



Positioning sexuality in holistic development through inter-linkages

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The last decade has witnessed major steps forward in legitimising a more holistic approach to “development”, which has led to efforts that address inequality and poverty through a multi-dimensional approach, taking into account empowerment, freedom, well-being and human rights. In parallel, political and policy advocacy around sexuality issues and related areas has evidently become more visible both at the national and global levels, as exemplified by the international debates on HIV-AIDS, sexual rights and more recently, the articulation of human rights principles to tackle discrimination and violence related to sexual orientation and gender identity (Yogyakarta Principles; December 2008 GA Declaration). While one could think that aspects relating to sexuality would come into this debate as one of the key dimensions of human development, main obstacles remain, which make it difficult to more fully incorporate sexuality as development priority.

This “silence” is not surprising as sexuality has always been controversial and triggers many conflicts at both societal and policy levels. In the last decade, moral conservatism has gained space in the international development arena as illustrated by millions of dollars being invested by the Bush administration to promote abstinence or initiatives aimed to deny young people access to information and contraceptive methods, to attack abortion rights or to restrict funding for organizations that support sex workers rights. For reasons of politics or religion, these forces oppose the granting of sexual rights and freedoms to those who fail to conform to their prescribed norms. These trends are contested at all levels by sexual rights activism that is attaining unprecedented levels of global-local connectivity.

Also there is the fact that few development experts and institutions have positively moved towards greater openness to sexuality issues. In DAWN, we experience this challenge in our engagement with the Human Right Council work, as part of a collective effort of NGOs to sustain the sexual rights agenda at the level of UN debates. In many contexts, sexuality can be about the very right to exist. Just as gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality is determined by societal, economic, political and cultural dynamics.

When the intersection between poverty and HIV and AIDS prevention is examined, we clearly see that societal norms in relation to sexuality can create severe conflicts. In many countries (86 UN member states) where “homosexuality” is a taboo or criminalized, HIV and AIDS campaigns tend to ignore same sex and bisexual relationships, or even more problematic, outreach work aimed at providing information to MSM have led to individuals being prosecuted and imprisoned as just happened in Senegal.. Studies on social movement dynamics also reveal a host of barriers and risks for sexual rights activists.

The intersection between sexuality and economics is yet another critical area. For example, in the domain of poverty reduction, sexual norms and related violence, discrimination and exclusion affect the ability of persons to access economic resources, health, education, employment and security. In relation to poverty specifically, the IDS (Institute on Development Studies) team working on sexuality and development has expanded the framework developed by Robert Chambers – the Web of Poverty’s Disadvantages – as to include dimensions related to sexual norms and related discrimination. These poverty-sexuality connections are all relevant in terms of research methodology and analysis. For instance, if a research on poverty adopts a household model that assumes a heterosexual family, dynamics taking place within the household around other existing kinds of relationships are made invisible. And if a woman lives in a lesbian relationship, the household would likely be categorized as a “female-headed household”, a term which usually applies to single women with children or other dependents. However many other connections between sexuality and economics are urgently requiring deeper research and analyses as in the case of labor market discrimination, migration trends, access to assets and credit, to name a few. At the political level the link between sexuality and economics is also present, as quite often in global negotiations we have witnessed diplomatic trade offs between economic issues, such as trade and sexual matters (see Pazello, 2005).

The political debates surrounding sexuality in societies and at academic levels are also enriching the conceptualization of gender in terms of calling for an understanding of gender constructs and norms in ways that do not evade the sexuality dimension and of interrogating the limits of understanding gender as exclusively referring to the male/female binary (see Corrêa, Parker and Petchesky, 2008, Fausto Sterling, 2000, Cabral, 2005). Breaking the silence on sexuality opens a space for a more positive, affirming approach to development itself, that take up terms that have been absent from the development lexicon, such as love, pleasure, respect, tolerance, solidarity and mutuality, among others. (see Cornwall et al , 2008) This can help the field to move beyond the “victimization approach” that tends to prevail in human rights discourses and practices -- and is also present in much of development thinking. The emphasis on victimization tends to reinforce dependence and inability to act and curtails the enhancement of people’s agency, empowerment and autonomy.