Sexuality and Empowerment: An Intimate Connection

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The views expressed in this document are not necessarily those of our funders.

Photos: Page 3: Female garment worker, photo: Sheikh Rajibul Islam. Page 6: Newly weds sitting together in the front seat of a car decorated for the occasion, with hearts and the Chinese symbol for marriage - double happiness., Cambodia, photo: Mark Henley/Panos. Page 7: A banner paraded by the Sex Workers' Union during a May Day demonstration in Parliament Square, Westminster, London, photo: Jenny Matthews/Panos.

Sexuality and Empowerment: An Intimate Connection

Introduction

What does sexuality have to do with women's empowerment? Research from the Pathways of Women's Empowerment RPC shows that sexuality affects women's political and economic empowerment in a number of important ways. For example, in the ways that women experience seeking election to political office, how women are treated and respected (or disrespected) in the workplace and in public, and how families and communities place expectations on how women should behave. Being exposed to sexual harassment and sexual violence and not being able to exercise choice in their sexual relationships affects women's well-being and ultimately undermines political, social and economic empowerment.

> "Is legal reform enough to address the problems that women suffer from in Egypt? I don't think so. I think we need to do more. We really need to address public opinion and how it is constructed; our social norms and how people think about marriage; men and women's roles and their relations within marriage. We need to have a dialogue, a societal dialogue."
>
> (Mulki Al-Sharmani, researcher, Social Research Center, American University in Cairo, speaking on the Real World documentary film 'Khul')

In this policy paper, we demonstrate why sexuality is so important for women's empowerment, drawing on evidence generated by research carried out by the Pathways of Women's Empowerment RPC and collaborative initiatives with the DFID-funded IDS Sexuality and Development Programme.

Box 1 What does women's empowerment look like through a sexuality lens?

The narrow way in which gender equality and women's empowerment has been dealt with in development policy and practice has often excluded sexuality. A 'sexuality lens' can provide new ways of looking at development problems. If for example, you look at women's empowerment through a sexuality lens, you see a more complete and realistic picture of a woman: not a victim, nor an end-product 'empowered' woman, but a woman with a complex and changing life. You see a woman whose well-being depends, among other things, on making choices about her own body, about pleasure and about her own sexuality. You also see a woman who lives within or perhaps challenges the confines of social pressure and expectations about her behaviour. A woman's sexuality and identity can affect many aspects of her life including her work and her means to earn a living, her family relations, her ability to move around in public, her opportunities to participate in formal and informal politics, and her access to education. Looking through a sexuality lens adds something very valuable to our efforts to promote women's empowerment.

How did we research sexuality and women's empowerment?

The word 'sexuality' is often misunderstood. This can make the intimate connection between women's empowerment and sexuality difficult to grasp. Sexuality is not simply a matter of sexual orientation or preference. Whether or not a woman is lesbian, same-sex desiring, heterosexual, bisexual or asexual, she will experience, at different times in her life, constraints, restrictions, pleasures and possibilities that derive from her sexuality.

Addressing sexuality in development often leads to a focus on the negative aspects of sexuality such as disease, violence and abuse. Of course it is extremely important to pay attention the harmful and negative aspects of sexuality such as violence. UN Women, a core partner in the Pathways Consortium, are taking a strong lead in this area. But this is only part of the picture. Sexuality, importantly, is also about pleasure. By ignoring this, donors can give rise to the dominance of victim narratives and lock both men and women into constraining and unhelpful stereotypes. Looking at the pleasurable aspects of sexuality invites a truer reflection of real women's lives and a greater understanding of all the possibilities that can contribute to women's empowerment. The work of The Pleasure Project in particular demonstrates this.

Pathways explored the potential that positive approaches to sexuality might offer. First, we sought to understand how narratives of sexuality change and can be changed. Our research prioritised popular culture as the most important vehicle for changing narratives. Second, we gathered examples of initiatives that sought to transform sexual cultures in a very practical way. Our focus was directly on the question of empowerment, and we wanted to learn from examples where positive approaches to sexuality promoted the empowerment of women and girls.

Box 2 Key findings

1. Sexuality is integral to women's political and economic empowerment. Women need control over their bodies, be able to assert their right to physical autonomy and protection from abuse, and realise sexual rights such as the right to a safe and satisfying sex life. If they do not have this, women have limited scope for making claims in other areas of their lives.

2. Women's intimate relationships can be a vital source of support in their pathways of empowerment. But where those relationships undermine or deplete women's resources or well-being, and where women are unable to forge relationships of their own choosing because of prevailing sexual norms, they are unlikely to gain the personal sustenance that we have found to be essential in supporting empowerment.

3. Norms and structures that regulate sexuality can prevent women from leading fulfilled lives. Conforming with norms related to sexuality can sometimes lead to material benefits for women. But it can also lead to a loss of control over their lives. The regulation of women's sexuality affects their ability to organise and engage politically, to access social services, to earn a living, to learn and to impart information, to enjoy the kind of personal and family life that they desire and to maintain bodily integrity.

4. Challenging norms about women's sexuality can lead to exclusion, marginalisation and impoverishment. It is vitally important to support women who are marginalised because of their sexuality and to see their political struggles as legitimate sites of resistance to injustice and inequality.

5. Action on injustice related to sexuality is a priority. This could mean challenging the ways in which women who do not conform to social, economic and political norms are isolated, or pressing for policy and law reform to create an enabling environment for the positive enjoyment of sexuality.

6. International development has dealt poorly with sexuality issues. This has a negative impact on the effectiveness of interventions to support women's empowerment. A sexuality lens can provide new ways of looking at seemingly intractable development problems such as tackling poverty, preventing violence against women, and improving access to education. Struggles for social justice and equality can intersect with the realisation of sexual rights.

Box 3 Connections between sexuality and women's empowerment

Sexuality and politics

When a woman stands for election to political office, among the many barriers she might face to being nominated, selected and elected, her sexuality may feature prominently. If she is, for example, unmarried, or separated, or divorced, aspersion may be cast upon her suitability for public office. If she is not a mother, she may find herself being judged for her lack of the qualities that would make her effective in politics. If she has a child out of wedlock, she may find herself ostracised by her party, plastered over the front pages of newspapers and hounded by the press. If she sits on committees that are, as most parliamentary committees tend to be, dominated by men, she may find herself the brunt of demeaning and patronising comments, and of sexual harassment.

Sexuality and economics

The connections between sexuality and women's empowerment become even more concrete and evident when we turn to the realm of the economic. In some parts of the world, women have always worked. But in others, women's entry into the workplace and their engagement in micro-enterprise has flourished in recent decades. Women's economic empowerment initiatives seek to foster the empowering effects of women gaining greater access to their own, regular, incomes. But for many women, and especially for young women, sexuality can present barriers to realising these opportunities. Women may face sexual harassment in the streets and the workplace, expectations from family members over whom they are permitted to love and pressure to marry, and for women who do not conform with normative expectations, workplace prejudice can lead to unemployment or job insecurity and moral as well as sexual harassment.

Sexuality and well-being

Sexuality is a fundamental aspect of our wellbeing. Our sexualities, sexual choices and sexual experiences shape who we are, and can have a significant impact on our health, wealth, wellbeing and capacity to make a contribution to our communities and societies. The negative and harmful consequences of sexual stereotyping and the hazards, harassment and abuse that women experience as a result of prevailing sexual and social norms should be cause enough for development intervention: there can be no empowerment if women are unable to exercise control over their own bodies. But this is not all. An approach that emphasises the negative can also be disempowering. By rendering women as vulnerable victims of harassment and sexual abuse, a focus on the hazards and harms of sexuality draws attention away from the positive dimensions of sexuality and their contribution to women's empowerment.

Seven key policy messages

1. Work on sexuality should be a fundamental part of any strategy for promoting women's empowerment. Donors should invest more resources in understanding the impact of sexuality on women's empowerment.

2. Policies and programmes that deal with sexuality should focus on more than the negative aspects of sexuality such as disease, violence and abuse. Sexuality is also about pleasure, control and empowerment.

3. Donors working on sexuality should be led by and work closely with local human rights and sexual rights activists. Donors often use the excuse of cultural relativism to avoid dealing with sexuality but correcting social injustices necessitate facing these sometimes uncomfortable issues.

4. Development agencies and practitioners should take care not to ignore or further marginalise women whose vision of sexual empowerment might be different to their own. Women who experience negative consequences as a result of their sexualities – whether widows, unmarried women or same-sex desiring women - need support.

5. Policy and programming should support women in their struggles to form the types of sexual partnerships and family arrangements they desire. It is integral to women's empowerment.

6. Development agencies should provide support to women so that they can challenge the legal, policy and social environments that limit their ability to freely express their sexuality and to come together collectively to press for change.

7. Donors should support innovative ways to create new narratives about sexuality to challenge existing stereotypes and present real alternatives for women and men that ultimately promote women's empowerment.

Box 4 Heteronormativity

Heteronormativity is the institutionalisation of the belief that only heterosexuality is normal, and only particular kinds of heterosexual relations are normal, for example within a gender unequal marriage between people of the same class and ethnic group (Cornwall and Jolly 2008).

In many countries, marriage is the only legitimate site of sexual expression. Women often want to get married because it can bring benefits such as societal acceptance and the 'legitimate' opportunity to have children and it can be the source of pleasure, affection and happiness (Johnson 2010; Al-Sharmani n.d.; Faiz Rashid 2006). Yet marriage can also lead to abuses and curtailment of choice.

The institutionalisation of marriage can work to uphold men's rights over women and make normal what can be seen as natural entitlements and privileges. Women who have or desire relationships that are not socially sanctioned – widows who want to have a loving relationship, young women who want to have a boyfriend, same-sex desiring women wanting to love each other – can find themselves subject to societal abuse, ostracism and other forms of oppression. This can have marked consequences for their mental health and physical wellbeing, as well as for their capacity to pursue careers, roles as representatives in politics and positions within their communities (Pereira 2009).

Key Message One

Work on sexuality should be a fundamental part of any strategy for promoting women's empowerment. Donors should invest more resources in understanding the impact of sexuality on women's empowerment.

Sexuality is an important consideration for development agencies working to promote women's empowerment. Sexuality affects, for example, development agencies' attempts to reduce poverty, prevent violence against women, and increase access to education. Sexuality also matters in fragile contexts where there is conflict.

If sexuality is not taken into account, there can be negative outcomes for women and girls. For example, some development interventions reinforce norms about 'appropriate' sexual conduct and expression rather than challenging the systems which limit women's agency (Lind 2009). Sometimes they have bolstered stereotypes about female sexuality in developing countries and colluded with attempts to regulate women's sexuality. Concerns with over-population are often tied to worries about political stability and the independence of former colonies (Gosine 2009).

Much of the sexuality-related work in international development has focused either on sexually transmitted disease or on the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. Both are important issues, affecting women's empowerment in a number of ways including, as Xiaopei He's research in China shows, the impact on the wellbeing of women married to gay men who are pressurised into marriage by social norms and homophobic legislation. But this has meant that less attention has been paid to the implications of prevailing norms of heterosexuality for women's empowerment, or to relationship between sexuality and the economy.

Tackling Poverty

Development is about more than the accumulation of material assets. Achieving greater freedom and well-being are an integral part of development. We cannot ignore discrimination, inequality and social exclusion and their developmental consequences. Far from being a

marginal issue, sexuality is at the core of realising essential freedoms.

Heteronormativity influences economies because they are structured around a particular model of heterosexual relationship. This can exclude and adversely include people according to their

Case studies

Sabina Faiz Rashid's research from Bangladesh highlights the ways in which economics, sexual relationships and freedom are interlinked. Women who were separated and abandoned by their husbands often became impoverished leading some to remarry and seek male protection. Within marriages many women experienced forced sex and yet they were reluctant to say no to their husband's demands in case he left. Some tolerated affairs and co-wives for the same reason. For these women "Sexual rights…mean something to forfeit in exchange for tenuous rights to security; they mean short-lived power … But they very rarely mean having control over one's sexual experiences." (Faiz Rashid 2006: 75)

Susie Jolly's action research in China which explored the linkages between sexuality and money, found that for many participants following their desires around sex, relationships and gender expression are just as important as raising their standards of living. Once basic needs are met then sex may bring 'internal' benefits and joy that are highly prized. This is demonstrated in the ways in which women are prepared to make material sacrifices to form relationships (Jolly 2011).

"If women's, men's and transgender people's bodies can be violated by others, and if our very existence is threatened, how can we ever enjoy any kind of development?"

(A Bangladeshi woman participating in a conference on sexuality and sexual rights, organised by the Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies quoted in Amado 2009)

sexual and gender identities and relationships. In many cases, poor people are more vulnerable to abuses of sexual rights and these abuses can entrench poverty. Diverging from or conforming to norms can have material impacts. Those who are marginalised by dominant norms around gender and sexuality – such as lesbians, bisexuals, single women, widows and sex workers – may face not only pressure to conform, but stigma, discrimination and violence if they do not. Prejudice and discrimination weaken networks of families, friends and colleagues, which are a significant safeguard against poverty particularly for those women who are working in the informal economy.

Preventing violence against women

"Good relationships are not forced and are not violent. They are a product of people's ability to choose how they wish to form relationships, with whom and when. They make a great deal of difference to our wellbeing. Poor people often face significant barriers to forming these relationships."

(Nemat Shafik, DFID, 14 February 2011, at the launch of the Sexuality and Development Photo Exhibition at the DFID offices in London)

Violence and women's empowerment are clearly linked. The right to control over one's own body is the most basic of all rights (Cornwall and Jolly 2006: 5). Violence against women can prevent women from choosing whether, when and under what conditions they have sex. Violence can affect whether women have control over whom they partner with or marry, including whether they have control over their bodies within these relationships. Young women are particularly at risk of forced and early marriage, marital rape and forced pregnancy. Tackling sexual violence is crucial to women's empowerment.

Pathways research findings demonstrate that women who reject societal norms and pursue their desires are at risk of societal or state punishment. This type of violence receives

less attention but it is a major barrier to empowerment. For example, in many settings sex workers are at enormous danger of violence from the state and the communities that they live in. In part this is due to vulnerability brought about by the criminalisation of the sale of sexual services. These laws often stem from a belief that the exchange of sex for money with multiple male partners violates norms related to female virtue and chastity. As a result the sale of sex is framed as abusive to women regardless of whether or not women who sell sex experience it this way (Overs and Hawkins forthcoming). Supporting women in pursuing their choices around their sexuality is key to empowerment.

Case studies

Jaya Sharma carried out research with Nirantar NGO who work with women facing domestic violence in rural India. They found that violence could be triggered by women expressing desires that their husbands considered 'unacceptable' and that women went back to violent relationships because this was the only acceptable relationship within which they could realise their sexual needs. Women explained that they can, and do, initiate sex and pursue the kinds of pleasure that they want. There were conversations about the subversion and negotiation of social norms and levels of agency. It was clear that although women who follow norms might benefit from these advantages, they were often fragile and/or conditional on continued compliance. The women explained that it was difficult to get societal support when you are asserting desire but far easier if you were a victim of violations (Sharma 2010).

In India, the women of VAMP, a sex worker collective, organised around HIV prevention, leading to transformation in their community. Before they came together to press for change the local community called them 'dirty people' and if they were beaten up they would remain silent. Organising enabled them to: put in place systems to regulate the local sex industry to ensure that no underage girls or unwilling women were involved; demonstrate about, and gain redress for, police violence and abuse and; engage as equal partners with public health professionals. For one woman, Kamla Bai, the greatest change in public perception of sex workers can be seen by the way that people now invite her to their weddings as a respected member of the community (Mansoor and Cornwall 2010). VAMP's collective action led to societal acceptance but it was gained on their own terms.

Sexuality in fragile settings where there is conflict

Sexuality and sexual freedom are affected by globalisation and moral conservatism. This is particularly marked in times of disruptive change when insecurity can prompt a retreat to 'tradition' or 'culture' and fears about security and stability are projected onto the bodies of citizens, particularly women.

Case study

In Palestine, Penny Johnson explored how the political and security crisis created a context in which moral panics about unmarried women, 'irregular' marriages and the transmission of sexuality-related messages through satellite television and mobile phone technologies led to tighter social control of young women. Johnson's research focused on two areas of the West Bank and revealed marked differences between the two in terms of young women's visions for the future. In Dheisheh, a strong supportive civil society and not having to cross an Israeli check point played a decisive role in facilitating the girls' opportunities. But in Sair where a checkpoint had to be crossed, girls' mobility and thus opportunities were severely restricted. This in turn impacted on women's ability to attend college and to work. These restrictions extended to accessing information about their bodies. The girls clearly articulated a desire to understand their bodies better, but faced barriers to such understanding. In discussing NGO training for Palestinian youth on democracy, the young women complained, "Really we are bored from always hearing the same subject: communications workshops, democracy. Learning about our bodies would be better" (Johnson 2010).

Increasing access to education

Education and women's empowerment are linked. Pathways research has demonstrated that there are links between sexuality and girls' lack of access to education but these are underexplored. In some settings, as shown by Pathways' research in the Gambia, girls are taken out of school for early marriage (Touray 2006). Sometimes it is argued that this will protect them from having children outside marriage. In many settings pregnant girls are more likely to drop out of school due to bullying, social pressure and lack of support. Sexuality education in schools is often inadequate and/or missing from the national curricula.

Lack of information about their sexuality means that young women find it more difficult to protect their health and to make decisions about their lives and bodies (Armas 2007). Sexual harassment and fear of sexual violence may prevent girls and young women accessing education. For example, schools may be sites of danger because of harassment by teachers and other students. Journeys to and from school might be perilous. Lesbian and bisexual girls experience homophobic bullying which leads to exclusion (Jolly 2010b). Pathways researchers argue that tackling these barriers to education depends on adequate social service provision and enabling policy and legislative environments. It also requires investment in changing the way in which girls and women, boys and men see themselves in the world, and changing perceptions, expectations, norms and values related to gender (Cornwall 2011).

"The sexual lives of both women and men are now caught between forces of social conservatism … and the pressures of commodification within sexual cultures under capitalism. Sexual pleasure, liberty and autonomy are often crushed between this rock and a hard place."

(Alan Greig 2006: 87)

Case study

Deevia Bhana's research in South Africa explored children's sexual rights through their accounts of HIV. She argues that concerns about children's rights often lead to them being framed as passive and desexualised. Her work with seven and eight year old children in a black township school in KwaZulu-Natal used ethnographic methods and group interviews. She found that the children's views were shaped by the social and cultural systems they lived within and gender, racial and class differences in the distribution of power. They were not ignorant about HIV and sex - some girls already equated HIV with rape - but tended to distance themselves from these subjects through humour because they realised that they were not supposed to present themselves as too 'knowing'. Bhana argues that there is a need for sexual literacy and openness in early childhood education so that children can talk about their sexual rights (Bhana 2006).

"Current constructions of 'tradition' in Islam cast anything related to sex and sexuality within the framework of marriage in all its modalities, and anything related to sexual desire and pleasure in the framework of heterosexual relationships as the normative practice."

(Touray 2006: 77)

Key Message Two

Policies and programmes that deal with sexuality should not put sole emphasis on the negative aspects of sexuality such as disease, violence and abuse. Sexuality is also about pleasure, control and empowerment.

A focus on the negative aspects of sexuality means we only see half the picture. International development has tended to over-emphasise the negative aspects of sexuality, for example sexual and reproductive ill health and sexual violence. As a result, it has failed to identify and support the positive and pleasurable characteristics of sexuality.

Pathways research demonstrates that women in diverse settings consider their sexuality as a source of power and a mechanism for shaping and controlling their destinies. An overwhelming negative focus on women's sexuality and the victim narrative that often accompanies it can be disempowering. It does not provide women with opportunities to express their desires and to imagine and work toward a positive vision of sexuality. It can also dovetail with conservative narratives about the inherent vulnerability of women and the need to protect them from male sexuality which is usually depicted as beastly, uncontrollable and violent (Jolly 2007; Jolly 2010a; Lewis and Gordon 2006; Cornwall and Jolly 2009). Acceptance of these stereotypes does nothing to challenge them.

"I would love to see women's enjoyment of pleasure, ability to articulate and ask for what they want sexually be a standard indicator for empowerment. I would also love the correlation or causal relationship between other empowerment indicators (ability to speak up, vote, leave the house etc) and enjoyment of sex to be tested. I will die a happy woman when The World Bank starts using it as a standard indicator."

(Anne Philpott 2011)

Case study

Removing women's ability to ask for what they want in terms of sex and sexuality while claiming to support their empowerment is dangerous. During a training course on sexuality for Dalit women and NGO activists in India, women said they needed to learn how to ask for what they want, as well as what they did not want. They said it needed to become socially acceptable to do so, otherwise they only have the right to say no, they do not have the right to consent. And men might justifiably think that when they say 'no' they actually mean 'yes' as it is not socially acceptable for them to admit if they do want sex. It is important to support women's ability to demand pleasure and satisfaction as well as protect themselves from, and gain redress for, abuse.

Key Message Three

Donors working on sexuality should be led by and work closely with local human rights and sexual rights activists. Donors often use the excuse of cultural relativism to avoid dealing with sexuality. Yet private issues relating to sexuality are shaped by public policies and structures and cannot be ignored

Sexuality tends to be viewed as a private matter, yet fundamentally, sexuality is shaped by economic, political, cultural, religious, social and market systems and norms. These norms and systems can open up or constrain opportunities for women's empowerment. For example, norms relating to sexuality may allow women to demonstrate how they feel about themselves through the clothes they wear. But these norms may also be imposed by society as a way of regulating women's behaviour and expression.

Donors and development practitioners who are able to influence public policy in myriad ways,

should not consider sexuality as a uniquely private issue. Donors would benefit from working closely with human rights and sexual rights activists, to see where their policies potentially have an impact on sexuality and empowerment. If development really did justice to the diversity of people's social and sexual identities, livelihoods and living arrangements, how would it be different to the approaches we see today? How can practitioners, activists, academics and policy actors concerned with challenging and changing oppressing gender and sexual norms work together to address the real issues concerning sexuality?

Working closely with the IDS Sexuality and Development Programme, Pathways has convened conversations between different actors who work in the intersection between development and sexuality. In April 2008, more than 70 activists, academics, donors and development practitioners from more than 25 countries gathered at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) in the UK to explore the complex linkages between sexuality and the development industry.

"As a black African woman from a poor country, I have made a proactive decision to say that I am part of development. According to the development industry, women like me are all heterosexual, living in villages, married, pregnant, with children, and so on. So I think it's important for someone like me to say I'm part of development, in order to challenge those assumptions."

(Stella Nyanzi, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, at IDS Workshop 'Sexuality and the Development Industry' April 2008)

In association with another IDS initiative, the HIV and Development Programme, and with funding from Sida and NORAD, Pathways collaborated in the Politicising Masculinities symposium in 2008 in Dakar, Senegal. The symposium drew together some of the best known thinkers on men and masculinities with the aim of moving debates about masculinity

beyond the personal to address questions of structure, power and politics. Forty-three participants came together for the symposium, from a range of sectors, disciplines, regions and perspectives, including academics, practitioners, activists and policymakers and from countries as diverse as Bangladesh, India, Cambodia, Zambia, Kenya, Uganda, South Africa, Burkina Faso, Argentina, Brazil, Australia, the USA and Europe.

> "In working with men for gender justice, it is important to organise men to work for political and institutional change – at Project Papai [in Brazil] we link up young men with social movements and campaigns to advocate for policy change."
>
> (Jorge Lyra, Instituto Papai, Brazil)

Building on these collaborations, Pathways, the IDS Sexuality and Development Programme and the IDS HIV and Development Programme, working with Andrew Seale from the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria and Andil Gosine of York University in Canada, with funding support from UNAIDS, UNDP, Sida and SDC, co-hosted a symposium called 'Untying Development's Straightjacket: Masculinities, Sexualities and Social Change'. Theorists, researchers, activists, policy actors and practitioners working on gender and development, men and masculinities, HIV prevention, gender violence and sexual rights analysed existing sex and gender norms, and how the development industry colludes with these norms. Together, they identified alternative ways of thinking and acting on these issues.

> 'I understand heteronormativity to refer to those norms related to gender and sexuality which keep in place patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality as well as other systems and ideologies related to power such religious fundamentalism, casteism, the class system and so on.'
>
> (Sharma 2009: 53)

Key Message Four

Development agencies and practitioners should take care not to ignore or further marginalise women whose vision of sexual empowerment might be different to their own. Women who experience negative consequences as a result of their sexualities – whether widows, unmarried women or same-sex desiring women – all need support.

Remembering that sexuality is not simply a matter of sexual orientation or preference, it is important to recognise the 'everydayness' of sexuality in relation to women's empowerment. At different times in her life, a woman may experience the constraints, restrictions, pleasures and possibilities that derive from her sexuality. It means that donors and policy makers need to take into account and resist the way that heteronormativity can define policies and programmes, so that women who do not fit into expected social norms and patterns of behavior (however that is defined in a particular culture) do not miss out on efforts to promote women's empowerment. Women who are unmarried, who are widows, or who are same-sex desiring also need and deserve support in the development process. It is unjust to only provide frameworks which support women who fit neatly into predictable accounts of what a woman's life should be like. This is why a sexuality lens is so important when considering women's empowerment.

Pathways' research has highlighted the need to properly identify the best ways to support women who might challenge mainstream understandings of appropriate behaviour for women. For example, research from Egypt shows that legal reform to support women in itself is not enough. In the last decade, Egypt has passed new family laws (mediation-based family courts and khul divorce, which is a recently revived practice permitting women to divorce their husbands with certain conditions attached, including forfeiting any money they might otherwise claim) with important ramifications for women. Mulki Al-Sharmani carried out a four-year ethnographic study of recent reforms in Egyptian personal status laws. She collected field data through interviews with female and male plaintiffs, judges, lawyers, legislators, mediation specialists, women's rights activists, public thinkers, religious scholars

and members of religious establishments. She observed family law cases and analysed content of court records. One of her findings was that although some women did resort to khul to escape marriages, there is still significant stigma attached to divorce in Egypt. This either prohibits women's use of the law, or means that they are subject to/experience this stigma when choosing to divorce.

"When first this law [khul] was introduced to the public, there was a lot of misinformation by the media… I think it created very negative and flawed ideas about the kind of women who resort to khul… always they are pictured as fickle, morally flawed, seductress, silly women who just want to leave their husband. However, over and over again I see that a lot of the women who are going through khul are hard working poor women who are in abusive marriages, but because they are resorting to khul they are forgoing their financial rights."

(Mulki Al-Sharmani, Social Research Center, American University in Cairo)

Key Policy Message Five

Policy and programming should support women in their struggles to form the types of sexual partnerships and family arrangements they desire. This is integral to women's empowerment.

Pathways research has shown that relationships are key to women's empowerment (Pathways 2011). Sexual and familial relationships are a site of support and pleasure for many women that provide energy which can sustain them in their political organising. Yet in many settings women are unable to forge the types of relationships they might like or are marginalised because they break societal norms by remaining unmarried or in same sex relationships. Interventions that support women to challenge the legal, policy and social environments which limit their ability to form the kinds of relationships that they want are crucial. The human rights framework is a good basis from which to develop practical tools to lend such support, and the Yogyakarta Principles offer especially useful policy guidance (www.yogyakartaprinciples.org/).

Case study

In Brazil, Pathways researchers found that domestic workers experienced many difficulties making and sustaining intimate relationships. The conditions of their work (long working hours and residence in employers' houses or at a distance away meaning many hours of travel to work) make it difficult for them to have time to meet with potential partners, or have time together with their partners. Living in the employer's home or in cramped living conditions in squatter settlements make it difficult for them to contemplate having families.

A strikingly high proportion of the domestic workers who took part in focus groups had experienced sexual harassment and abuse from their employers. Given that such assaults take place within the home and the fragility of employment, domestic workers' sexual rights are difficult to protect.

Brazilian domestic workers have found that the key to change is collective action: the domestic workers' rights movement formed a union which is now articulated with other workers' unions, and has achieved major strides in changing employment policies permitting domestic workers time off, securing greater employment rights and putting in place professionalisation schemes to promote greater job security. Activists press for the right of every domestic worker to live in her own home, have her own family and enjoy the kind of conditions of work that many other workers take for granted.

Key Policy Message Six

Development agencies should provide support to women so that they can challenge the legal, policy and social environments that limit their ability to freely express their sexuality and to come together collectively to press for change.

On many occasions when women have organised around sexual and reproductive issues, it has acted as an entry point for broader struggles for social justice. The recognition of abuses or inequities related to sexuality can be the catalyst for social mobilisation which challenges other 'natural entitlements' and privileges. Pathways research has demonstrated that providing support to these struggles and removing impediments to collective action are crucial to women's empowerment.

"Sexual rights empower people not only regarding their decisions in their sexual lives, but also by generating self-esteem, a new perception of citizenship, and control over their own lives in other spaces such as health, education, employment etc."

(Armas 2007: 9)

Rights that have a direct bearing on sexuality are enshrined in international law. These include the right to liberty and to security of person, to freedom of expression and the right to seek, receive and impart information, the right to marry and found a family, the right to access healthcare services. These rights frameworks are important in making claims for sexual justice. Sharma has argued that in the Indian context sexual rights tend to be deployed in relation to particular identities. This identity politics can be important in breaking silences and building communities. However they can mask the diversity and fluidity of sexuality and be exclusionary (Sharma 2006). Pathways has found that in most settings law and policy reform are a starting point for the journey women make to empowerment rather than the end in itself.

Case studies

In Bangladesh Shireen Huq explored how the women's movement began to work in partnership with sex workers rights organisations. This was a challenging process because although the women's movement was characterised by a progressive political discourse they tended to be conservative on matters related to sexuality. The struggle for sex workers rights initiated a process which helped to redefine the boundaries of women's activism and challenged conceptions of sex and gender as fixed categories (Huq 2006).

In China Pink Space NGO brought together women marginalised because of their sexuality – lesbians, the wives of gay men and women living with HIV. Through dialogue they came to realise that social norms and the pressure to marry led to the curtailment of happiness and opportunity for many of them. For example the wives of gay men, who married without knowing about their husbands' sexuality, felt trapped in pleasureless partnerships yet were unable to speak out about their position for fear of losing their family or experiencing stigma and discrimination. Hearing these stories inspired women to work together to challenge those norms which denied them power and choice.

(He forthcoming).

Case study

The Human Rights Education Programme for Women in Turkey introduced a sexual rights component into their training on the law and conducted skills building with rural women to enable them to advocate about rights within their personal and public lives. They found that despite steps toward gender equality in the penal and civil code women were still subject to human rights abuses that stem from patriarchal, conservative conceptions of sexuality for example, early marriage, 'honour crimes', marital rape and virginity testing. But despite the flaws in the law transformative awareness-raising around sexual rights was a crucial first step in changing perceptions and empowering women to make choices.

Key Message Seven

Donors should support innovative ways to create new narratives about sexuality to challenge existing stereotypes and present real alternatives for women and men that ultimately promote women's empowerment.

Evidence from Pathway's research on women's empowerment and sexuality reveals the significance of norms and values as a critical factor in women's pathways of empowerment. New and changing narratives about sexuality offer wider benefits to women's livelihoods and wellbeing (Cornwall, Corrêa and Jolly 2008; Jolly and Cornwall 2010; Pereira 2008). Popular culture – music, radio and TV programmes and films - are very much part of women's lives in many of the contexts in which Pathways worked. Such popular culture is important because it

Case studies

Representations of women in popular music can reinforce or challenge stereotypes. Pathways researchers Akosua Adomako and Awo Asiedu analysed the lyrics of Ghanaian musical genres from the 1950s to the present, and found that the messages contained in these songs were often negative, portraying women as sex objects, and as fickle and jealous. The researchers wanted to create new narratives about women in popular music and organised for different stakeholders involved in the music industry to come together to identify ways to make this happen. This opened up spaces for discussion about the way gender and relationships were being portrayed in popular music and a song writing competition was launched to encourage artists to think more about these issues. A panel of judges made up of musicians, music producers, gender researchers, music scholars and young music consumers chose the winning songs, based on the strength of the lyrics, musical quality and innovation. Ongoing engagement with these groups will encourage shifts in the way women are portrayed in the music and entertainment industries in future (Adomako Ampofo and Asiedu 2011; Anyidoho 2010; Asiedu and Adomako Ampofo forthcoming) .

Storytelling is an important tool to highlight and propagate the positive experiences of women in their sexual lives. Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, the publisher of Cassava Press in Nigeria, argues that too much feminist activism and thinking has focused on the negative aspects of African women's sexuality which does not do justice to their lived experience. Pleasure and happiness need to be viewed alongside fear and danger in order to understand how the 'danger narrative' is legitimised by the patriarchy and to forge a more transgressive approach to challenging and dismantling those systems that keep women fearful. To this end she has commissioned a project to collect stories that subvert dominant ideas about the role of desire in African women's lives (Bakare-Yusuf forthcoming).

> "The current situation in our countries, related to freedom of sexual expression, is an emblematic example of how rights, realities, societal and governmental efforts are pieces of a complex social, political and legal puzzle. In such a complex dynamic, everyone has to connect initiatives, expertise and efforts in order to build a society in which non-discrimination and freedom of sexual expression are not only legal and political principles, but also concrete alternatives for all."
>
> (Raupp Rios 2006: 50)

can help women to imagine an alternate vision of sexuality and can shift public opinion and attitudes and values more broadly. Pathways has worked in different ways to create alternative images of women in film, storytelling and photography, as well as in development policy narratives (Adomako Ampofo and Asiedu 2011; Ali forthcoming; Asiedu and Adomako Ampofo forthcoming).

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