lesbian and gay novels where the main protagonist(s) is Black. For instance the students were introduced to mainly American authors such as Octavia Butler, E. Lynn Harris, Ricc Rollins, Shonia L. Brown, Jewel Gomez, Laurinda D. Brown and Sidi, amongst others. There is still a dearth of local black lesbian and gay novelists in South Africa. As part of the offerings is one of the first feature films made by a black lesbian, Cheryl Dunye, and titled 'The Watermelon Woman'. All of these films are popular with the lesbian and gay students and have become important teaching material.

In conclusion, the teaching and learning environment of South African universities is full of theoretical paradoxes. The classroom is a powerfully, privileged, cerebral space which has the potential to silence many in the name of "access" and "opportunity." Within a voluntary learning space which allows for personal development and political awareness actual education may be generated, collectively. It is within the GEU space, I argue, that realistic options for activist and feminist pedagogy have been allowed to thrive, and that given this opportunity, marginalized students – especially those marginalized through the politics of gender and sexuality – have created their own university, their "home".

## Endnotes

- 1 An example is the publication edited by Nonhlanhla Mkhize, Jane Bennett, Vasu Reddy and Relebohile Moletsane: *The country we want to live in: hate crimes and homophobia in the lives of black lesbian South Africans*. Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2010 is based on a round-table discussion hosted by the Human Sciences Research Council in 2006.
- 2 See Neville Hoad. *African intimacies: race, homosexuality, and globalization*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007 and the conference proceedings edited by Vasu Reddy, Theo Sandfort and Laetitia Rispel. *From social silence to social science: same-sex sexuality, HIV & AIDS and gender in South Africa*. Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2009.
- 3 For instance Ruth Morgan and Saskia Wieringa's edited publication *Tommy boys, lesbian men and ancestral wives: female same-sex practices in Africa*. Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2006.

- 4 Organisations such as the Forum for the Empowerment of Women (FEW) concentrated on the rights of Black lesbians and the Coalition of African Lesbians (CAL) organised lesbians across the African continent.
- 5 I have selected them for various reasons – they are some of the few who have not only come out as gay and lesbian in the academy (Reddy as a gay person of colour and Bennett as a white lesbian) but have long (her/his)stories of involvement both in the academy and in the lesbian and gay movement.
- 6 During a campaign by the HIV and AIDS unit in 2011 the GEU and Loud Enuf distributed the booklet “The young gay guys guide to safer gay sex” as part of the information package. We received an e-mail from a woman staff member complaining about “the pornographic filth” with which that the GEU is contaminating the campus.
- 7 His People has a very large student following on campus and its organisational leaders are often in the media expressing their homophobic opinions.
- 8 In 2011 two of the Loud Enuf members were sitting under a tree close to the GEU in a loving embrace. When the campus security started to harass them they refused to be intimidated and came to the GEU with the security in tow. The matter was amicably resolved when we pointed out how we interpreted the security behaviour as homophobic and made it clear that we are going to take action against them.
- 9 In 2010 the University of Stellenbosch hosted their annual event ‘Die Soen in die Laan’ (Kiss in the Avenue) where it is accepted that heterosexual students kiss each other in public as part of a publicity stunt. Two gay students decided to kiss each other and were photographed and the photo was published in ‘Die Matie’, the student newspaper, an uproar followed and the event was subsequently cancelled in 2011. In October of 2010 during the Pink Week at the University of Cape Town the Pink Closet built by students was burnt down during the night. In both instances the responses by the university authorities were mild.

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## Lyrics

Diana Ross. *I'm coming out*

Lady Gaga. *Born this way*

# Profile: Women Crossing the Line: Exploring the politics of gender and sexuality at the University of Cape Town

Tanja Bosch and Susan Holland-Muter

## Introduction

This profile piece explores the University of Cape Town's (UCT) action research project, one of five such projects implemented in five university campuses in southern Africa, which aimed at building young women's leadership and social organization to confront sexual, raced and gendered inequalities within the university.

There is an enabling national gender legislative and policy framework in South Africa, with the national government promoting policies which facilitate young black women's access to education and other social and economic opportunities. This has increased access to tertiary education for young black women. However, gender relations on campuses continue to be negotiated within a context of economic and racial inequalities. Universities are sites in which the meanings of gendered identities are intensely contested. While the discourse of gender equality and human rights is alive and present on campus, these co-exist and are often contradicted by a university and more general national context which tolerates and normalizes high levels of gender based violence, and valorizes a hegemonic masculinity. This contestation contributes to (an important) instability around gendered and sexual norms, and opens the space for continued negotiations and engagement with the politics of citizenship and human rights.

While South African universities have undergone major transitions associated with the broad political changes in the country and while UCT has been associated with a long-established progressive tradition, the staff and student body remains mainly white and middle class (Sennett et al, 2003). Moreover, while the university in South Africa has been positioned as a site of struggle, old anti-apartheid narratives have been replaced by a discourse of

student activism less concerned with national politics but rather with micro issues such as financial exclusion. Within this context, organization around gender issues and political activism by women's groups has been muted.

"Women Crossing the Line" aimed to create public awareness and debate over 'the line' of convention, which controls women's autonomy and choice, particularly as young women face intensive challenges in universities. The project was conducted collaboratively between the university's African Gender Institute and Centre for Film and Media Studies.

Feminists and women's rights activists, LGBTI activists and activists within the HIV movement have provided the impetus for concentrating on sexuality as a site of research and activism. High levels of HIV, gender-based violence and increased organization around human rights and sexuality for women and LGBTI communities, has led to an increase in academic and activist work on gender and sexuality (Correa & Parker, 2004). In Africa, particularly in South Africa, Bennett and Reddy (2010) posit that the increased engagement in Africa on questions of gender and sexuality arises from the combination of policy and advocacy work around the prevention of HIV/AIDS, the inadequate attention to the ways in which sexuality, culture and identity hinder "policy uptake" (240) and a focus on sexual citizenship. Both internationally and in South Africa, sexuality has been most "easily" addressed and dealt with in the context and from the framework of health and human rights approaches, rather than pleasure and desire, or autonomy. Our project has attempted to focus on the politics of gender and sexuality in a way that moves beyond a narrow focus on HIV/AIDS prevention, with its calls for "responsible sex", and to surface and provide alternative voices to dominant discourses of young women's victimhood, and of being populations "at risk". "Women Crossing the Line" has sought instead to focus on an exploration of experiences of femininities, power and agency in order to surface the multifaceted experiences and issues of young women's sexuality on the university campus.

## Methodology

The use of feminist action research methodology in our project was a deliberate attempt to de-centre the interpretive authority of the academic researchers and to create polyvocal texts through which the "researched" would present their own perspectives (Mendez & Wolf, 2007). New methods do not necessarily result in more 'valid' forms of feminist research, but certainly raise issues of voice and

reflexivity, and encourage a research ethic that involves creating and nurturing reciprocal relationships to create empowering forms of “knowledge”.

In this context, the collaborative nature of the group composition meant that students and lecturers were co-researchers, where attention was paid to power relations within the research team, while focusing on the promotion of young women’s agency and leadership, providing them the process and the space to analyze their experiences of campus life, identify the key problems experienced by young women students and to collectively define solutions or actions which attempted to change and/or address the contested meanings of gendered and sexual identities on the campus. The research team comprised two academic researchers, a research assistant and a group of five student researchers from a second year undergraduate gender course.

The first step comprised building a common political and analytical framework within the group through an exploration of our personal experiences and societal context in which women’s sexuality is constrained by patriarchal and heteronormative norms, interrogating how these have played themselves out differently in terms of race and class; and how through our subjectivities and positions we are engaged in a continual process of negotiation with societal norms and power relations – conforming or resisting the norms and power relations. One example of this which emerged in the discussions was the idea that young women students are often gender compliant at home and transgressive at the university, illustrating the process of how women negotiate gendered norms in the different spaces through which they move.

This resulted in the identification of a unifying theme, which underscored the approach and intention of the research project, namely *Women Crossing the Line*<sup>1</sup>. The concept of “the line” makes reference to traditional social norms and values with regard to women’s sexuality; and “crossing the line” refers to the process of contestation – and of the need to highlight women’s resistance and subversion of patriarchal sexual and gendered norms.

Through a process of institutional mapping, the gendered, racialized and sexualized norms on campus were surfaced using a specific building used for the teaching of social sciences on campus, and housing several Social Sciences departments and research units, as a microcosm of the university’s institutional culture. Here the group surfaced the different ways in which women’s bodies are allowed to occupy this space – moving within discourses and practices which at the formal level promote a desexualization of bodies,

and promote a certain intellectual knowledge (in which the politics of the body and sexuality are largely absent), and yet which also provide the arena for (hetero)sexuality to be performed. Based on this reading of a key lecture/research space, the project attempted to create processes and spaces through which to analyze the meaning of sexualities, otherness and the public/private dichotomy; and to imagine and realize actions which could shift and/or address structural and embodied injustices.

There were four key elements in our campaign: Body art installations, posters, *sexyuality* dialogues and a final event called “Performing Our Sexualities”, described in further detail below.

## **Let’s talk about it, how can things be different? The body art installations**

The first phase of the project explored the different ways in which women’s sexuality is controlled and placed under surveillance by discourses and practices that promote hetero-patriarchal norms. Students used body art installations to highlight and disrupt, through public performance, the ways in which young women constitute and police their constructions of self, and perform their gendered identities in relation to the patriarchal heteronormative discourses promoted through social institutions.

## **Images of positive sexualities**

The next phase of the project involved the creation of large posters featuring images of ‘ordinary’ looking individuals accompanied with a series of questions related to sexuality. The posters were block mounted and strategically placed on easels around campus. The individuals featured were intended to represent campus personas or characters (the average student) and the questions raised a number of issues related to sexuality for all sexes and genders, and amongst others dealt with issues of autonomy, full and active consent, safe sex, HIV/AIDS, equitable relationships, self and body-esteem, safety, happiness and pleasure. There were three sets of questions that were placed next to different sexes and genders to show that these questions don’t “fit” with any one particular person, but may very well be the concerns of anyone on campus.

This phase initially aimed to explore positive sexualities and provide a space for the sexualization of the “invisible” or desexualized actors on campus, e.g. women students and staff, people living with disabilities; workers; particularly

within the context of the desexualization of the university campus. At this point the project also grappled with ways to engage with sexuality that moves beyond a focus on HIV/AIDS, violence and victimhood.

### **Sexuality dialogues**

Members of the team engaged with students on campus during this period and invited them to the *Sexuality Dialogues* held on campus. The posters were also used to advertise this series of women's dialogues at which women were invited to join a conversation about their sexuality and experiences on campus. The themes that emerged here included young women's experiences of 'the line' and the policing of gendered and heteronormative norms on campus, as well as multiple forms of violence. The response to the sexuality dialogues showed an overwhelming need for women on campus to have a safe and open space to regularly get together and have discussions and develop projects to challenge sexual norms on campus.

The dialogues placed women's everyday experiences at the centre of critical inquiry, drawing on the notion that there is a certain rhythm to the giving of testimony, which usually begins with mundane everyday occurrences and often results in something more significant/ symbolic. Sharing experiences become a way to validate those experiences and create a sense of solidarity.

### **Performing Sexualities: The final event**

The final event showcased the earlier creative products, gave a space for young women to perform feminist music and poetry; and an actual performing of sexuality, which gave the audience the opportunity to 'cross the line'. First, the installations were performed in a modified form based on earlier comments, then a number of gender and sexuality themed poems and musical items were performed. Finally, drawing on the notions of gender as performance, the final event inverted the spectacle-spectator binary by calling on the audience to perform their identities in ways that cross the line and potentially cause "gender trouble" (Butler, 1990). The actual performance gave participants a range of props and clothing items, which they used to "perform" or pose, and which were photographed.

The "performances" were an opportunity for the representation of those sexual identities that are often not recognized by the voices of surveillance and control operating in the public space of the university.

## Some issues to consider around process, race and position

Collaborative feminist research is faced by a number of challenges, also reflected in the present study. Patai (1991) questions whether it is ever possible to reduce the power differentials between researchers and researched, in this case academic and student researcher. The close personal relationships resulted in the sharing of intimately personal stories, with the potential for exploitation as they become “data” (Stacey, 1991).

In the present action research process, we faced the latent, power dynamics associated with position within the university (academic researcher/student researcher) as well as power positions associated with race and class, with the resultant differences of power, authority and status, which sometimes created opportunities for solidarity, but also generated tensions. Students’ assignment of power to the academic researchers meant that they did not always take full ownership of the project in terms of taking the lead to set up meetings or participation in decision making; but also that the academic researchers were constantly negotiating and renegotiating the resultant insider/outsider dilemma. There are tensions within projects of this nature – questions arise such as who is actually driving the change agenda? Who decides what kind of change? What kind of agenda? Is it really possible to speak to building democracy and joint decision-making under conditions of such different power relations?

Race was experienced as an issue at different moments within the project, both as a marker ascribing a social position as well as an identity. “The profoundly racialized construction of sexuality in South Africa needs to be recognized as one of the particularities of our ‘politics of location’ (Tamale, 2011: 10). During the evaluation of the project, a student researcher highlighted the significance for her of the “whiteness” of one of the academic researchers, and the power they subconsciously ascribed to her race. There were also quite different notions and relationship to “being coloured” – this could be seen as a generational difference or one of political ideology, or a combination of the two. An example can be found with two “coloured” participants in the project – one a student, the other an academic. The student researcher defines herself as “coloured” and sees this as having quite specific connotations, whereas the older staff member, who had been active in the struggle against Apartheid, defined herself as “black” and purposively did not describe herself as “coloured”. At different moments of the project, the significance of race

and how it affects our experiences of being gendered sexual beings was also raised. During the Sexuality Dialogues, issues of race were foregrounded in discussions around different notions of beauty and who was “seen” as being attractive; and in terms of different experiences of social surveillance and control as illustrated in the experiences of a young, black lesbian student who outlined her experience of black men who felt entitled to approach her and question her sexual identity in a way that was not experienced by white lesbian women. There had also been some limited discussion around why it was mainly black women students who were participating in the project, and where were the white women students? This is an issue that would need to be addressed and explored further, as any theories put forward would be mere speculation.

Whether to foreground the politics of pleasure or the politics of violence, control and surveillance in young women’s engagement and experiences of sexuality was a constant debate within the research team. As Vance (1984) has noted, “danger and pleasure are ever-present realities in many women’s lives”, and the explorations within this research process was no different. In the face of dominant discourses around young women’s sexuality, which foreground the many sexual violations which young women experience, highlighting the ever present dangers which young women face in the form of rape, harassment, surveillance and control, and on notions of women being vulnerable and “at risk”, there was a strong call for the project to spend time surfacing and exploring young women’s positive and pleasurable experiences of sexuality. The argument was that young women are not always victims of male sexual desire, and that they too wanted sex, enjoyed it and were active sexual subjects. This often led to a tension within the group, as it was felt that even if young women did actively engage in and initiated sexual relationships, or actively demanded and experienced sexual pleasure, they did this within an institutional environment of the sexual double standard. In addition, the interactions with the student body and discussions within the *sexuality* dialogues had also revealed young women’s very real fear of and daily experience of sexual violence. What became clear was that the sexual pleasure and the danger are both present in young women’s lives, and that we would need to navigate the multiple and often contradictory experiences of women’s sexuality, and recognize, as noted by Masvawure (2011) that

dichotomies are very problematic, and that any exploration and theorization of young women's sexualities needs to take women's heterogeneity and their multifaceted sexual experiences into account.

The intended aim of the action research process was to work with and empower young women students, contributing to deepening their intellectual and analytical skills and knowledge in the arenas of gender and sexuality within the university space, and to create spaces and processes to promote young women's leadership, in order for them to engage with and promote broader processes of social change within the university (in the first phase). We could safely say that to some extent this has happened. We all, young and not so young women, can speak of feeling more "empowered", to having a stronger sense of self, of feeling more self confident, and of being more able to articulate our concerns and issues more clearly. We can all say that we have a deeper knowledge of how to think critically about a particular issue, consider and develop research questions, plan a campaign and develop organizational skills, and have a sense of what our visions of a more just and equitable society would look like, and what kind of conditions we would like to see in place in order for (young) women to be able to exercise our sexual rights. There would probably not be agreement on all these issues within the group; however, everybody to a greater or lesser extent would be able to articulate their positions. But like all processes of 'leadership building', and participating in processes of action research with a distinctly transformative agenda, it is incomplete, it has been flawed, and there have been tensions and contradictions.

At a general level, however, the action research project contributed to creating an alternative voice and presence on campus – putting the spotlight on the politics of gender and sexuality in a way that no other campus based organization is doing. UCT has some history of student organization, and in the past has had at times quite vibrant young women's movement and networks of feminist activists and researchers. However, sadly these are now distant memories and currently UCT's student organizations are organizing themselves in different ways with different concerns. The institution continues to be deeply patriarchal and this action research process has attempted to create a space and a woman-centred process that is dedicated to exploring the politics of gender and sexuality on campus.

## Endnotes

1. Although this was a constant theme in our own discussions and work, we acknowledge the use of this slogan by Just Associates, an international women's rights network.

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# Profile: Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights among Female Students at the University of Zimbabwe: A participatory action research project

Naomi N. Wekwete and Charity Manyeruke

## Introduction

The University of Zimbabwe Young Women Leadership carried out an action research project entitled “Strengthening Research Capacity in Africa: Gender, sexuality and politics with a strategic focus on the lives of young women” in partnership with the African Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town. The study’s aim was to investigate the sexual and reproductive health challenges faced by female students at the University of Zimbabwe (UZ). The project had a specific focus on institutions of higher education in the SADC region, which sought to strengthen research and action which involves the lives and empowerment of young women.

The research was conducted during the period April 2010 to April 2011. During that time, the University of Zimbabwe was not providing accommodation to students as the halls of residence were closed in July 2007, mainly due to the fact that water was not being supplied to the residences. The closure of accommodation to University of Zimbabwe students brought many problems for the students, both male and female, but for female students, it has affected sexual and reproductive health and rights. Given this background, the team agreed to focus their research on “lack of accommodation at the University of Zimbabwe”. This profile discusses the processes involved in surfacing and documenting the concerns of female students and describes some of the findings that were presented to the university authorities to effect action that could alleviate some of the challenges faced by women students.

## Rationale for the Study

Young people's reproductive health needs have been largely ignored by existing reproductive health services because they have historically been viewed as the healthy strata of the population (United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 2011). However, young people between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four are particularly vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV, unwanted or unplanned pregnancies, unsafe abortions and limited access to sexual and reproductive health rights (UNFPA, 2011). The university community, and female students in particular, constitute part of this vulnerable group. A high prevalence of multiple concurrent partner relationships has been reported in tertiary institutions in Zimbabwe, and our research shows that many young women have multiple partners who provide for them financially. These kinds of relationships are key drivers of the HIV/AIDS epidemic (SAYWHAT, 2010). Our research shows that many young women also tend to believe men have a need for sex and the right to coerce women into sex.

The University of Zimbabwe offers a behaviour change intervention that focuses on the development of the skills necessary for a healthy, positive lifestyle and HIV/AIDS prevention (UZ, 2009). Although HIV/AIDS counselling and testing services are provided in tertiary institutions, unavailability of post-test support and stigma hinders students from seeking treatment even when services are available for free. Access to treatment remains a challenge for most Zimbabwean students in tertiary institutions (Students and Youths Working on Reproductive Health Action Team (SAYWHAT), 2010). SAYWHAT (2010) identified the absence of youth friendly services as one of the reasons for students' failure to access treatment on campus. The team also reported that clinics at tertiary institutions do not have the capacity to treat STIs and often face shortages of essential drugs. Given this background, the University of Zimbabwe research team decided to focus their study on sexual and reproductive health-related challenges faced by female students at the University of Zimbabwe.

## Selection of students

The process of selecting students to participate in the research involved two meetings with interested students after information about the project had been placed on notice boards across the University campus. The University of

Zimbabwe project coordinators met with female students with an interest in discussing issues of female sexual and reproductive health: gender, sexuality, and politics including issues on HIV/AIDS. The meetings attracted students from a number of faculties including Social Studies, Medicine and Commerce and in order to allow for meaningful participation of the students, a focus group discussion was used as a platform to allow students to brainstorm about sexuality and about reproductive health problems on campus.

Pertinent issues that were raised during the first meeting were the problems of lack of accommodation on campus, cross generational sex, multiple sexual partners, condom negotiation between partners, unplanned pregnancies, HIV/AIDS, and the economic situation and its effect on the increase of tuition fees and cost of living.

A second meeting was conducted with the main objective of finding a unique area of discussion peculiar to the University of Zimbabwe in relation to female sexual reproductive health on campus. The University of Zimbabwe research team decided on the “lack of provision of accommodation to students” as the main factor affecting sexual and reproductive health of female students. Ten students who were active during the two discussions were eventually selected to be the core group working on the project together with the project co-coordinators. Five of the ten students were then chosen to represent the students at a workshop conducted in Cape Town in September 2010. The students had the opportunity of meeting students from other universities and shared experiences from their respective universities.

## **A Reflection on Action Research Methodology**

The methodology used in this research was aimed at strengthening female students’ capacities to participate in identifying sexual and reproductive health related challenges they face on campus and explores ways of how to deal with the challenges (Prieto, 2002). The University of Zimbabwe research team used varied methodologies which included environmental analysis, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews to elicit “I” Stories to carry out its research on how accommodation problems faced by female students at the University was affecting gender, sexuality, politics and reproductive issues. All the methodologies, though they are different, reaffirmed problems that were being raised by students.

## Environmental Analysis

The female students in this project carried out an environmental analysis which involved taking photos of the environment which affect their sexuality on campus. This process enabled students to identify places they regard as students' spaces and their accounts of these social interactions within these spaces testify to policing of hetero-normative gendered identities on the campus.

Students identified a space between the Commerce and Arts buildings commonly known as 'Facebook'. This is where "surfing" of girls by boys takes place, it is a place of gossip and a place in which many women feel embarrassed because of the way they are stared at. Female students identified the places in which they feel most comfortable and this is important for the University's management to understand so that if benches are to be placed, they would know where to place them. These would also be sites where small booths to sell newspapers, magazines and female sanitary-ware could be installed.

However, not all places at the university are liked by female students. They sometimes shun places because they feel intimidated by the environments or they don't feel comfortable being in such places. Female students expressed feeling uncomfortable and intimidated in many parts of the university as they are often harassed by male students and staff. Some participants explained that they felt offended by comments made by the grounds and cleaning staff about their bodies and clothing because they do not belong to the same class of education and there is no way they can ever date them. This was an interesting point to note because in the focus group discussions, female students were reported to be dating gardeners who do not belong to their class, for the purposes of getting accommodation in the university's neighbourhood. So this means that the gardener-student relationships are regarded as backyard developments which should never be known within the university campus.

In this study, it was also observed in one of the images taken that these general cleaners also sit almost at the entrance door of the ladies' toilet. This makes the students shun entering such toilets because they feel insecure and experience a lack of privacy. The University's Administration has since taken note of this issue and argued that an investigation should be carried out since the workers are supposed to be working and not sitting around ladies toilets.

The images taken by the students also show water around the floors in the toilets and outside. The female students identified this situation as undesirable. The problem of water at the university was identified as a serious issue affecting the lives of female students. The University has been experiencing water problems for a number of years. This period falls within the same period which Zimbabwe has been experiencing political problems, that is since 2000. This problem is also experienced by urban centres in the country as a result of failing to secure funds to purchase water purifying chemicals. The ladies' toilet facilities are not user friendly as evidenced by the lack of sanitary bins and full length mirrors. Tissues are never found within the facilities and there is rust and missing lids on the cisterns. There are black plastic containers which are normally filled with water for washing hands when there is no running water and everyone dips their hands in the container which is unhygienic.

The University erected boreholes on campus but because most of its buildings are located on high ground, the pressure is not adequate to get water supplies around campus and besides, borehole water is inadequate to meet all the water needs of the university. As a result of the problems being experienced by students, the University is constructing a water reservoir which can store water for a few days before City Council's water returns. The University is also cognizant of the fact that the problems may persist, if Council water takes a long period to resume pumping.

The Students Union in most universities is where you normally see students conversing freely and having their student's activism meetings. One of the images taken by students in this study shows the emptiness of the Students' Union buildings at this University. The building was closed at the same time as the closure of the University's accommodation. This should have been a place where female students' issues are discussed and some of them resolved. However, the emptiness, silence and lack of movement may almost symbolize no hope for a quick solution to students' issues in general and female students in particular. The absence of this political arm means that a platform for which female students can start their political career and gain milestones is not available to them.

The students involved in this project also took an image of an empty hall of residence to show how they feel about closed halls of residences. They feel anger at the University's Management system as they do not understand

why the halls of residences should be empty when they are struggling with transport and they can also not utilize the library at night because it will be very dark and unsafe and they will not find any transport to take them to their respective suburbs. On campus, there are no restaurants for students. Next to the taxi rank are the food vendors where most of the male students buy their food. The female students feel that the condition in which the food is sold and the dust raised by the taxis makes the area appalling to the female students. The lack of a proper sitting area makes it uncomfortable for most female students. Female students feel therefore marginalized at campus. They feel that their needs are not being considered by the university's management.

Another image taken by students on their spaces is the commuter taxi rank on campus. Most students do not own cars therefore they use taxis for their daily travels to and from college. One of the images showed a student boarding a commuter taxi whilst it was already moving and students described drivers and their assistants (*mahwindi*) as very rude, especially towards female students. This makes female students feel unsafe.

### Focus Group Discussions

This study also gathered information using focus group discussions. The focus groups ranged from 8 to 15 students. Three focus group discussions were held on campus during lunch hours and were led by students themselves to enable them to speak freely on the issues that were affecting them. Students felt that the discussions gave them the opportunity to come together as female students and discuss amongst themselves problems they are facing emanating from lack of accommodation on campus and affecting gender, sexuality, politics and reproductive health. Students on campus generally no longer have their own meetings since they are out of university residence. Most of the time students want to just attend their lectures and go home immediately after these lectures. In most cases in the the focus group discussions students felt comfortable to discuss what their female counterparts were facing since they felt ashamed of some of their experiences like dating older man ("sugar daddies"). The conversation thus centred on a "friend of mine"; "a girl I know"; "a girl I heard of" and "a certain girl". The use of the pronoun "I" was limited in these discussions, which indicates why it was important in this kind of research to have the "*I*" stories which focused on personal experiences.

## “I” Stories

The stories shared using this methodology showed desperation on part of the female students. In the section that follows we provide some excerpts from the “I” stories:

A: I am hurt and ashamed to say that I have resorted to becoming a commercial sex worker, not by choice, but due to circumstances since I cannot afford accommodation and my up-keep. I had relied on my mother's money which was not enough anymore. I needed clothes, money for lunch, bus fare, groceries, money for printing and photocopying, stationery and accommodation. I strongly feel that if only the university could open halls of residence, maybe for people like me, we wouldn't have to go through all this. Each time I sleep with a man, I try to bath myself as much as I can to remove the filth but the actions keep on flashing in my mind. My mother does not even know that this is what I am doing for a living. I am afraid to go for an HIV test because chances are that I am positive. My dream has been shattered because I might not graduate alive. But who can I blame? I am deeply hurt by the predicament of the girls in my situation, what is going to become of us and are we ever going to be normal people? I doubt it.

B: When I request for money for my upkeep it sometimes takes two months and I need to pay for photo copying, rentals, buy clothes and food each day. I ended up selling sweets during lecture breaks so that I can get money for lunch and at times I skip meals. I cannot stay late on campus reading in the library because I walk each day to campus and there are no street lights in the road that I use so it is not safe to walk when it's dark. Back at the room we live in, some girls would want to play their phones and radios during times you want to read making it so difficult for me to read and it is so frustrating because most of the time I'm behind on handing in my assignments. Some girls invite their boyfriends to the room and this might mean sleeping with a male in the room. As a young woman who had morals instilled in me since I was a young girl, I feel disgusted as if I'm the one sleeping with the men. Living in the room with the other girls has brought such a drawback in my education as well as social life as I feel I'm surrounded by people with a different character from mine.

C: ... I then moved to Mt Pleasant where I am currently staying. The living conditions are awesome it's just like home; a spacious house and only 3kms from school. But this is where I met the most indecent of men; friends and ... I attended parties, went for clubbing, drinking and had sex because the norm was that friends came and went as they pleased. I mean no one had control over me and as far as I was concerned once I was out of the school gate that was the end of school. But because I did not do it for finances, just for fun, this did not last long. I got broke and my father in Kwekwe would not support my drinking habits or promiscuity. Again my landlord got hind of this behaviour and asked me to move out – just for a break I guess. That's when I realised I was pregnant. Because of sex and alcohol abuse, lack of self-control and so on, I forgot who I was and how I was stuck in such a situation. The man could not be found and when I was left all alone, I began to rethink my behaviour.

The inclusion of “I” stories was an opportunity for students to tell their own stories and to present their problems by sharing what they have gone through as a result of the absence of campus accommodation. This methodology allowed students to use their own words to express their feelings and emotions when narrating their stories.

### **Knowledge Creation and Empowerment**

The feminist action research approach taken has helped in facilitating building knowledge to change the conditions of lives for students at the University of Zimbabwe. The female students were involved in the research, investigated the concerns among female students and at the same time participating in the whole process. By engaging students in action research, critical issues concerning their sexual and reproductive health needs were illuminated. Students figured out their problems which they then presented to the university management.

The research process included a process of empowerment and a contribution to action. The involvement of students in the participatory action research made a great impact on the lives of the female students. The fact that they were researchers and, at the same time being respondents, helped in tapping out critical issues affecting sexual and reproductive health of female students at the university. Effecting change in young women's lives was also enhanced by the direct interaction between the research team

and the university management. During the last meeting held with the Pro-Vice Chancellor and the rest of university management, the research team was promised that action would be taken, especially on the issue of accommodation. As promised, the halls of residence were re-opened in August 2011. Students had also raised concerns that some of the staff, both academic and non-academic, were rude to them. The management promised that this would be addressed through an awareness workshop. This again was fulfilled as a meeting was held with the Pro-Vice Chancellor and staff on Etiquette issues in September 2011.

The study has contributed to the body of knowledge on information related to sexual and reproductive health and rights issues with findings that emerged from the study. The issues concerning female students at the University of Zimbabwe, brought to the attention of the university authorities, include the following: female students' engagement with "sugar daddies", multiple concurrent sexual partners, prostitution, engagement in unprotected sex leading to HIV infection, unwanted pregnancies, illegal abortions and non use of HIV and AIDS testing services. Some girls, because of desperation, are forced to abort their pregnancies, which is illegal in the country. One girl, in her testimony, reported that she became pregnant and when she told their boyfriend, he denied being responsible for the pregnancy. As a result, she was forced to travel to South Africa to have an abortion there since it is illegal in Zimbabwe to have an abortion.

## **Dissemination of Research Findings**

Dissemination of research findings is a key factor in contributing towards "political" participation and influencing policymaking (Prieto 2002, p.6). In this case, the research findings were disseminated in various ways, namely through an exhibition referred to as the "Shine Day", meetings with university management to discuss the research findings, and also through publication. This was a learning experience as most of the academic reports are never disseminated in the first two ways mentioned earlier.

On the "Shine Day" the findings were presented in the form of a power point presentation, drama, poetry and songs at the end of the project in May 2011. People invited for this event included students and staff from the University of Zimbabwe, organisations representing students such as SAYWHAT and SHAPE Zimbabwe, representatives from Ministry of Gender,

Women Affairs and Development, Ministry of Youth Empowerment and Development, and non-governmental organisations such as Zimbabwe Women's Resource Centre and Network (ZWRCN).

## Conclusion

The methodology used by the University of Zimbabwe was largely participatory action research. This meant involving students throughout the study and allowing the students to interpret their own spaces and problems. It also included probing the students to explain the meaning of certain actions. Most importantly, the two meetings held with the University's administration where problems and solutions were discussed with the students and lecturers involved in the study together with the Pro-Vice Chancellor, Dean of Students and the Chaplain was an outstanding achievement of this research. Practical solutions were discussed with the university's management which largely means that female students will now be placed high on the agenda as a result of this study. Halls of residence were reopened in August 2011 and a meeting with the pro-Vice Chancellor and university staff was held in order to effect change on their attitudes towards students.

The following recommendations were put forward based on the research findings:

- The University of Zimbabwe authorities should provide accommodation for students to solve some of the social and health issues affecting female students, for example, access to the library until late hours. Most of the sexual and reproductive health concerns are emanating from the issue of lack of accommodation.
- The university should consider HIV and AIDS awareness sessions in between lectures vital so as to create much needed awareness about the importance of HIV testing, whether or not one is engaging in sexual activities.
- It was also suggested that the university should increase HIV and AIDS awareness among students by flighting posters and showing films on HIV and AIDS to students as the university used to do earlier. In the 1980's and 90's, new students were shown films on sexually transmitted diseases during orientation week to remind them of dangers in engaging in unprotected sex.
- The UZ should increase the number of counsellors and mentors on

campus as it was reported that only two HIV and AIDS counsellors served the university population.

- University authorities are strongly recommended to consider having friendly health services as students complained of rude staff at the students' clinic.
- There should be female students' groups that will be able to tackle or bring to attention issues and concerns of female students. It was highly recommended that the Young Women's Leadership should be established as a permanent group at the campus to tackle female students' problems.
- There should also be a female student charter for their sexual and reproductive health rights.

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# Profile: Action research on gender-based violence at the University of Namibia: Results and methodological reflections

Lucy Edwards-Jauch

## Introduction

The lack of gender activism on the University of Namibia's campuses points to a lack of feminist consciousness and a pervasive culture of fear at the university. The Department of Sociology at the University of Namibia (UNAM), in collaboration with the University of Cape Town-based African Gender Institute (AGI), initiated a gender research and activism project to enhance young women's research capacity and to (en)gender some activism. Within the broad theme of young women controlling their own bodies, we chose gender-based violence (GBV) as our focus. The research team comprised two Department of Sociology lecturers and a core group of ten student co-researchers. The project focused on gender-based violence and sexual harassment as key impediments to young women's bodily integrity. The research provided opportunities to reflect and act on young women's lack of control over their own bodies and the institutional cultures and practices that impede such control. Some of the major issues that affect young female students are harassment and violence from taxi drivers, male students and lecturers, sex-for-marks transactions between male lecturers and female students and the exploitation of young women's labour when they become 'hostel wives' and fulfill unpaid social reproductive work for the male students with whom they co-habit.

While the research was largely exploratory, it does provide some pointers to how action research can integrate education, skills building, data collection and action into an empowering process and lead subjects to recognize and assert their own agency.

Participation and action towards social transformation are the key markers of Feminist Action Research. The latter implies the value judgement that

current conditions are unacceptable and require change. Social research, is therefore, not only seen as knowledge construction for its own sake, but as part of a process that empowers oppressed and disenfranchised groups to challenge inequalities and their own social exclusion. Feminist Action Research can enhance young women's research capacity while building feminist consciousness and feminist organization, towards transformation.

The lack of gender activism on university campuses points to a silencing of gendered voices and a denial of particular experiences. Often it is assumed that because university curricula contain courses on gender, there is no longer a need to reflect on gendered and patriarchal institutional practices. Engagements with gender are often appropriated by official discourse, and detached from feminist activist roots. This action research project on gender-based violence gave us an opportunity to return to those roots.

In our research the combination of knowledge and action involved the cyclical integration of a number of activities namely; data collection; education; awareness raising; action and reflection. The epistemological orientation towards democratization and empowerment has methodological implications. This profile reports on some research findings, actions and methodological reflections.

## **The Namibian political and institutional context**

Despite very progressive policy and legal frameworks on gender equality, Namibia is struggling with endemic violence against women and children (Ipinge and Le Beau, 2005; Hubbard, 2007). A World Health Organisation (2005) study on women's health and domestic violence in Namibia indicates that 31 percent of women experience some form of physical or sexual violence at the hands of intimate partners and that 21 percent experienced sexual abuse before the age of 15 years. McFadden and !Khaxas (2007) show how various sexual practices legitimised by the authoritative force of culture, undermine women's bodily integrity and subject them to sexual and gender-based violence. While groups of women, government and non-governmental organisations periodically embark on various anti gender-based violence campaigns, the culture of violence stubbornly persists for various historical, social, economic, political and cultural reasons (Lamb, 2006; Burton, Leoschut and Popovac, 2011; Women's Leadership Centre, 2010).

Intimate-partner violence or wife-beating is often used as a proxy measure

for perceptions on women's social status. Despite progressive legislation like the Married Persons Equality Act (1996), Combating of Domestic Violence Act (2003) and the Combating of Rape Act (2000), many women in Namibia are still not able to exercise their sexual and reproductive rights due to these high levels of violence. The 2006/7 Demographic and Health Survey (Republic of Namibia, 2008) shows that 41 percent of men and 35 percent of women agree to at least one reason where wife-beating is justified. This indicates a high degree of societal acceptance of GBV as a legitimate means of control. A Ministry of Health study of GBV confirms that it is still tolerated in most communities in Namibia (United Nations, 2009). The Legal Assistance Centre (LAC) estimates that nationally, Namibia has about 1600 rape and attempted rape cases per year. This is high for a country with a total population of just under two million people (Coomer, 2010).

Prior to our research, anecdotal evidence suggested that young women at university are exposed to various forms of violence that undermine their sexual and reproductive autonomy and health. Our rationale for using Action Research to investigate the GBV on our university campus, was not only to gather data, but also to educate, raise consciousness and take action that would change the institutional culture and arrangements that impede young women's ability to exercise their sexual and reproductive rights as gender-based violence is a key impediment to young women's sexual and reproductive autonomy (World Health Organisation, 2005).

### **Epistemological and Methodological considerations**

In keeping with the key feminist action research principles of inclusion and participation (Reid, 2004), the student co-researchers and to a lesser degree other participants, were involved in the selection of the research topic, the formulation the key research questions, data collection and report writing. Prior to student involvement, the lecturers identified the issue of *kamborotos*<sup>1</sup>, that is, intergenerational transactional sex between female students and older men, as the research topic. Student researchers in the group disagreed and started interviewing other female students, particularly those in the hostels, to ascertain what their key concerns around sexual and reproductive rights on campus were. From the outset the participatory and cyclical nature of action research was revealed since empirical data was needed to inform the choice of a research topic. Conceptualisation and empirical data collection were,

therefore, not two distinct phases. After this initial data collection, students returned with the firm conviction that GBV was the most urgent matter for further exploration and immediate action.

We adopted Fals-Borda's (2001) notion that knowledge construction should improve practice and, therefore, requires the conscientisation of educators. We thus combined the three sets of activities identified by Hall (cited in Reid, 2004), namely, research, education and action. The egalitarian and empowerment underpinnings of feminist knowledge construction, presupposes the conscious dismantling of the knowledge-power nexus that reflects and reinforces broader inequalities. The research process was, therefore, a constant inter-play between education, conscientisation, skills training, information gathering, action and reflection. Multiple methods were employed to conduct the various activities. These included documentary research, training and information gathering workshops, focus group discussions, mapping, a campaign, a demonstration, a petition, drama, poetry and a panel discussion.

Although acts of violence are mainly perpetrated against women, the research project tried to avoid, what Harding (1987) regards as victimology since this goes against the empowerment philosophy that underpins feminist action research. The co-ordination of research, conscientisation and action required a democratic and empowering organisational form. The university had no history of feminist activism and therefore no organisational structures through which to channel our activities. The many gender research and teaching activities, that form part of our academic programmes, are not geared towards action that can challenge unequal power relations as well as the patriarchal institutional cultures and practices. We therefore had to institute, what Gergen (2003) refers to as first order democracy by establishing the Action Research Team (ART) that served as a vehicle to co-ordinate activities around information gathering, education and action.

### **Paradoxes of power in feminist action research**

The differential access to academic codes within the research team and inequalities embedded in institutional hierarchies invoked a paradox of power which Lennie *et al.* (2003) refer to as the "impossible burden of feminist research." ART comprised lecturers and students who were locked into differential institutional power locations. These inequalities are incongruent

with the egalitarian ethos of feminist action research. It was a challenge to reconcile the contradictions between the democratizing agenda of action research and the highly stratified institutional environment.

Despite the democratic ideals, the academic language of Feminist Action Research can be very exclusionary and can reinforce inequalities and subject-object positionalities in the research process. Fals-Borda (2001) points out that the anti-positivist stance of action research requires crossing the boundaries between subjects and objects or the researched and the researcher. To overcome subject-object dualisms and differential power locations some mediation was needed. Most of the team members were second year undergraduates who had not acquired the degree of academic literacy needed for critical engagement with the academic literature. We distributed articles on action research philosophy, epistemology and methodologies to all ART members but most found it very difficult and even incomprehensible. To mediate the knowledge gaps, lecturers had to assume the double function of mentors and scribes. One lecturer summarized the literature in more accessible language. This reinforces and polices the boundaries between knowers (experts) and the other.

### **Institutional mapping, spatial mapping and confronting power**

Our first step was to build a common understanding of our institutional context with regard to sexual, reproductive and gender-based violence. At a workshop for core-group members we pooled our knowledge about the institution. Further research was identified and allocated to overcome clear knowledge gaps. Research tasks included the collection and review of policy documents relevant to Sexual, Reproductive Rights and Health (SRRH) and GBV. We found that in some areas there were no written policies. We did manage to obtain Sexual Harassment and HIV/ AIDS Policies. To fill other knowledge gaps, key informant interviews were conducted with the head nurse at the university's clinic, the Deputy Dean of Students and the coordinator of Zamunawe<sup>2</sup>. This initial information gathering process was seen as an affront to some in power. A request for the institution's Security Policy resulted in threats towards the student researcher tasked with accessing it. The hierarchy of power was reasserted when a lecturer and ART member intervened to question the high-handedness and humiliation caused by the

individual concerned.

After a skills-training workshop on participatory methodologies, student members of ART conducted information gathering and education workshops with other students. The idea was to have a cascading effect that will eventually build towards the critical mass needed for collective action. Ten core group members divided themselves into five teams consisting of two facilitators. Each team facilitated a workshop of between 14-18 students. The workshops were held simultaneously, with opportunities for interaction between groups during lunch, tea-breaks and body-work (tai-chi) exercises.

Each group did a transect walk of the university campus to identify unsafe spaces where women feel threatened and where violent attacks are most likely to occur. These were documented photographically. Facilitators used other participatory action research tools to gain information about the types of violence that occur on campus; the type and up-take of services provided on campus; ranking of the most important issues around GBV and the types of actions that can bring about change. In addition to the valuable information gathered, facilitators and participants found the process empowering and even therapeutic. Facilitators later submitted workshop reports on the facilitation process and findings.

## Key Findings

### *Sexual harassment*

Sexual harassment, violence and threats perpetrated by taxi drivers at the taxi rank<sup>3</sup> just outside the University's gate was seen as the most immediate concern for workshop participants. Female students are touched inappropriately, physically pulled and dragged by taxi drivers who accost them at the gate and jostle them to fill up their taxis. There are cases of female students who were threatened and beaten up by aggressive taxi drivers and this type of intimidation perpetuates a culture of fear and silence.

Participants reported knowledge of what they referred to as "sexually transmitted marks". They reported that there are lecturers who exchange marks for sexual favours, although this is against the University's Sexual Harassment Policy. Other unwanted and unsolicited sexual advances, like making sexually suggestive comments or touching students were also reported. Participants reported that male security guards touch female students inappropriately while some male students whistle, grope, touch and pass humiliating remarks

on various parts of the anatomy of female students.

Discussion revealed that women often show a great level of tolerance to harassment and violence since they have been socialized into submissive gender roles; others lack the assertiveness to resist or are ignorant about their sexual and reproductive rights. Sexual harassment, therefore, often goes unreported.

### *Rape and Assault*

Assertive female students are often stigmatised. Some suffer “corrective punishment” in the form of rape or beatings to humiliate them. Many Namibian indigenous cultures discourage female assertiveness and at times males use violence to “correct” such “aberrations”. Gossip and isolation form part of the negative sanctions imposed on assertive women. Women who suffer sexual assault are often too embarrassed to report it to the police. They get blamed for the assault and accused of being too provocative. In fact, during the research process, a student reported a violent assault by a taxi driver. When we contacted the city police the first question the policewoman asked was what the student did to provoke the assault. Women living in the university hostels reported the following acts of violence:

- date rape
- secret staging, filming and distribution of sexual encounters via cellular phones and social networking sites without the knowledge or permission of the women involved. This is often done as corrective punishment to humiliate young women deemed arrogant or unattainable.
- Often, males cohabit with their female partners in the female hostels. As a result, other females feel unsafe when using communal facilities like toilets, bathrooms and kitchens when confronted by strange men in these areas at night.
- Participants reported that they do not feel safe when walking to lecture halls, the taxi rank and hostels at night. This is a problem as lectures continue till late at night.

### *c) Access to sexual and reproductive health services*

HIV/AIDS peer-counselling and psychological counselling services are available through the office of the Dean of Students. Many participants had problems

with the accessibility and the quality of counselling services. They complained that counselors and social workers are often out of their offices with no notification about when or where they could be reached.

Questions were raised about the lack or perceived lack of confidentiality of counseling services. This discourages students from accessing these services. Participants expressed the need for a clear protocol to report cases of sexual harassment, rape and assault, particularly when it involves lecturers. Some felt that counselors were reluctant to take up cases of sexual violence for fear of victimization. Students also fear victimisation and, stigmatisation and, therefore, often do not report sexual harassment on the part of lecturers.

The UNAM clinic provides primary healthcare services, HIV testing and counselling services and contraceptives. Participants raised concerns about the judgemental way nurses dispense these services. The most worrisome issues reported were the lack of confidentiality and embarrassing and judgemental remarks made by nurses about the sexuality of students. At times, students are publicly humiliated and the reasons for their visit announced to all waiting in the queue. Gender inequalities in condom distribution were seen as discriminatory. The university has male condom dispensers in male toilets and no condom dispensers in female toilets and female condoms are often not available.

Namibia has a very restrictive abortion law and abortion on demand is illegal. Young women have illegal and unsafe abortions at great risk to their health. Participants reported the illegal sale of abortion pills by untrained persons. It is not clear how widespread this is and could be a topic for future investigation.

## **Reporting, dissemination of findings, education and action**

Fals-Borda and Mora-Osajos' (2003) argue that Action Research are complex, irregular, multi-linear and convergent systems of thought. Our research exposed the need to transcend boundaries and binaries that are traditionally regarded as discreet and distinct. Firstly, data collection was an ongoing process that often overlapped with awareness raising, education, reporting and action. Findings were reported in multiple forms and overlapped with a number of other activities.

ART, in partnership with the office of the Deputy Dean of Students and the coordinator of the University's Gender Research Unit, made presentations to

new students on our research findings and ART activities during Orientation Week. The opportunity was used to launch an awareness raising pledge that male and female students signed. The pledge read “thumbs down to GBV on all UNAM campuses”. Students had to sign a pledge by dipping their thumbs into paint and then making the thumbs down imprint on a banner. This caused a lot of curiosity, was messy and great fun. Information pamphlets about GBV and sexual harassment reporting procedures were distributed to encourage reporting and the assertion individual agency.

International Women’s Day (8<sup>th</sup> March) was used to draw attention to GBV on campus. ART organized a demonstration and handed over a petition to the University management. About eighty male and female students participated in the small, colourful and lively demonstration. The lack of participation in the demonstration underlines the paucity of activism and pervasive fear of challenging authority on campus. The demonstration and other activities were widely reported in the print and electronic media.

ART hosted a panel discussion the day after our demonstration in order to exact accountability from the university as an institution. Findings from our research were presented to the student population, University policy makers and managers responsible for activities that have a bearing on SRRH and GBV on campus. These policy makers and managers were asked to respond to questions ART members prepared for them. Some managers were indignant about the fact that they had to answer to students and others acknowledged some of the problems but avoided firm commitments about actions towards change. Some saw ART’s “audacity” in breaking the silence around sexual matters as bringing the university into disrepute.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> March ART hosted a drama afternoon. The tools of Forum Theatre, open microphone and poetry were used to disseminate research findings, to raise awareness and to collect more data. Augusto Boal’s Forum Theatre, derived from the Paolo Freire’s educational philosophy of pedagogy for the oppressed, can be used in a number of areas of social justice activism and civic education (Sullivan, undated; Zinn, 2006; Komain, 2005). ART members developed a participatory drama “Malaika” that depicted some of the key findings of the research and exemplified some of the issues related to SRR and GBV (Sakaria, 2011). The audience became actively involved in constructing alternative and transformative narratives. Scenes were frozen and the audience asked to conceptualise, verbalise and act out alternatives to the

findings presented in that scene. The audience became “spect-actors” moving them away from the traditional passive spectator role (Ibid). After all the scenes were staged, the show was transformed into an open discussion forum. Discussion revealed gender differences with regard to views on GBV. Although most male students disagreed with GBV, they called for some understanding and tolerance for the many reasons men feel compelled to commit acts of GBV. This caused heated debate and was deemed unacceptable to most female students present.

The forum was again transformed into an open creative space where the audience could make any contribution towards the topic. Contributions ranged from short statements, to poetry to songs. The use of drama, poetry and song was an attempt to overcome the many dualisms of traditional research that separate the creative, affective, experiential and rational aspects of cognition and indeed human endeavour. It affirms Fals-Borda and Mora-Oseja’s (2003) assertions that to face injustices and social defects, research and teaching practices should overcome discriminatory distinctions between the academic and the popular, and between the scientific and the political.

## **Conclusion**

Our action research on GBV is ongoing – we have already set out the next phase that includes drawing male students, taxi drivers and security guards into the process. Information gathering, education and action will continue. We will expand our core group to twenty researchers/educators who will carry out further research, education and action. Our activities generated so much interest that a group of male students and staff members have instituted their own separate but ART-linked feminist action research project to explore GBV and constructions of masculinity. We recognise that personal and institutional transformation requires ongoing work over a long period of time. So far we have achieved some of our objectives but many remain unfulfilled and, therefore, the struggle for gender justice continues.

## Endnotes

1. The term *kamboroto* literally means “small bread” and is a descriptor for young women who are engaged in sexual relationships with older often married men or men involved in more stable relationships with other partners. The term denotes the transactional nature of the relationship since the men do not have to support these women in the same way as their marital spouses, they only have to provide “small bread”, hence *kamborotos*.
2. Zamunawe is a students’ organization that provides HIV and AIDS training and peer counseling to other students.
3. Windhoek has a very limited public transport system and most of those who cannot afford their own cars use taxis shared by up to five people. Like a bus system, taxis follow a fixed route. Passengers who wish to get off at a certain point beyond the designated route are made to pay extra.

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## Standpoint: The politics of being “young”: is a “youth” category really necessary for “development”?

Rishita Nandigiri

The *idea* of “youth” is usually bandied about with ease, homogenising an already mostly arbitrary social construct. Youth are often, depending on context and speaker, described in any number of ways ranging from apathetic to politically conscious game changers (typically referencing the so-called Arab Spring), a demographic dividend to a potentially dangerous youth bulge, from needing their innocence protected to wildly promiscuous with no moral compass. No matter where or how one places youth on a spectrum of understanding, there is general consensus that “youth issues” need tackling.

Beyond a constantly shifting age limit, there’s no agreed universal concept of who exactly is youth and why. The United Nations defines “youth” as those between 15 and 24 years of age, adolescents as between 10-19 years, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child defines ‘children’ as persons up to the age of 18 (United Nations, 2011). To add to the confusion, age-based definitions are different regionally and from country to country. The African Youth Charter defines youth as 15-35 (African Union, 2006). The National Youth Policy in South Africa defines youth as those between 14 and 35 years of age (National Youth Commission, 1997), the Kenyan National Youth Policy uses 15-30 as a marker (Ministry of Home Affairs, Heritage and Sports, 2002), and in Nigeria youth are defined as those between 18 and 35 (The Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Youth Development, 2001). All the confusion is further compounded by throwing the term “young people” into the mix, functioning as a catch-all for adolescents and youth between 10-24 years of age<sup>1</sup>.

## Youth as a demographic

There are several practical explanations for why age is used to demarcate when it comes to youth<sup>2</sup>; but most centre on the implications of demographics and statistics on programmes and policies. Given that there are over 1.8 billion young people in the world today, 90 per cent of whom live in developing countries, where they tend to make up a large proportion of the population<sup>3</sup> most development and population interventions focus on youth.

With the commemoration of the 7th billion person in the world in October 2011, there was a resurgence of ideology from the 1970s. One such insidious theory, that specifically targets the autonomies, rights, and lives of young people – and especially those from the Global South – is the ‘youth bulge’ theory. The youth bulge theory posits that as this generation of young people enter the workforce, they will either help their nations move forward (as demographic dividends—another problematic term) or due to the lack of opportunities, the unemployment rates will grow, leading a huge number of unemployed young people – particularly young men – to violent and socially destructive acts. It also links to young people entering their reproductive lives – putting a huge emphasis for governments on controlling young people’s fertility and reproductive decision-making. Again, the brunt of this policy overwhelmingly impacts young women’s bodies and lives.

The youth bulge theory has gained support for compelling governments to focus on employment opportunities and job creation—both of which are much needed. However, these policies and initiatives must not be justified using such rhetoric, and rather, must be seen within the rubric of the citizenship and rights of young people instead of due to a dangerous misconception that potentially sets up problematic programmes and approaches to youth development.

Another policy based on demographics is an ‘expansionist’ framework that is increasingly evident in societies with declining population rates. There has been a resurgence of pronatalist rhetoric in such countries (Russia, for example) where previously liberal laws on abortion have seen increasing resistance and even a regression to more restrictive clauses, a shift in societal bias favouring more children, and some countries even offering tax deductions and other incentives to encourage larger families.

Such theories reflect the highly problematic population control rhetoric that ceases to see populations as people, and instead reduces them to

“numbers”. It strips people—specifically youth—of their identities and views them as a particular demographic based on colour, age, job, education, citizenship; and by doing so removes any sense of autonomy, integrity, and dignity. It positions them – and therefore, any intervention – as a “body”, open to policies and programming regardless of their human rights, values or wishes. The prevailing belief that there are “too many” people in this world for the finite number of resources available (specifically in the Global South) is underscored by this viewpoint, with a polar opposite fear of entire nations being unable to support themselves due to the sheer lack of young people to sustain the economy or the rapidly aging population.

Young people in societies facing a youth bulge are seen, in a demographic sense, as being in/entering their prime reproductive years and if this is not controlled or influenced, it could lead to an unsustainable economy and therefore, society. It specifically targets the so-called “undesirable” populations and restricts their autonomies and violates their sexual and reproductive lives to sustain a system that is inherently unequal and oppressive. Again, the restrictions and violations are of young women’s sexual and reproductive lives; sustaining a system that actually removes young people, and specifically targets young women, from the centre of development and renders them passive receptacles of policies devoid of human rights and justice.

Indeed, these ugly policies are coming to the fore in discussions particularly related to Global South countries. It is held that these countries will be unable to sustain their growing populations, their economies will be overburdened by the numbers of people and therefore collapse, and their resources, already limited, will be unable to cater to the needs of their populations. As a result, these emerging countries and economies will face the burden of a society in decline. This ideology places an unfair, unwarranted, and completely unjustified burden on young peoples’ sexualities – particularly of young women, bodily integrities and autonomies; and is based on racist, xenophobic, and completely unjust ideologies.

Conversely, in countries where there is a large middle-aged population, a steadily growing aging population, and a much smaller youth population, there are grave fears of a societal collapse due to the ‘burden’ placed on the young people to support the ageing populations without a comparable “replacement” rate. Hence, there are programmes to encourage young people to have larger families, as well as policy changes to restrict access to contraceptive information, and choices.

That these theories form the basis of some interventions and policies is also linked to the ideology of dominance. If those in positions of power believe that youth populations need controlling and protection or are consistently labelled as “irresponsible” or “violent”, it limits the spaces in which youth – and young women particularly – can challenge, critique and create an alternate discourse. By excluding young people from key decision-making positions, it perpetuates a cycle of harmful policies and programming that is at best irrelevant, and at worst dangerous.

To adequately mount a challenge and shift perceptions and policies, young people need spaces to articulate their positions, needs, and realities. At this point, “youth” is no longer an artificial category; but are multiple identities that need recognition and realisation within larger facets and aspects of society, including policy interventions.

### Dehomogenising “youth”

The broad range of ages covered in the definitions of youth covers a spectrum of socio-political, historical, and cultural experiences, inequalities, and identities. Oftentimes, policy and programmes refer to “youth” as a homogenous group; stripping them of their identities and contexts. One size definitely does not fit all young people. Acknowledging and understanding the diversity of “youth” and the multiple factors that influence their identities—not just in terms of age, ability, gender identity, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, sexual orientation, citizenship, culture, religious beliefs, the languages they speak and the contexts—cultural, social, political, economic, historical, religious—that they live in; but in what their experiences are, the access they have to different avenues, and the ways in which power structures are a part of their everyday lives.

Unpacking who exactly we mean by “youth” will also reflect the inequities of history and how that has consistently excluded swathes of society from access to knowledge, education, and information that is generally assumed to be the domain of “youth”. The South African National Youth Policy specifically mentions such circumstances in defence of the broad age range, “A person aged 35 years in 1997 was born in 1962 – she or he lived during a period of high political conflict, much of which was expressed in schools. Whilst a young person aged 14 years in 1997, was born in 1983, growing up when many new reforms and achievements of the struggle were being realised. Thus,

it is necessary to recognise the different life circumstances and experiences which shape those who comprise this broad age category.” (National Youth Commission, 1997)

Within this rubric of “youth”, those who are younger and older, poorer, from indigenous groups and ethnic minorities, from rural or hard-to-reach areas do not always have the same access to policy and programmatic influence as each other. The needs and realities of “youth” vary greatly, and specific interventions are needed to include them in all activities and “development” programmes.

Programmes that fail to do this, also fail to engage with young people in any real, meaningful and sustainable manner, and instead re-etch the same system. Understanding the diversity of young people means recognising their “evolving capacities”<sup>4</sup>. Taking into consideration the growth and progression of young peoples’ lives, capacities and decision-making skills, along with the external/contextual influences, is crucial for young peoples’ rights and for any sincere attempt at sustainable development.

### **Young women, perception, and categorisation**

Interestingly, in my experience, using “young women” as a category is not met with as much resistance or as much controversy. Perhaps it is because rather than seeing young women as part of a “youth” space, they are subsumed into the larger spectrum of “women”. It disassociates young women from the experiences of “age-related” dominance alone, and adds another layer of structural, cultural, socio-political and historical dominance. This is not without its own complexities and contradictions, both in terms of the approach of programme and policy; but also in terms of how young women experience these spaces.

Policy and programming that particularly focuses on women and seeks to challenge the inherited and inherent models of dominance must shift perspective when working with young women’s issues and needs. This is not only because young women’s experiences differ, but also because their access to care and knowledge is controlled in a different manner. It can be argued then, that they experience violence, violation of rights, and repression in different ways that is compounded by their other identities and contexts.

It is not just a singular identity of a young woman that is subsumed, it is her other identities that are integrated into their “larger” spaces as well. While integration is important to underscore the cross-sectionality of issues, it also

cannot address the needs of a broad cross-section. Understanding that age is also a barrier – and perhaps one that erects more hurdles than others- is integral to meaningfully working with young women.

The perception of young women and their capabilities is also a factor in how young women engage in spaces and the access that they have. As I mentioned earlier, the ideology of dominance plays a huge role in how young people engage, and this has a lot to do with the perception of young people. It is not just the harmful concepts of young people as passive and apathetic that abound, but the equally dangerous ideas of young people (and this is especially in relation to young women) as victims that need protection, or as fledglings needing constant direction and supervision. These concepts lead to misguided attempts at “protecting” young people by limiting their access to knowledge and information. This is particularly true when it comes to their sexual and reproductive health and rights. Under the guise of protecting innocence and “purity”, there is a strong push to limit access to comprehensive sexuality education, access to contraceptives and even safe abortion access. This is further compounded by a cultural construct of young women – how young women look, how they behave, how they speak, and importantly, how they interact with their “seniors” – that begins to limit and control their autonomy and decision-making.

The ideology of dominance in reference to young women includes women in their communities, homes, school and work spaces; amongst others. Young women’s autonomies are also limited and controlled by (generally older) women, making it difficult for generic “women’s” programmes to adequately address the power dynamics and structures that come into play inter-generationally. This is evident, not just in programming and policy, but even within the women’s and feminist movements committed to building young women’s/feminist leadership.

As Ishita Chaudry so accurately puts it, “Feminism is increasingly, for many of us, at times also an oppressive system of how power operates between women who have it, and those who don’t.” (Chaudhry, 2012) Young women and young feminist activists have to navigate a corridor of established ideologies and beliefs, a history that is handed down embroiled in politics of space and language. It can be difficult to question and to critique within such spaces. It is further compounded by the fact that formal spaces for young women’s/feminist narratives are difficult to create and sustain.

Young women's/feminist literature that analyses, theorises, and builds on the lessons of the "field" are also hard to access; making actual engagement and involvement difficult and potentially perpetuating a framework of leadership that is incongruent with not just the larger beliefs of the movement; but with the needs of it too.

## Conclusion

I struggle with the question of whether "youth" should be a category by itself or if it should be part of broader constituencies – young women, young LGBTQI, young workers, young migrants. I struggle with the categorisation of "youth" and even my own position of youth as an identity. It is so in flux and so susceptible to shifts and change that it makes it extremely difficult to work and theorise on.

However, the barriers and the challenges that exist because of one's age and perceived ability (in relation to that age) are hard to argue against. The structures of power and dominance that have been long established are also difficult to deny, and they do consistently exclude young people and control their access and autonomy.

If challenging the dominance, the insidious theories and perceptions *about* young people needs to take place, then young people need to have separate and distinct spaces to understand and acknowledge their own needs, as well as strategise and actively question and challenge the dominant discourse. Politicisation and identification of their own ideologies needs space and time too. If building "future" (and present) leadership is imperative, then young peoples' realities and needs must be looked at within existing structures too- and if the structures do not have safe spaces or cannot be shifted and changed from the inside alone; then young people need to create and have access to alternate spaces.

Despite my own misgivings and struggles with how, where and why young people fit into the current development discourse and acknowledging that the current systems do not adequately address or engage young people; I do think it necessary to have a separate "category", and "identity" to question and create one's own arguments and theories; but to not look at it in isolation from other spaces – after all, identities are fluid and identities are multiple.

## Endnotes

1. In this piece, “youth” and “young people” are used interchangeably.
2. The African Youth Charter is “CONVINCED that Africa’s greatest resource is its youthful population and that through their active and full participation, Africans can surmount the difficulties that lie ahead”; and recognises “that youth are partners, assets and a prerequisite for sustainable development and for the peace and prosperity of Africa with a unique contribution to make to the present and to future development” amongst other notes.
3. Population Division UN-DESA World Population Prospects: 2010 Revision
4. Convention on the Rights of Child

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# Standpoint: Reflections on my Journey towards Self, Identity and Purpose in the African Diaspora

Simukai Chigudu

“Cardiology is the single most important specialty you will ever learn,” declared the Professor of Cardiovascular Medicine in my first year of medical studies at Newcastle University. “Unless, of course, you choose to work in Sub-Saharan Africa,” he added in an offhand way.

The atmosphere in the lecture theatre was heavy with anticipation and excitement as the entire cohort of students was eager to learn about advanced physiology and the “sexy” new technology used to treat complex cardiac disease. The work that one might choose to do in Sub-Saharan Africa was evidently far removed from the collective consciousness.

My mind was pre-occupied though, dwelling on the latter half of our lecturer’s opening statement. Something about his throwaway remark perturbed me. Why should cardiovascular medicine matter less in Africa? His assertion was ostensibly about different epidemiological patterns of disease and therefore different health needs of the African population. However from his tone, I had, perhaps unfairly, inferred something different, something much more cynical: Africa is essentially embroiled in conflict, drought, malnutrition, rampant epidemics, failing health systems and poor governance. As such, a sophisticated understanding of cardiology – the pathophysiology of disease, expensive new medicines, and groundbreaking interventional procedures – is neither relevant nor appropriate for a region still contending with diseases of poverty. And though his comment was clearly not intended to offend, I was indignant.

The episode revealed more about myself than my colleagues or my professor. I had arrived in Newcastle as an overseas student from Zimbabwe. From an early age, my parents had imbued in me a deep sense of social justice. My Ugandan mother, whose work spans nearly the entire African

continent, has been at the forefront of promoting and advancing women's rights for nearly three decades. My father took to arms in the bitter and bloody liberation struggle for Zimbabwe's independence before serving many years in civil service seeking to build a more equitable and prosperous post-colonial society. Their passion grounded me and gave me identity.

I had decided to study medicine with a view to one day tackling the enormous challenges of health inequality, deprivation and social exclusion entrenched in much of my home continent. And yet sitting in an introductory lecture, my worldview felt threatened. Would my privileged western medical education ultimately leave me ill equipped and ineffectual in the face of such overwhelming structural and systemic challenges?

I was haunted by this question, which in reality veiled a deeper and more jarring inner turmoil – a profound sense of isolation since arriving in the UK. The medical school boasted sparingly few black or African faces and this seemed to reflect the wider demographic makeup of the Northeast – a post-industrial, predominantly working-class, 'white' part of the country. I felt alienated and dispossessed, questioning both my identity and sense of purpose.

Prior to starting at medical school, I had moved to England, aged sixteen, on a scholarship to complete my final year and a half of high school education at an exclusive Catholic boarding school in rural Lancashire. The school's grand and exquisitely beautiful edifice was conspicuous in its surrounding, and otherwise undisturbed, hilly landscape. Unquestionably the facilities, opportunities and quality of teaching offered at the school were world class.

My experience of college life was often much more negative. On arrival, I was treated as an intruder by a number of students – notably white, British and upper-middle class – with much greater longevity at the school. Their fear and trepidation was predicated on the fact that we, as a cohort of new students including a number of overseas and working-class pupils, did not understand the school's history and traditions. Its institutional identity – reflected in its architecture, geographic isolation, religious values and antiquated traditions – seemed anachronistic to me.

I recall being accused of lacking respect for many of the school's archaic practices and hierarchies, both formal and informal. Though unsaid, I detected the group mentality that greater multiculturalism and integration with students from different social classes would undermine existing cultural life

at the college. Somehow modernity and cosmopolitanism would unravel the school's Catholic values, its distinguished legacy of sending pupils to Oxford and Cambridge, and its love of cricket and rugby. Without realising it, this my exposure to xenophobia and elitism as an adolescence offered me a small insight into the wider issues of class politics in Britain.

Unwittingly, I had found myself trying to identify with but not belonging to this world. For many years afterwards, I would be burdened with this permanent sense of unease. At the same time, my memories of growing up in Zimbabwe felt increasingly distant. The dramatic and tumultuous economic and political upheaval in my home country had eroded many of the social structures and networks that had provided me with a sense of connectivity and belonging in my childhood. Existence at home now felt transient. Death, disease, political change, violence or bankruptcy had and could strike unpredictably and irrevocably. Reflecting on the life I had left behind and the one I would return to filled me with fear, dread, guilt and longing.

The immigrant experience of many young Africans, typically in the pursuit of education and career advancement, can be fraught with several penetrating questions around identity, self and belonging as well as the subtle tensions between each of these. Navigating through different institutional spaces can add a further layer of complexity. My boarding school had appropriated me into Catholicism and British conservatism and had begun to mould my conception of morality, masculinity, community life and activism around a patriarchal and Christian centre. A dissonance arose from this paradigm. I was unable to reconcile many of the school's inherently good Jesuit values with its missionary overtones and the hegemony of Anglocentricism that it thrust on me.

My transition into the wider world at university affirmed the reality that I was in a minority in grappling with issues of identity politics. Simultaneously, I was becoming socialised into the medical institution. Even as a junior medical student, it was clear that the bulk of my education would be focused on the particular region of England in which I was based. Disease profiles, doctor-patient relationships and the workings of the health system were taught to us within the context of the UK and specifically the Northeast. In this way, the gulf between life in the UK and life in Africa was widened. In the words of one commentator, my education was leaving me "lost in translation".

The process of forming a coherent self was protracted and demanded

a number of vital transitions and transformations in my thinking, ideology and outlook. The early stages of my medical training provided a crucial and surprising learning opportunity in this regard. It was at this juncture when I first became acutely aware of the lack of discourse around wider social issues and processes – such as political context, race, culture, gender or social class – and their importance in understanding the health of individuals and communities. The disease dominant pedagogy of medical education values biomedical science over the “softer” disciplines of social science. This theme continued into my clinical years where students and doctors tend to revere interventional and emergency-based specialties while viewing specialties like public health with contempt. By contrast, my frame of reference for understanding health and disease had been formed when living in Zimbabwe and making connections between poverty, lack of education, weak healthcare systems and therefore poor health outcomes.

I found myself trying to resolve inner conflicts in two parallel streams: my professional identity and my sense of self. I understood my difficulties in addressing these questions but nevertheless felt helpless in the face of them. I yearned for either a mentor to guide me, or a role in which I could one day see myself. Both remained elusive at that stage.

And then, in the summer of my second year, I had a breakthrough.

In the swanky and open-plan offices of the Global Fund for Women in San Francisco is where a new phase of my political education and self-discovery began. I applied for a three-month internship with the Africa Programme Team at my mother’s former organisation. Desperate for a break from the academic and professional indoctrination of medicine, I sought to expand my understanding of human rights, gender and civil society. My portfolio of work focused principally on women’s sexual and reproductive health rights. I learnt about the legal, social and public health frameworks in which non-governmental organisations work to achieve greater equity and empowerment for women.

My education, beyond the technical and analytical skills that I acquired, was deep. The organisation served as a hub of internationalism, progressive thinking and creative energy in a vibrant, liberal and eccentric city. My conceptions around gender and sexuality were challenged daily. For the first time, I encountered individuals for whom gender was not a simple binary of male and female – a shock to my conservative sensibilities formed by African

traditions and Christian education. Similarly, racial and ethnic identity was not considered clear-cut but rather an amalgamation of genetic, historical and cultural factors held together by unique life experiences.

I was uneasy at first but gradually settled into this new perspective on fundamental issues of identity. It was inspiring to work with such strong and self-possessed people who were unified by a dedicated women's movement and yet retained their own distinct sense of individuality and motivation. Soon I was engaging in extensive disquisitions on contentious issues such as legalising gay marriage, social protection of commercial sex workers, safeguarding reproductive rights for women and ending harmful cultural practices. As my views transformed so did my sense of identity. Though I had not fully resolved many of the questions around nationality, race and belonging; I had found a new identity and community in activism. My conviction in the power of social movements reinvigorated my sense of purpose and highlighted the broader context in which I could eventually take my medical training.

I returned to Newcastle charged with urgency and direction. I immersed myself in student activist groups. I was involved in organising national conferences, fundraisers and educational campaigns to alert the student community to human rights abuses, humanitarian emergencies and social injustices around the world. This work was not without its difficulties though. I frequently had to summon all my reserves of courage and commitment to seek visibility and raise my voice to a community that could be resistant to these ideas, dismissing them as distant, irrelevant and too great to surmount. Platitudes expressing admiration for my attempts to 'save the world' carried a subtle condescension suggesting that my passion was naïve and misplaced. And, at times, my conviction was misconstrued as arrogance and self-righteousness thus casting me as 'one of those people', akin to the evangelical Christians on campus.

Perhaps the most personal form of opposition that I encountered was the most subtle and indirect. I often felt that colleagues both outside and within my student advocacy circles had a singular understanding of Africa. While we were able to discuss the objective and objectionable statistics around HIV or access to essential medicines with a great degree of nuance, we lacked the same sophistication when considering the human narrative. I offered my perspective on these issues as an African but this aspect of my identity was

discredited and undermined. To be authentically African connotes living on the continent, speaking English in a thick guttural accent, being immersed in poverty and lacking western education. In the eyes of a number of British and American colleagues whom I met whilst working on global health issues, I was discounted as a true African, often labelled as an elitist and was admonished for being part of the “brain drain”.

These accusations of illegitimacy hurt me profoundly. They also compounded my fear that repatriation or cultural re-indoctrination on the continent would be met with similar opposition. The fear that I would neatly fit the mould of those deemed to have abandoned African heritage in favour of Europeanising experiences continued to linger in the back of my mind. For all the progress that I had made in finding my sense of purpose as a health activist, I was still struggling with my personal identity. At university and on clinical attachments, I carried the label of a private school educated medical student along with the attendant stereotypes around privilege and being out of touch with the experiences of ordinary people. The irony was not lost on me.

As I juggled multiple identities, I tried to draw strength from my experience in the creative space of the Global Fund. The intricate blending of individual expression and collective social movement was empowering. Part of me had begun to feel liberated enough to start engaging with, critiquing and celebrating my different identities. Global travel and education did not rob me of my African-ness. Instead they enhanced it, adding to the breadth of perspective and understanding with which I was coming to see the world. I began to view my identity as a matrix of disparate but interconnected qualities, attributes and experiences. This complexity inspired and strengthened me further to find a similarly unifying theme of globalisation in my academic and professional pursuits, in the hope that my career could eventually reflect the multiple dimensions of my identity.

In the latter years of my medical studies, I found conceptual space to merge my advocacy interests with my academic work through the articulation of global health. Rigorous self-education and relentless networking created opportunities for me to work and carry out research in South Africa, Tanzania and Mexico. And as I gained exposure to global issues and their impact on health, I uncovered a community of like-minded students, researchers, doctors and practitioners working across a range of disciplines and geographies with

the common purpose of utilising academic knowledge to bring social change and to leverage global resources in favour of greater health equity.

The transition to working as a doctor has continued to present many of the old challenges. The inward-looking and myopic character of hospitals mirrors my initial experience of medical school. It is also frustrating to encounter repeatedly many of the inaccurate and incomplete assumptions made about me, based on my accent and education, from other healthcare workers and patients alike. However, I have become more skilled at emphasising different identities over others depending on the demands of the moment.

My time spent working in a hospital will remain limited to completing the mandatory two-year internship that precedes specialty training in the UK. Tying together the summation of my experiences, I have resisted the pressure to pursue an advanced training pathway in one of the glamorous hospital-based medical specialties. My original aspirations remain central to my core beliefs and values around social justice and health equity.

As such, my next step after leaving hospital medicine will be to take up an academic fellowship in public health at a leading London university. This fellowship will combine a specialty-training programme in public health while providing me with time, funding and mentorship to develop my own distinct research interest.

My focus remains primarily on Africa and my goals are centred on widening access to health services, strengthening health systems and addressing structural drivers of disease. I aim to use my fellowship to pursue these interests and I have already been in contact with a number of enthusiastic and like-minded researchers in progressive academic departments.

My diasporic journey with its many vicissitudes has bolstered my personal resilience and has allowed me to develop a broad and global way of thinking. I have found professional purpose and personal conviction in global health. Global health has come to mean more to me than a discipline. It describes an attitude that is committed to seeing health as a fundamental quality of equity across borders, cultures, genders and ethnicities. It captures a mindset that is orientated towards recognising and celebrating diversity, interconnectedness and complexity. Its global nature is manifest in its transnational locations, interdisciplinary knowledge and multi-professional collaboration. And for the first time since leaving home as a precocious teenager, I am starting to feel a little more at ease.

## Standpoint: "Won't nobody even try to reach her mind..."

Athenkosi Sopitshi

I had never considered myself an activist, and before coming to university my feminism had never moved me beyond the borders of familiar spaces where I felt my voice carried some weight. This piece serves as an autobiographical reflection on of some of my experiences as part of the Women Crossing the Line project, run by the African Gender Institute, and it is worth noting that the personal journey of my involvement has taken me simultaneously outwards into an experience of freedom *and* inwards towards the growth of a self-reflective gaze which made me feel uncomfortable. Conscious scrutiny of how I live and negotiate spaces as a young woman has been neither straightforward nor "safe". Months after my involvement with the project ended I came across a song that captured most of my experiences as a young, black woman who did not fit the conventional models of beauty (or so I thought) and who walked around apologetic and often hiding, invisibilizing my sexuality as if it were a shy dirty secret.

She's a big chick

Big ol legs

Big ol thighs

Big ol ass

Big ol tits

She's so big

Won't nobody even try to reach her mind... Jill Scott - *Thickness*

Working with a self who was hiding both her body and her mind to discover what my sexuality and gender offered me as a route towards genuine power was exhilarating – and terrifying.

### Starting point

One morning sitting in a Gender and Development lecture we received a presentation about the project as they were looking for young women to

join the project. I wrote a motivational letter to become part of the project because I heard the buzz words ‘empowerment and young women’ the two things I have always felt should go together. Although I formally joined the project in its second phase, all my expectations of what it might entail were thrown out the window early on, as I had to engulf myself in a conversation with my peers that I never even dared to have with myself. Conversations about bodies; conversations about race; conversations about bodies and race and sexuality. And conversations as a strategy for something but at first, it was hard to know what.

The project began by creating live performative installations, within university space, in which a team of young women acted out the stereotypical roles of femininity: the woman starving herself to be “beautiful”; the woman who is the “slut”; the woman whose sexuality is owned by her family or her religion. I was part of these installations which showed the different ways women’s bodies were policed through the state, religion and media. As I was shouting, performing the stereotypes, where people were watching, I felt so exposed as if I was showing the world my insecurities as if I were the one in the centre of it all. I have always been conscious of my wide hips, big thighs, stretch marks and all the things that the world of commercialized femininities tells us are bad, not sexy enough to go on magazine covers. Although I usually walked in the corridors of the university, showing a confident demeanor (I felt it was appropriate to act this way because I identified as feminist, and therefore showing the cracks in my confidence was not an option) publically performing myself – even as a stereotype – as sexual and sexually conscious felt too dangerous. Doing the performance accentuated inside my heart the secret conversations and encounters with the mirror, which reflected all the negative things the world projected about my thickness. The negative things I had also begun to internalize and own as “who Athi was.”

The experience of being part of the team of “performing stereotypes” highlighted how important it was for me to question, interrogate my opinions and experiences as young woman located in this ‘intellectual’ space, living in a body that is raced, gendered and to ask how all these intersect to shape my sexuality and offer me possibilities of relationship to my own body and others. One of the significant features of the project was the dialogues after every action (such as the installations) which provided a space for young women to discuss all the things we often keep silent about on campus. We spoke in

depth about why it is acceptable for men to be overtly sexually assertive, while women – in this post-liberation South Africa era – had to be forced into a “good girl role” sexually. We acknowledged that we rarely derived any pleasure from this, and that we wanted pleasure – sexual pleasure, the pleasures of intimacy, and the pleasures of confidence in our bodies. We grieved over the frequency with which we seemed to accept the “good girl” role sexually, all in the hope of running away from being called whores or sluts.

Personally, the confrontation between my Christian faith and my politics of my sexuality was an internal dilemma that I had to deal with. The stark contrast between what I believe spiritually and what I feel and experience forced me to exist in a position where I had to silence certain aspects of myself in both these environments respectively. As part of the media training in the project I wrote a piece on masturbation, something I have never been able to talk to my Christian friends about – the project allowed me the space to express this mounting curiosity I had about my body. It is fascinating how in all my days going to church and growing in my faith I had always been made to feel like a temptress, my sexuality never acknowledged as anything but dangerous. I had to cover up my legs – if my skirt went above my knees I was causing my brethren to stumble. But wait, what about me? I have all the embodiment making me sexual, a sexual being too. What makes me stumble? Is stumbling the only possibility?

It was only at university that I got to have a conversation about my clitoris. It was always the big bright pink elephant in the room. My sexuality always discussed in relation to men and never in its individual capacity as something that I can explore without a man. That’s why the piece I wrote on masturbation was a narrative of how liberated I had felt being able to openly talk about the sensations of sexual pleasure, about the fullness of being a woman without feeling dirty – someone whose sexuality was only a source of temptation to others.

The project also opened up a space for us to discuss issues of institutional culture that often go unchallenged. This signified the move from the personal transformation into the analysis of the ordinary university spaces as political ones. Within the University of Cape Town, we have the “walk of shame” – this is the name given to the experience of a woman student leaving a men’s only residence at night. As she walks out, away from seeing a man friend or partner, she has all these demeaning sexual and gendered labels placed on her, called

out by the men she passes in the corridors and along the pathways between the women's and men's residences. These judgments never apply to men. Some students claim this exercise is harmless, but I believe it has dire consequences on how women's bodies are treated within this space. A few months ago a young woman was raped on campus in a way that provoked a public outcry, and it still puzzles me that my peers – on hearing the news – initially asked, “What she was wearing?” The assumption is always that the experience of formal education would open our eyes to the dynamics of sexual violence, and to the politics of gender. But the ways in which contemporary cultures mould notions of hypersexual femininity (always a temptress, always a slut) lead to social permissions for men to lay claim to our bodies. When men are violated, sexually or otherwise, when do we hear, what was he wearing?

Although my activist work with sexuality has so far been generated only within the university space, the dynamics surfaced transcends any university wall. They are shaped by widespread discourses that affect us all individually however strongly we claim immunity from them. These are discourses about who is and is not sexually desirable, what it means to be sexually assertive, and who has the right to control of her reproductive and sexual body. As I worked harder and harder to unpack these discourses through dialogue, action, and internal negotiation with my own beliefs and feelings, I felt liberated being one of the women that got the ugly stares on campus because we were being “too radical” or because we were talking about matters that ‘should remain private’ as though the consequences of our private encounters remain within private spaces. These consequences morph into language, images and discourse that we negotiate (what are the consequences of having “consensual sexual intercourse” when drunk? What are the consequences of accepting anal sex from a boyfriend even if you, his girlfriend, don't like this form of sexual activity? What are the consequences of not insisting on the use of a condom?).

Despite the uncomfortable truths I was confronted with working within this space of activism, there was a liberating element that has impacted my personal growth as a “graduating student” working within a formal space that I hoped to influence. Seeing other young women coming to the dialogues and events we held as a team appreciating the platform to talk openly, without being ridiculed or judged for wanting to explore their own bodies, was rewarding. It felt like the kind of reward you could call building a movement. It felt like a different route to graduation, one I had helped to create myself.

In Conversation: “And they are fierce!”

Jane Bennett speaks with *Shereen Essof*, current director of JASS (Just Associates, Southern Africa).

**Jb:** Shereen, hey! It’s so good to see you, and thanks for having this conversation for Feminist Africa. I’m going to need to write an “introduction” about you and your work (both laugh) but for now if you were asked to introduce yourself, where would you start?

**Shereen:** That’s always a hard one for me! I’m a feminist activist and my name is Shereen, and I guess part of my life’s work is really using a feminist analysis to effect structural change in challenging all oppressive forces, of which patriarchy is central. Capitalism, neo-liberalism, nationalism, militarism ... they all impact on women’s lives in this region where I’m based. I try to harness a feminist approach to both the content and format of my work, and aspire towards work that centres process, allows for collaboration, challenges power, and creates new relationships, knowledges, and possibilities. More recently I have been quite deliberate to surround myself with beauty.

**Jb:** I think of you – I know you’ve been working very much through the Directorship of JASS in the past couple of years in Southern Africa (**Shereen:** yes) – and I know you have political connections with a number of countries, but I think of you as Zimbabwean; I think of you as coming out of a very particular struggle against a masked neo-colonialism (**Shereen** nods); how much do you think of yourself as Zimbabwean?

**Shereen:** (laughs) You know I think my roots go very deep in terms of what it meant to live, what it meant to grow up within the women’s movement in Zimbabwe at a particular historical time. And I think it was certainly during that time – the decade of the 90’s – that I developed a certain kind of feminist consciousness – and language – to name what it was that I had experienced and felt at the level of my body without up until that time really having a language to name it. I think that Zimbabwe was also the place where as a young person I met women who would be the – who would be key in terms of my journey – who would be in my life, even today as the guides

and the wise ones. Today, I can trace my political life back through the voices and through the work of certain women I met then and I can trace my own political understanding of what it means to build a feminist movement back to that period. So I think Zimbabwe is also a place that holds me and that has fed me, politically, and in other ways.

But the last number of years has challenged how it is that I think of myself in relation to Zimbabwe – and I’m not going to go into the long story now – but it comes out of my thinking about the meaning of national boundaries and simultaneously about what it means to be dispossessed of a heritage because of your lack of “formal” citizenship status. So there’s that. I think that Zimbabwe has also become over the last number of years – I don’t want to say “a different place” because at one level it is the same – but many things have changed: socio-economically and politically we are in a different moment, with slightly different challenges that demand different political strategies, the players are different, and I don’t see myself as being as located in this moment in the same way as I perhaps was in the past. That has been important in terms of my shifting relationship to Zimbabwe. And the last thing I want to say which contextualizes me a little bit is that I think women’s struggles in Zimbabwe are not necessarily particular to Zimbabwe only – I think there are structural forces operating across the region, which are manifesting in different ways, there are some very dangerous forces at play. If you are someone who uses the kind of analysis I do – we do – you can see that these manifestations are by no means unique to one country context – and to challenge them demands thinking of yourself beyond any kind of nationalized history and thinking of yourself in a strange way without certain sorts of roots.

**Jb:** That’s interesting and I think I recognize much of what you are saying – can I ask you then, what you think it might mean to “be young” amidst some of these forces – and I know you’ll explain more about these as we go along – you’re talking about the need to move “beyond” a context, in order to manage the size and nature of the political challenges feminism needs to take on. Of course, if one is young, what one knows best maybe has to be one’s own context. How do you work both with the need to get to grips – differently – with a context (your own context) and with the need to transcend it without crudity. Without arrogance.

**Shereen:** With difficulty! I think I'm going to separate out the two things you are asking me to think about, Jane; the first is what I think it might mean being young in this context and then, the second being how do you work with that.

There's a part of me that sometimes goes backwards and forwards on this because.... let me start with my understanding of patriarchy: I think that patriarchy has always been incredibly smart and it morphs in ways that are sometimes completely unexpected. Because of that there's a part of me that thinks that every historical moment presents a particular version of things that impact on women and women's lives in oppressive ways. Our struggles have been dedicated to challenging and transforming patriarchy, but the moment you chip away and effect some kind of positive change, the system morphs and you are faced with a different configuration of forces and manifestations of discrimination. I guess I say that because every moment presents a similar yet slightly different set of issues because the configuration of forces that we are needing to deal with are morphing, shifting and changing in relation to the successes and gains of the last few decades that women activists (however they may name themselves) have achieved. That's the first thing (laughs).

So what is it that I see as characterizing this particular moment? I think we are seeing a form of backlash to those thirty years. We're seeing an intensification of violence on a number of levels. But I also think we are seeing the effects of what I could call "hidden forces" that have the power to influence State policy, national agendas but are elusive, camouflaged. And I think that those forces - like certain religious fundamentalisms, multi nationals, cartels - are shaping the landscape and influencing government positions on many things including rights, reproductive rights, sex and sexuality. And these forces are or have consolidated and do strike me as differently configured from the last two decades - so what does that mean for us here?

When you have "nationalism and tradition" intersecting with conservative agendas as taken on by our States, you have a dangerous equation. It is in this context that young women and men are living and dealing with.

Certainly, in contexts like Zimbabwe and Zambia, conservatism, religious fundamentalisms, policing of bodies, reinforcing gender roles is all virulent; alive, strong; gaining currency and momentum. How you counter this and the violence that comes with it is really difficult, potentially dangerous yet absolutely crucial.

**Jb:** One of the things about which I've been very thoughtful lately, partly in relation to the project undertaken by the AGI which worked with young women (who all had a certain amount of privilege) who were telling stories of exactly how they were encountering and dealing with this notion of "virulence" you describe, is the shape of the "sexual and reproductive health and rights" issues emerging around us. Despite all kinds of work around access to reproductive health in the past 25 years, and despite the fact that we can now sometimes openly talk about lesbian and transpeople's rights, the concerns of young women involve daily questions of health, reproductive health. Not sexual health!

**Shereen:** Reproductive health! Yes!

**Jb:** You are seeing it too?

**Shereen:** Absolutely. Absolutely. And you see, Jane, for me, this names the intense crazy of what it means to work with young people in this particular moment. When you have a President who says "I will rule this country by the Ten Commandments" and this approach filters down into schools, into families, through the media, all of the gains around access to reproductive health options, services get severely limited or mediated by the moral values of those providing services. Let alone sexual rights which get wiped out. Like that! (Snaps fingers) Because the predominant messaging right now, what is part of the moral fabric and what is valued is in fact very conservative.

**Jb:** And it's conservative around things as ordinary as menstruation, talking openly about menstruation, ensuring girls have easy access to information and to different ways of caring for themselves

**Shereen:** Yes, menstruation – how teachers or people more generally speak about it or don't. How hard it is to counter the idea that having a period isn't something to be ashamed of; and contraception the most embarrassing thing to talk about. It's getting harder to access contraception – often service providers use their moral lenses when they provide services and young people shy away as a result. If I am a young women and want to move out of my family home, if I want to just go and live with a friend, in some contexts that is unthinkable. There is dwindling support for the idea that as a young women, my independence is possible.

**Jb:** Or, if I'm twenty-one, and a young woman, and I don't think I want to get married....

**Shereen:** Precisely, precisely. So that re-assertion of patriarchal control is alive

– whether it’s coming through the father, the uncle, the older brother, the entire family and community system,

**Jb:** It’s so interesting to me how powerful the failure of the discourse of “gender equality” has been – you may disagree – that discourse of the 1990’s certainly had its own fights and there were some very courageous people associated with it and created traction for concepts like “equality” and “balance” and “access to-.” But in the face of what we need to negotiate now, that discourse seems remarkably thin as a tool.

**Shereen:** (Pauses) I think, I think something happened with that too, Jane, because in its historical moment, demands for “gender equality” constituted a very powerful discourse. And it was powerful because it retained a politics, a political analysis.

**Jb:** (interrupts): The politics? Do you mean a feminist analysis of patriarchy, of neo-colonialism?

**Shereen:** (nods) Yes, exactly; when the political principles generated by that analysis – which allowed one to get at the structural elements of inequality, power – became separated from the project of designing policies for “gender equality” and implementing them in a depoliticised way. To take it one step further, when the feminist analysis was turned into “gender mainstreaming,” that’s when the discourse becomes thin and hollow. And that’s when the site of struggle changed. Because then it was about fighting for “gender equality,” not about what it means to fight for quite fundamental issues like structural oppression and sexism, racism, homophobia.

The capitalist patriarchal system works on dividing us, keeping us separate. This goes back to the question about what it means to work with young women in this fight, right now. We’ve already spoken about how patriarchy is fully operative. It is fully operative in the drive towards maintaining hierarchies, insisting on separation and categorization, and then using that to create hierarchies of influence and power – sometimes even deployed in the furtherance of the cause of gender equality. And in our region there are hierarchies within women’s organizing. Even the language is problematic and loaded – if we think about the category of “young women”, and where that category often seems “to fit”, within the and I am ashamed to say it, but the hierarchy of feminist organizing, the “young women” are often right at the bottom. And they are subject to being “acceptable” to “older” women, to being policed by them, consciously or unconsciously. Within this paradigm a

so-called “young woman” will only be able to carry influence if she is accepted by the hierarchies of more powerful women in the organizing momentum. She has to be “mentored” ushered into the realm of gender organising and then of course on issues of sexuality and reproductive choice you have to toe the line and often the line is a conservative one. So if the voice of the matriarchs is pro-life how do young women intersect with that? How do you even begin? It raises huge questions about how you work, and support young women, in a context which is stacked, in that kind of way. And stacked not only within the women’s organizations, but of course within society more broadly. And it’s also about unpacking and peeling away all of the layers which make actual political dialogue with young women so difficult – It’s all those layers around the meaning of age, the meaning of the body, the meaning of choice.

**Jb:** Around sexuality.

**Shereen:** Yes. In order to build a constituency that can cohere, to harness collective power, given the forces that are stacked up against us in this moment, irrespective of what the dynamics of the more mainstream spaces are, for us, means addressing those layers.

**Jb:** (interrupts) and also have a language...

**Shereen:** Yes, exactly.

**Jb:** And when you think about building that constituency, I guess you also have to take on the board the way neo-capitalism has created a very efficient constituency of “young” people, especially of women-people, who have already been organized within the marketization of “femininity”. In both resource-rich and resource-poor environments, desire for certain forms of being “powerful” as a woman gets channelled through not only the material world of commodities, but also through certain languages about the body and about sexuality. And this constituency is very mobile, and very inter-communicative within and across different contexts. And that raises questions about what it means to organize with young women, not simply in the context of matriarchs and mentors, but within the context of peers. When the “young woman you ought to be” is part of what surrounds you not simply as a “student,” or a “young activist” or a “daughter” but also as a “friend” or a “lover,” then the challenge of discovering a voice which can challenge those expectations is monumental. And it’s not one in which older women activists can necessarily be either helpful or respectful of what you may choose to do.

**Shereen:** Yes. Yes. And what it feels like for me, as an organizer, is that you

are constantly working with contradictions, and negotiating contradictions – it can be the admiration for a particular pair of shoes that a young woman has (**Jb:** (laughs) I relate!) and her simultaneous recognition that her body is beyond her current control when it comes to consumer capitalism and more immediately, that she has no control when it comes to what she will be able to do in terms of living her sexual and reproductive life freely. Both of us – her and me – we will be working in and with those contradictions as we seek to organize each other to be able to connect meaningfully, and to reach out to others.

**Jb:** Yes. And that makes me wonder about another concept which I've been encountering a lot recently, although it's not a new concept. I have a lot of colleagues thinking about "neoliberal femininity," the circulation of versions of femininity which offer, under current political and economic climates, a discourse on "choice" to women (especially women in their late teens and early twenties). And this "choice" is manufactured and utterly ungrounded in what is actually possible – you know, the "choice" to both work for wages and manage a domestic space, with kids, efficiently and alone. Or the "choice" to use contraception while in reality, only certain forms of contraception are available or even usable within the context of a heterosexual relationship. And there's an argument that the complexities of "choice" for young women we might want to work with are those which come from their embeddedness into neoliberal versions of their agency.

But I am not 100% convinced. My own sense is that the "choicelessness" facing so many young women is not the "choicelessness" of eras in which we were fighting as Southern African feminists for changed legal status or for access to property, and it's also not the "choicelessness" of fake empowerment. It's a "choicelessness" which arises in the context of simply trying to negotiate endless contradictions about the link between gender and "being human," and trying to get to grips with a world in which critical information about the economy, or about genuine access to power, is hidden from almost everyone. Hidden from the 99% (laughs).

**Shereen:** (laughs) Yes and where because of that we try to change ourselves to "fit" into the world. Which leaves you floundering and directionless. You can't see your choices because your world is being manufactured for you. Its alienation, and you are slowly drained of dreams, possibilities, agency. Instead of changing the world "to fit" women. But Jane, the thing about trying

to work in this moment – is that we cannot create contexts (in the shape of trainings, or movement-building sessions, or just organizational homes and cultures) in which people are going to be left at risk. Left hanging in some way, unsupported. Precisely because of the context. Because becoming aware of alternatives, of choices, finding ways to build community and work together on the issues we need to be working together on to realise change, and beginning to understand how the forces of oppression may be working, and starting to challenge – this can mean a very strong backlash. So if young women are creating conversation with one another about how to understand their contexts politically, and how to change those contexts, how to keep open and allow for the widest range of choices in a women’s life, how do you ensure that no one young woman gets thrown out of her house for participating, or gets attacked by even her “friends” who have not been part of that conversation. How do you really really create movements and solidarity without impossible risk?

**Jb:** But no civil-based political movement has ever been built without the recognition of risk to its members – so what are you saying here?

**Shereen:** I’m saying that the issue of security needs to be part and parcel of strategy. What are the mechanisms for ensuring security which must get built alongside the growth of organising and solidarity and consensus about action and alongside the formation of new political consciousness. And I think in Zimbabwe, that is exactly what has been the approach to young women’s organizing.

But – I have a problem calling it “young women’s” organizing! Inclusivity, mentorship, space and power. I think whether you are 12 or whether you are 19 or whether you are 26 or 49 or 83, it’s the same struggle actually. It’s the same struggle. Yes, we may experience certain things differently given our positioning in terms of chronological age but we experience things “differently” on a whole range of axes and yet, it is still the same struggle. Often in situations where women of different generations work side-by-side, the interaction between generations is weak. I think we need to move away from the dichotomy of “young versus old” and start talking about the specific needs and contributions of every generation. But I am not happy about the language of “young women” as a separate constituency because I think its usage just reinforces splits. “Young” isn’t always about age. There are people who mentor me who are younger than me and I look up to them. Ageism and

generational divides hinge around access to resources and decision-making, it's a language that comes from somewhere and serves particular interests. Donors support "young women's organizing"...

**Jb:** (interrupts) Not "middle-aged women" (both laugh!) And of course, so do churches, so do athletic teams – the "young women's" this or that has always been attached to versions of organizing which assume that "the young" are – as you said earlier – to be mentored as "new" versions of those with greater standing or power in the context – "the elders", the adults. So what is your approach – turn the thing on its head? Deconstruct the categorization and refuse to use it? Radicalize its meaning? Fight for space for people who are 12, 15, 18, 27 to say: "We are not 'young'; we're IT!" So that the political analysis flows from "IT"?

**Shereen:** That's it, exactly. But going back to the question I raised about security, I think you can't engage in movement building right now without really designing, upfront, the safety and security which accompanies that. Because in Zimbabwe, for instance, the legal prohibitions against "loitering" have always been used against younger women, and while it is possible for any woman to be threatened by that prohibition, we know that the focus of the surveillance is being trained on women identified as "young." And it is critical to think consciously about one's own safety and security – not as a self-indulgence, but as a political responsibility.

I have been thinking a lot about the work that we will be doing next year in Zimbabwe, with elections coming up, in a context in which the bulk of politically-driven violence is still not formally recognized in any way – and most definitely, if you are going to be doing political work in Zimbabwe, if I am going to be doing political work in Zimbabwe, if anybody is going to be undertaking that political work, the lawyers need to be organized, the emergency protocols, the safety protocols have to be in place. We've just set up an Urgent Action Support Fund in Zimbabwe, so that there is a pot of money which sits there, for GALZ, so that if things get crazy, at least some resources are immediately available.

And then there are complexities which reach even beneath the predictable zones in which we know activists will be vulnerable. A colleague of mine was working with a community of women who began talking, among themselves and for the first time, about corruption, and information did not "stay in the room" – it can't – and the situation unravelled as policemen started

to get suspicious of the work, and what it meant to have certain kinds of information entailed fear and huge anxiety. And it's not knowing, in contexts of surveillance and repression, what conversations are going to trigger what, and there can be no easy assumptions about "dialogue" and its connection to movement-building. And you have to be smart. Really smart.

**Jb:** And maybe that takes us back to another earlier point: the difference between ideas about building "gender equality" and ideas generated through a feminist analysis about the way power might work. It's really only the latter that gives you an adequate starting point in terms of its recognition that patriarchy and its friends (**Shereen:** all its friends! (laughs)) have dedicated interests of their own. You can't build a movement unless there is some version of consensus about what interests need to be challenged, and why.

**Shereen:** Yes, name the patriarchal powers be they visible, hidden or invisible powers at work in our contexts that need to be challenged. Alongside this Jane, there is a layer of young women who are...who get it, who are on their own journeys in terms of who they are as young women, and who others are in their communities, and they get it – and they are fierce. They are critical and fierce about their feminist analysis of power, the things that they will stand up for, and about what that means. And they are there on the frontline. They are there.

And to go back to that narrative of the three decades there were many things that were achieved. But the context changed and with it our strategies have to change. Conventional NGOs are being challenged. I am not sure that gender equality and gender and development strategies so prevalent in the 1990s are going to take us where we need to be in terms of social justice. I am not sure that the organisational form of an NGO (with everything it comes with) is the most appropriate vehicle to effect change given our contexts and the challenges they are presenting.

I mean, the last time I was in Zimbabwe, Katswe held a performance of the Vagina Monologues, and they filled out the Seven Arts, 800 seats! They are using popular culture and theatre arts as a means to feminist popular education. Can I share something amazing – a piece entitled Street-walking, hair-flipping, hips-swaying, head down-leave me alone resistance? ... "This is an ode to all women who have ever walked down a street and were bugged, harassed, approached, hurt, snickered at, kidnapped, abused by the remarks and actions of men unwanted. This is the violence we want to end – amongst

many others. Having to police our bodies daily has left invisible scars upon our souls. This is also a response to all my man friends who say, in response to my complaints about being harassed incessantly by unwanted men “Why do you girls complain, I’d love all the attention, tell the truth, you secretly love it right?” The answer is “No”. Not today, tomorrow or yesterday. I am not flattered or enticed. And, no, it is not always fun walking in my shoes. So, no, this cannot be a joke. In fact, I am angry. Angry at the silent and outspoken forms of oppression and violence that women survive daily. This is only one story amongst many.”

That’s not nothing! The analysis. The articulation. The coming to voice, is not nothing. Its power and resistance. Katswe is a group that operates as a movement of young women, most are volunteers who are working to enable other young women to mobilize, organize and articulate and claim their needs and aspirations with regards sexual and reproductive. Choice. This kind of work, precarious as it may be, this is the work that is taking the feminist movement building forward. And it’s being inspired by “young women” (laughs) and by many other women, many on the edges of social or political visibility. And it’s a really exciting moment. I’m not saying it’s an easy moment and I’m not predicting directions. But I feel really lucky – and privileged – to be living my life with this as my “work” right now. Because it’s also living my life.

## Contributors

**Jane Bennett** is the Director of the School of African and Gender Studies, Anthropology and Linguistics at the University of Cape Town. Through the African Gender Institute, where she is based, she teaches, trains, writes and engages as fully as possible with strategies to challenge epistemological and material violence.

**Jill Bradbury** and **Peace Kiguwa** are based in the Department of Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand. They are both researchers and writers, and in the project on “Young Women’s SRHR leadership” they worked with many students, including **Daphne Mogopudi**, **Ayanda Khumalo**, **Zandile Ngubeni**, **Hlengiwe Mchuma**, **Mabogoshi Matlala**, **Thandeka Mdletsha**, **Zanele Makhobo**, **Patricia White** and with their colleague in the department, **Mzikazi Nduna**

**Tanya Bosch** works in the Department of Film and Media at the University of Cape Town and in the “Young Women’s SRHR leadership” project, she worked with **Susan Holland-Muter**, an independent consultant on issues of feminist sexual rights work, and they both worked with a number of students, including **Athenkosi Sophitshi**, **Christel Antonites**, **Mireille Hendricks**, **Siphu Khundayi**, **Wanelisa Albert**, **Anuschka Richards**, **Lindiwe Ngwevela**, and **Siyabonga Zonda**

**Hope Chigudu** is a lifelong feminist activist with many hats; she was the co-founder of the Zimbabwean Women’s Resource Centre, and has worked with many feminist organizations, both within Africa and internationally. She was the Board Chair of the Global Fund for Women, and has worked with Urgent Action, AWID, and JASS. She is iconic.

**Simukai Chigudu** is Zimbabwean, and in the process of becoming a medical specialist “transnationally”.

**Lucy Edwards-Jauch** has worked within the University of Namibia's Department of Sociology as a activist researcher and academic for many years. In the "Young Women's SRHR leadership" project, she worked with her colleague, **Ndeshi Namupala** and a number of students, including **Heidie Nweneni Hashipala**, **Helouis Elsabie Goraseb**, **Helena Ndinelago Tuloga Taapopi**, **Venessa Karises**, **Elasrien Asanda Katiti**, **Charmaine Tibiyane**, **Melissa Katupao**, **Joalette De Villiers**, **Venjitjiua Mungendji**

**Shereen Essof** is a feminist activist, who has worked with a wide range of feminist organizations, especially in the SADC region, to build movements and support challenges against oppression at multiple levels. She is the current Director of JASS (Just Associates: Southern Africa) and is about to publish a book on the Zimbabwean Women's Movement, through HIVOS.

**Mary Hames** is the Director of the Gender Equity Unit at the University of the Western Cape, where for many years, she has inspired a wide range of feminist initiatives targeting homelessness, hunger, disability, homophobia and harassment on the campus and beyond. She and her students are particularly well-known for their creation of the dramatic performance, "*The P-Word*", which has introduced the concept of dynamic activist story-telling about women's sexual and reproductive experiences to hundreds of audiences.

**Godisang Mookodi** is a longtime academic researcher and gender activist within the University of Botswana, where she is based in the department of Sociology. In the "Young Women's SRHR leadership" project, she worked with colleagues, **Poloko Ntshwarang** and **Sethunya Mosime** and with the team of women students they built altogether, including **Keneilwe Camm**, **Golebaone Manikisa**, **Tankiso Phatedi Keneilwe Thipe**, **Thatooso Samunzala**, **Lame Olebile** and **Olivia La Mance**

**Rishita Nandigiri** is currently a programme officer at the Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights. Her Masters degree is in Peace Studies, looking at the role of media in conflict, and she is engaged in working with policy and advocacy which prioritizes the experience and wisdom of "young women" internationally.

**Athenkosi Sophitshi** just completed her Honours degree in Gender and Transformation, at the University of Cape Town, writing a thesis on ritual and pregnancy in the lives of poor, black, women in Cape Town. She has been a student activist and leader throughout her time at UCT, and plans to continue working with both activism and research.

**Naomi Wekwete** works within the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Zimbabwe. She and her colleague **Charity Manyeruke**, within the Sociology department at the University of Zimbabwe, worked with (among others) **Maureen Tshuma**, **Epiphania Chikowo**, **Tendayi Nyepa**, **Amanda Lieto**, **Modester Ngwerume**, and **Fortunata Mandipaza** in the “Young Women’s SRHR leadership” project.