

# Marginalisation by sexuality: report of an IDS workshop

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*Development agencies have conventionally viewed sexuality as a health issue. Sex has been regarded as a source of danger, harm and disease. The words 'love', 'desire' and 'pleasure' are absent from the development lexicon. This article draws on discussions at a workshop at the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex, in September 2005, at which activists, practitioners and academics came together to debate the challenge of realising sexual rights, and to share experience of practical initiatives of working with a more positive, enabling approach to issues of sex and sexuality. It calls on development agencies to redress the marginalisation of sexuality in their policies and programmes, and recognise the significance of sexual well-being for all dimensions of development.*

## Introduction

Development agencies have begun to wake up to the realisation that sexuality has vital implications for efforts to improve people's life chances and well-being. The effects on prospects for development of the violation of women's bodies – whether through rape, female genital mutilation or lack of support for safe abortion and maternity care – have gained growing acknowledgement. The AIDS epidemic has forced recognition that unequal and unsafe sexual relationships can have serious development-related consequences. Debates on the challenge of getting more girls into school and keeping them there have raised issues of sexual harassment, and the consequences of inadequate sexuality education for young women. And yet, in many of these discussions, sexuality continues to be pigeon-holed as a health issue, persistently associated with disease, harm and danger.

Development which aims to address issues of sexuality has been more explicit in taking a gender perspective than other areas of development. But this has sometimes been part of the problem, rather than part of the solution. Prevailing gender orthodoxies in development thinking often make it difficult to think beyond the stereotypes of the brutalising man and the victimised woman, both of whom are generally presumed to be heterosexual. There is little real recognition of the implications of repressive laws and restrictive employment opportunities faced by

those who diverge from dominant norms around sexuality, who include not only lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender and inter-sex people, but also single mothers, women who choose not to marry or remarry, and non-macho men. Nor is there real acknowledgement of the extent to which women's active engagement in re-enforcing these norms and associated ideals of respectability and compliance is in itself a 'gender issue'.

Sex and sexuality have implications for development that go well beyond the frames that currently exist, whether in relation to health or to gender. The frame of persistent negativity, of harm and danger, makes it difficult to think positively about sex – and to think creatively about ways in which to engage women and men in efforts to reduce sexual harms and enhance sexual well-being in more productive, energising, and inspiring ways. The frame of heteronormativity – the assumption and enforcement of the norm of heterosexuality – blinds development efforts not only to non-heterosexual sexual expressions and identities, but also to those heterosexual sexualities that deviate from the norm. And the frame provided by the kind of simplistic notions of gendered power that are so commonly found in development focuses attention on problematic masculinities, and avoids engaging with women's agency and responsibilities.

This article draws on discussions and presentations on the challenge of realising sexual rights in today's world, which were held at a workshop at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Brighton, in September 2005.<sup>1</sup> The workshop was organised by Susie Jolly from IDS's gender communications unit, BRIDGE, and myself, under the auspices of the IDS Participation Group's Power, Participation and Change programme. It was funded by the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sida, SDC, DfID and the Ford Foundation. The workshop brought together 60 activists, academics, policy actors and practitioners, from 20 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, North America and Eastern and Western Europe.

Workshop participants brought insights gained from engagement in a variety of kinds of work. Some brought experience in researching sexuality, and designing programmes in response; others from grassroots work on sexual health promotion, including creating new education materials to promote safer sex. Others still, brought experience from advocacy at the international and national levels, in building alliances between social movements to address sexual rights issues, and in writing sexual health and rights policies for donors and governments.

In this article, I seek to capture some of the main lines of debate in the workshop, and reflect on broader implications for development actors and agencies. In the first section, I explore the connections between sexuality and development. I go on to draw on scene-setting discussions on contemporary challenges and historical perspectives, and turn to the question of contextualising sexualities in diverse local debates and realities. The article then turns to consider what a positive approach to sexuality, one that emphasises pleasure rather than disease and danger, might offer. I then address

lessons emerging from analyses offered at the workshop of strategies to build alliances and to claim sexual rights. In conclusion, I explore emerging issues for further research and action.

## Sexuality and development: making the connections

Development has an awkward relationship with issues of sexuality. There are those who believe that sexuality has nothing to do with development. Some see sex as a side-issue to the more pressing concerns of economic growth and poverty reduction, rather than as intimately bound up with poor people's livelihoods. For some, talking about sex is plain embarrassing. For others, sex is part of the 'private sphere', outside the purview of development. Some imply that sexuality is a choice – while poverty is not. For others still, sex is primarily a problem that requires strategies of containment: sexual health promotion to contain the spread of disease, rehabilitation and policing to contain the vehicles of infection and 'immorality', and laws to criminalise sexual deviance (Gosine 2004).

Development agencies have *explicitly* dealt with issues of sexuality in their programmes on health and population, and *implicitly* by disregarding its significance for employment, livelihoods, security, housing, education, governance and social protection. Sex has been treated as a problem, rather than as a source of happiness, intimacy, fulfillment and pleasure. Words like 'love' or 'desire' are not part of the development lexicon. As Henry Armas, from the Peruvian NGO GRUPAL, pointed out at the workshop, discourses of poverty portray poor people as if they were innocents who need 'our' nurturing and assistance: by treating them like children, it remains possible to keep their sexuality invisible.

What *do* sexual rights have to do with development? And what would giving greater visibility to sexuality achieve? Definitions of sexual rights have at their core issues of non-discrimination and recognition that might be considered fundamental to human dignity. Indeed, it might be argued that sexual rights are what Henry Shue (1980) calls 'basic rights': essential if we are to be able to realise any other rights, for how can we claim other rights, if we do not have rights over our most intimate being? Sexuality is a development issue, because it affects the very things that many think of as constituting 'development'. The right to bodily integrity, to sex that is consensual, pleasurable and safe, is at the core of our very well-being. The right to have intimate relationships of our own choosing without being victim to violence, ostracism or discrimination, is fundamental to our lives and livelihoods. How, if women's and men's bodies can be violated by others, and if our existence is threatened by those who deny us the right to be, can we even imagine being able to enjoy any of the aspects of development that are captured by writers like Sen (1999) and Chambers (2002)?

To make the connections between sexuality and development, we need to revisit the fundamental tenets of 'development' itself, whether in relation to notions of the

social contract, human rights or the political economy of human relations. New frames are needed that can engage those for whom sexuality is perceived as an irrelevance, threat, luxury or 'externality'. As Robert Chambers commented, 'we need to enable people to be as comfortable in talking about sexuality as they have become about gender'. IDS economist Martin Greeley argued that even the most hard-to-reach economist must concede that the roots of welfare economics lie in the utilitarian principle of the greatest happiness for the greatest number: 'no-one can logically dispute the relationship between sexual pleasure and happiness', he argued, 'economists cannot deny, by their own definitions, the centrality of sexuality to human well-being'. The problem is, he pointed out, 'because they can't measure it, they have chosen to ignore it'. Yet it is evident that sexuality-related disadvantages feature in every single one of poverty's multiple dimensions (Chambers 2002): in relation to security, livelihoods, voice and clout in decision-making forums, social relations, access to services, capabilities, physical well-being, and ascribed and legal inferiority. It is surely time for development agencies to get real about these connections, and begin to find positive ways to address them rather than continuing to ignore them.

## Historical perspectives and contemporary realities

Struggles over sexual rights have taken on a new intensity in recent years. AIDS has brought sexuality out of the shadows. It challenges development practitioners, policy-makers and researchers who are reluctant to talk about sex, and creates new opportunities for them to explore questions of desire, power and pleasure, and to gain understanding of how and why these are relevant to development concerns. Women's movements have mobilised to claim the right to safe abortion in countries like Argentina and Brazil, where the grip of conservative Christianity once made its very possibility an impossible dream. Legislation permitting same-sex partners the same legal rights as heterosexuals, and banning discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, is beginning to take root in the global South, as well as the North. Movements of sexual minorities have gained greater visibility, and built alliances with other social movements struggling for rights and citizenship, bridging old divides and creating new coalitions for change.

At the same time, new and ever more dangerous forms of conservatism are on the rise, threatening people's very right to exist, let alone to love. In countries such as Uganda, which once impressed the world with its HIV prevention strategies, people may now find it hard to find even a condom – let alone the encouragement to use one – as a consequence of abstinence-only programmes backed by the US government and the Christian right. Organisations that once supported the struggles of sex workers to realise their right to safer working conditions now have to contend with the difficult choice of continuing their work or losing their funding. Even the most progressive

governments, such as Brazil, may find themselves battered into place by alliances of powerful reactionary forces, trading off trade agreements for conformity with the reactionary agenda of suppression of sexual rights.

Sonia Correa opened the workshop by outlining landmark shifts over the last 40 years, which have shaped current struggles for sexual rights: the World Population Conference in Bucharest, in 1974, when the rights of couples and individuals began to be discussed; the United Nations First Conference on Women in Mexico, in 1975, where the concept of 'bodily integrity' was invented; and, from the 1980s, as waves of rights talk began to mount, the UN Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, 1994, and the UN Fourth Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, which placed the issue of sexual rights onto the international agenda. Drawing attention to how themes have resurfaced and have acquired new meanings during these decades, Sonia Correa argued that we have recently seen an intensification and polarisation of battles over sexual rights, in a context of increasing differences, uncertainties and risks.

In the global arena, hard-won gains are under threat, as language and principles that won acceptance in Cairo and Beijing in the 1990s are being challenged. As Amnesty International's Kate Shiell noted, putting a positive approach to sexuality and sexual rights on the agenda in such a hostile context presents huge difficulties. It is a struggle enough in UN negotiations simply to retain what was formerly agreed, let alone promote a more progressive stance. Language in international declarations that relates to sexual rights has become a bargaining tool; and the constant quest for consensus among state delegations with very different underlying views and philosophies means that statements that support sexual rights are likely to be sacrificed. Forced into constantly being on the defensive by the need to withstand right-wing attacks, has helped to create strategic alliances between those who might otherwise not have worked closely together. And yet, as Kate Shiell reflected, the reactive positions that activists have had to take up, have had the consequence of making it harder to get to grips with what sexual rights actually mean, and what exactly advocates of these rights are seeking to progress.

## Contextualising sexual rights

### *The limits of framing sexual realities in terms of human rights*

Debates at the workshop brought into question the extent to which thinking of sexuality in terms of rights provides an adequate way of addressing sexual realities. How much might we expect of the law, of human rights frameworks, and of the language of rights? Opinions were divided. Putting protective legislation in place and removing discriminatory laws were seen by many as essential preconditions for realising sexual rights. As Shireen Huq of the Bangladeshi NGO Naripokkho pointed out, processes that frame *moral* claims can be used as a basis for making *legal* claims.

For some, 'rights talk' makes a difference precisely because it helps people gain a sense of their entitlements – even in contexts where there is little prospect of actually being able to press legal claims. For others, however, a rights-based approach to sexuality was inherently limiting, for pragmatic and political reasons.

Understandings of sexual rights and sexuality vary cross-culturally, as well as within cultures, whereas the concept of human rights is one that is rooted in a very distinct culture: that of Northern Europe. Discussions at our workshop highlighted the difficulties inherent in describing people's experiences of sexuality in terms of rights. Rights, as Sergio Carrera from the Rio-based Latin American Centre on Sexuality and Human Rights (CLAM) pointed out, only exist as objective, value-free concepts at a theoretical level. In fact, they are never neutral; they become 'filled' with cultural content when they are negotiated in particular contexts. Xu Bin from the Chinese Institute for Tongzi (Queer) Studies suggested that in China, advocating sexual rights as *rights* can attract the charge of being too Western, and too radical: this can have the effect of distancing the very people for whom these rights are being sought.

There are further conceptual and political limits to thinking about sexuality in terms of rights. One, as Sonia Correa pointed out, is the thorny issue of the balance between protection and freedom. Examples revealed different strategies for engaging with criminal law. In the Turkish case, described by Karen Ronge of Women for Women's Human Rights, criminal law was used as a vehicle to advance sexual rights. In other contexts, such as in the Indian case analysed by Sumit Baudh, efforts have focused on *removing* punitive regulations such as Article 377, which makes sex between men a criminal offence. Oliver Phillips of Westminster University's analysis of the radically different political and legal frameworks of South Africa and Zimbabwe showed the extent to which law is a double-edged sword: 'We look to the law for rights, but the very codification of categories and injunctions is profoundly normative'. The law, he pointed out, can be used to contain, domesticate and discipline as much as to lend legitimacy and protection.

As Jaya Sharma, from the Indian NGO PRISM, pointed out, 'rights talk' often depends on defining, fixing and labeling categories of people whose rights are being claimed. Yet sexual identity and sexuality are more fluid than this. 'We can't take for granted what we mean by rights or even what we mean by sexuality', she argued; and she called for shifting the frame to claim the *right to be* whoever we are without being forced into any particular social or sexual group. Human rights frameworks may seem to hold more promise in this regard. Yet human rights discourse presents its own obstacles. Kate Shiell observed, 'Human rights are about saving the innocent. As soon as you sexualise them, everyone has a problem'.

What became evident from our discussions was the importance of going beyond what Roger Rios called 'laundry lists of laws', to a deeper level of analysis that would permit strategic reflection on the transformative possibilities of law. Demanding new laws to protect particular citizens, using categories such as 'gay', 'heterosexual',

'bisexual' or 'transgender', may be counter-productive, as Henry Armas signaled. This is because these categories are themselves cultural constructions that may not capture local expressions and experiences of sexuality. In China, Xu Bin argued, 'gay' and 'lesbian' do not mean anything at the local level; local activists need to invent a new language. There is a real danger that international lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) groups who challenge the assumptions of heterosexuality that pervade development, may end up reproducing imposed models of sexuality.

The degree to which sexual rights find legal expression, or serve as a basis for demand-making within civil society, varies across contexts. A number of presentations at the workshop challenged the ready equation of 'sexual rights' with 'sexual minorities', bringing into the frame a range of other experiences: Promise Mtembu's reflections on the denial of the sexuality, let alone the sexual rights, of HIV positive women; Grace Osakue's description of pressures faced by young women in Nigeria from predatory older men; Phan le Mai's account of breaking the silence about sex in the Vietnamese Clubs for Women's Advancement; Zoly Harilala Rakotoniera and Sabina Faiz Rashid's work on the sexual rights of married Malagasy and Bangladeshi women respectively; the hazards of heterosexual marriage in Cambodia or Zambia, as described by Veronica Magar and Gill Gordon, where migrant husbands' sexual proclivities may include the purchase of unsafe sex; and Anupam Hazra's account of the risks run by men in India who end up having hurried sex with men in public places, their desires proscribed by society and the law.

### *Battles over culture*

Sexual rights are perceived in many developing countries as representing the insidious creep of Westernisation, and as promoting corrupt sexual mores. 'Traditional culture' is represented as a bulwark that will maintain decency and order. And yet, 'tradition' is constantly and selectively reinvented to suit the agendas of the powerful (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992). Isatou Touray of the Gambian NGO GAMCOTRAP shared a graphic presentation of photographs of Gambian women's mutilated genitalia, which showed how 'tradition' is played out in the violation of women's bodies. Her account focused on the contradictions of 'culture'. As she said, 'I believe in my culture, I love my culture, but there are some things wrong with my culture'; female genital mutilation, she argued, takes and ruins lives in the name of 'culture'. Sexual rights go, she argued, to the very heart of our being:

*Sexual rights are about the self, about bodily integrity – it is beyond pleasure, it's about being yourself*

As Sylvia Tamale, Dean of Law at Makerere University in Uganda, pointed out, the very laws now used to persecute those accused of 'un-African' sexual practices, were put in place during the colonial era to regulate sexualities deemed 'uncivilised'. Further, as Ayesha Imam (1997) noted, those who defend 'African tradition' when it

comes to gender relations may be more than happy to drive a Mercedes Benz and wear suits. Questions arise about whose 'tradition' or 'culture' is being defended. Peruvian transgender artist and activist Guiseppa Campuzano reminded us of the importance of recovering the suppressed histories and traditions of people who, prior to colonial invasion, may have experienced their sexual and gender identities very differently. His account of pre-colonial Peruvian traditions showed how *travestis*, those who transit genders, were valued rather than vilified.

### *Rights for whom?*

Claims to sexual rights are generally advanced by those whose rights to bodily integrity and choice of sexual orientation have been denied. What, then, are the implications of conceiving of sexual rights as universal rights, that is, as rights that can be claimed by heterosexual men as well as by women and sexual minorities? Arguments can be made that as the primary perpetrators of sexual harms, heterosexual men already possess the means to assert the right to have sex when and with whom they choose. Nighat Kamdar of the Pakistan-based organisation AWARD, for example, flagged the contradictions inherent in extending sexual rights to men in a context where many men have multiple partners, unsafe sex and total control over women's lives. Yet it is all too easy to slip into a men-as-problem discourse, and to fail to acknowledge the diversity of male sexual and gendered identities, and indeed the fragilities and powerlessness experienced by some men (Cornwall 2000).

The realities of sexual violence perpetrated by men need to be squarely acknowledged. But this may be better addressed by identifying certain male gender identities, especially those in which violence against women and children comes to be naturalised, as problematic, and focusing on reinforcing alternative ways of being a man. The workshop heard about a number of innovative programmes that are seeking to do precisely this. AWARD uses theatre to explore the making of masculine sexualities and stimulate debate on male responsibility in Pakistan. Jorge Lyra and Benedito Medrado from Papai in Recife, and Marcus Nascimento from PROMUNDO in Rio, described programmes working with young men to reframe heterosexual male identities in ways that encourage respect, equality and intimacy. CARE Cambodia's Play Safe project similarly provides opportunities for men to re-examine normative constructs of masculinity. These initiatives embody a notion of sexual rights that confronts and challenges unequal power relations, by focusing on core human rights values of dignity and respect.

### The power of pleasure

Going beyond a doom and gloom approach to sexuality calls for imaginative strategies. From workshops on how to be a better lover to the promotion of condoms as sex toys, tactics that engage with desire, play, and the erotic, stand much better

chance of reaching those otherwise impervious to safer sex messages. As Jill Lewis and Gill Gordon pointed out, they also open up avenues for reflecting on just how much our gender identities constrain our sexualities and vice versa. Hossam Bahgat of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, reflected on how preoccupations with bodily *harm* also have inherent political limitations by narrowing the reach of activism to damage limitation. Embracing the right to pleasure, he argued, reframes debates about sexuality to focus as much on liberty as on well-being.

### *Talking about sex*

A positive focus on sexuality means embracing the erotic, and acknowledging desire and the power of pleasure. In her paper for the workshop, South African feminist writer Desiree Lewis argued that public policy debate is limited by 'technical and biomedical language that ignores what is subversive, imaginative, erotic, human and complex'. She highlighted the extent to which, for example, campaigning for safe sex has served to marginalise feminist demands for women to enjoy and assert their sexual and reproductive rights, and reassert the power of men to determine when and how sex takes place.

Popular culture, the Web, and the media play a huge part in shaping people's attitudes about sex. Working with, and creating new forms, of popular culture offers an important avenue for change, Desiree Lewis argued – one that can subvert and challenge the objectification of women and the commoditisation of sex. Communicating more openly and positively about intimacy and desire can be a hugely powerful means of transforming people's ways of thinking about sexuality and sexual relations. Song Sufeng and Sandra Ljubinkovic and Jelena Djordjevic told inspiring tales of V-Day events in China and Serbia that revitalised women's energy to claim back their bodies.

Development agencies have been slow to realise this potential, because they have often started from what they think people ought to know, rather than by thinking about the ways in which people learn and communicate about sex. In doing so, they have been complicit in silencing those who are seen by society as those who 'ought' not to be thinking or talking about sex at all – such as the children described in Deevia Bhana's account of her work in South Africa, and whose knowledge and perceptions of sex and sexuality revealed realities that need to be made visible.

Working to promote women's prerogative to claim sexual pleasure calls for re-valuing 'traditional' institutions, as well as working with 'modern' communications like romance magazines or soap operas. In a powerful account of an indigenous Ugandan initiation institution, Ssenga, Sylvia Tamale showed how reading African sexualities through Western eyes risks profoundly misunderstanding people's own cultural and sexual codes. Doing so risks missing vital aspects of traditional institutions, including the opportunities they may offer women to learn more about their bodies and about how to enhance their own sexual pleasure, as well as how to

please their partners. The challenge for development practice, Sylvia Tamale argued, is to work with women's own ways of communicating about sex – from riddles to songs to games – and to draw on local practices in culturally sensitive ways, rather than assuming that they are always problematic or ignoring their existence.

### *Whose pleasure?*

Jill Lewis of Hampshire College, and Gill Gordon of the International HIV/AIDS Alliance, provoked reflection on the challenges of incorporating sexual pleasure into sexual health and HIV prevention work. Pleasure, they contended, is not something simple or pure; our experience of sexuality is constructed through a range of images and notions that frame what we regard as pleasurable – and include those in which women's bodies are objectified commodities to be used by men for their own pleasure. Sexual rights for women may mean being able to reclaim their right to pleasure, but this does not address the fact that heterosexual male sexualities often promote the taking of pleasure in ways that run roughshod over women's sexual rights, including their rights to satisfying sex. They drew attention to the inherent ambivalence in feminist debates about sexual pleasure.<sup>2</sup> They asked: What, then, are we arguing for when we talk about pleasure? Equality for women and men? Or do we need a way of thinking about sexual pleasure that brings obligations and responsibilities more firmly into the picture, and that highlights the culturally constructed nature of sexuality and hence its changeability?

Pleasure is, after all, complex and contradictory. Anupam Hazra of the Indian NGO SAARTHI argued that effective safer sex education requires thinking 'beyond the bedroom' and talking 'within rather than over' sexual codes, recognising the urgency of desire and its darker sides. As Hanna Hacker of Vienna University reminded us, pleasure is not some magic ingredient that can simply be brought into development. As Nighat Kamdar pointed out, 'sex' in itself is not just an act: the relationship of sex and pleasure is about something much broader, and diffuse. It is not just sexual acts that people want, Anupam Hazra pointed out; there are many other aspects of sexual encounters that people find pleasurable. For some, desire is driven by the wish not to be lonely; for others, what they experience as pleasurable is constructed by others as harmful or violent.

The notion of 'pleasure' is powerful because it is inherently unstable; and it is unstable precisely because pleasure is often also about power. Barbara Klugman reminded us that the language agreed at the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, in 1994, talks about *satisfying* sexual relations. But she questioned whether the term 'satisfying' encompasses all the things sex is about, that is, the purposes and reasons for sex. And she raised the further challenge of how such commitments translate into people's everyday lives: how can they be monitored? What would it take to determine whether or not efforts to enhance satisfying sexual relations were having any impact?

### *How to be a great lover – a way forward?*

Discussions at the workshop highlighted some of the shortcomings of current approaches to sexual health promotion. They drew attention to the extent to which health promotion has over-emphasised particular kinds of sex, privileging the immediacy of disease prevention and neglecting the myriad other dimensions of the erotic. Shifting the frame to focus on pleasure was seen by participants to offer an entirely different approach to the promotion of safer sex. Xiao-Pei He showed how powerful a focus on pleasure can be, describing a training workshop on participatory approaches for HIV prevention in China, in which participants shared tips and sexy safer-sex practices by trying them out on each other in an impromptu post-workshop session.

Initiatives like The Pleasure Project, described by Wendy Knerr and Anne Philpott, which works with the sex industry to create and promote safer sexy tools, and the International Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS' sexual healing resources, open up an expanse of erotic possibilities that embraces a plurality of sexual pleasures.<sup>3</sup> Wendy Knerr of The Pleasure Project gave an example of marketing condoms as erotic accessories rather than as tools for disease prevention. She argued for an approach that could embrace the pleasurable possibilities of non-penetrative sex, as part of repertoires of play and desire that can reconfigure sexual codes in enabling and empowering ways. To do so, Jill Lewis argued, calls for an approach that takes seriously the way in which dominant notions of masculinity and femininity create obstacles for collaboration between women and men in negotiating sexier safer sex. She gave the example of how regarding men as those responsible for condom use reduces women to passive onlookers, and fails to acknowledge that putting on a condom can be an intensely fragile experience for men. Recognising this draws attention to what women might do as partners to share responsibility and allay anxieties.

## Claiming sexual rights

*What would the world be like if we really did have the right to choose our sexuality and pleasurable sexual relations?*

(Karen Ronge, Women for Women's Human Rights, Turkey)

What *would* it take to realise the possibility of having these choices? The workshop's final panel focused on this question, and on a series of presentations from different contexts on mobilisation to claim sexual rights.

Forging alliances for the advancement of sexual rights has proven challenging. A recurring theme of the workshop was the tension between those who press the state

for greater intervention, as feminists have often done, and those whose activism is focused on securing liberty from state intrusion, as has been the case for gay and sex workers' rights movements. Hossam Bahgat and Shireen Huq's analyses of sexual rights struggles in Egypt and Bangladesh offered fascinating accounts of how these divides can be bridged. Hossam Bahgat sketched out the trajectories taken in struggles for sexual rights in the Middle East, outlining the structural challenges for alliance-building in a context where Islamic and Christian religious organisations hold such sway: he highlighted opposition to women's rights to bodily integrity, and moves to redefine 'private' as 'the right to be left alone, where state and society should stop'.

Shireen Huq described how in Bangladesh, the engagement of the feminist NGO, Naripokkho, in sex workers' struggles against illegal evictions from their homes and brothels, had resulted in new understandings of the links between women's realities, in and out of sex work. Media coverage of sex workers' demands to be treated as other workers prompted a new basis of solidarity between the women's movement and sex workers. Engagement with *hijras* (inter-sex and transgender persons) brought about a radical re-questioning of the sex/gender distinction.

Karen Ronge's account of the Women for Women's Human Rights campaign to reform the Turkish Penal Code emphasised the importance of building other kinds of connections. She emphasised the importance of communication, and the fostering of connections, at every level, combining national policy advocacy with grassroots training that reached into the family to reframe gender-based violence. Their starting point was to work with women by asking them the question, 'what would be your vision of having rights?' From this work arose new conceptualisations of rights, from women's own perspectives.

## Making the connections: emerging agendas

*We used to talk about development with a human face. We should be talking about development with a body.*

(Arit Oku-Egbas, Africa Regional Sexuality Resource Centre, Nigeria)

IDS represents, to many, the very heart of the development mainstream. There was a tangible feeling of exhilaration at being able to bring issues of sexuality into an arena that has remained so impervious to its significance. To see the corridors of IDS lined with the provocative art of Peruvian *travesti* activist Giuseppe Campuzano, and decked with brightly coloured declarations of sexual rights, was something in itself. To engage people who have led development thinking on poverty and power, like Robert Chambers, in debate on the connections between sexuality and development was

something again. Having created this space for dialogue, what is now needed to make use of it?

Putting sexuality on the development agenda is about more than breaking the silence about sex. It is about asserting sexual well-being as a legitimate development goal in itself, whether framed in terms of sexual rights or as inextricably bound up with poverty reduction. Taking this agenda forward requires further research and action on a number of fronts, from new forms of enquiry and engagement to the consolidation of what has been learnt and what has been done. A number of key themes emerge:

### *Understanding everyday expressions of sexuality and notions of sexual rights*

*Before we begin pushing what we think is a progressive agenda, we need to describe what is going on, on the ground.*

(Hossam Bahgat, Egypt)

A recurrent theme of the workshop was the hazards of making assumptions about other people's sexual identities, codes and practices. Going beyond these assumptions calls for activist and action-oriented research that can ask the question of what 'sexual rights' actually mean in the everyday lives of different kinds of people, in different kinds of relationships, and in different cultural and political settings – and how they understand their own bodies, desires, pleasures and sexual relationships. A significant literature exists on sex, sexual health and sexuality. Rich as this is in terms of insights, much of it is written inaccessibly and published in obscure places. So much more could be done to engage people in exploring their own sexual meanings and experiences and in using what emerges creatively and pro-actively to enhance sexual well-being.

Supporting the development and use of innovative participatory methodologies and popular communications in work on sex and sexuality can do much to advance this agenda. From the use of pictures of the body to map the erotic and erogenous (personal communication, Lucy Shilling), to working with different groups of people to produce photo-novellas and rap songs that speak to others like them (Hassan 2002), participatory approaches permit issues of pleasure and desire to be surfaced and explored, creating spaces for self-expression and dialogue (Gordon and Cornwall 2005). By enabling people to tell their stories, listen to each other and begin to reframe their perspectives on the possible, such tools for change can create the basis for new narratives and practices.

### *Gathering evidence*

Policies on sex and sexuality are more often based on ideology than on evidence of what people who such policies seek to assist feel would actually make a difference in enhancing their sexual well-being. In today's world, we are increasingly seeing programmes such as abstinence-only approaches to HIV prevention being backed by political muscle and conditionalities. There is an urgent need for more evidence of what is happening on the ground, as organisations that once supported condom promotion and safe abortion are enjoined to abandon these activities under threat of closure. What forms of resistance or subversion are arising as a result of current US policies – and what might be gained from having more information and more evidence of their effects? And what can more progressive governments do to support struggles to realise sexual rights – whether in terms of battling in the international arena, in terms of their own development policies or in making good the funding gap left by the loss of US funding for those who cannot and will not subscribe to the new conservatism?

### *Defining sexual rights*

*We tend to focus a lot on our enemies, because they're very powerful, but if they come to us and say what is a sexual right, we won't be able to answer them.*

(Kate Shieff, Amnesty International)

Greater clarity needs to be brought to discussions of otherwise opaque concepts of sexuality and sexual rights, Sonia Correa argued. Appropriate and accessible language needs to be developed, with which to speak of the positive, fulfilling dimensions of sex and sexuality, as well as of dangers, harms and risks. If instruments such as charters or declarations of sexual rights are to be meaningful and useful in different cultural and legal contexts, the International Planned Parenthood Federation's (IPPF) Karen Newman emphasised, more work is needed to define the legal and normative dimensions of sexual rights. This calls for engagement with legal scholars and activist lawyers and efforts to bridge everyday lived realities and the more distant and abstract worlds of law and policy, at the national and the international levels.

While concerns were expressed about the extent to which human rights frameworks provide a way forward in the current geo-political climate, the rise of rights talk in the development arena does offer scope for transforming approaches to sexual well-being (Cornwall and Welbourn, 2002). The questions arise of how sexual rights can be articulated within the 'rights-based approaches' currently being pursued by many development agencies? And what is needed to make sexual rights as central to the development agenda as rights to food, shelter, water or health?

### *Engaging with religion*

Situating struggles for sexual rights in today's global politics brings the issue of religion to the fore, as Sonia Correa pointed out in her opening remarks. Much more needs to be done to work constructively with faith-based organisations to enhance and embrace elements of religious belief that emphasise the values of mutual respect, human dignity and love rather than bigotry, prejudice and hatred. Development researchers, policy-makers and practitioners can no longer hide behind the shield of secularity and claim to take no view on religion and its influence on development. Reactionary religious positions pose a huge threat to the entire development enterprise. Yet to treat these positions as if they represent all Christians and Muslims is to lend them legitimacy, and obscure dissidence among those who practise these religions. Progressives exist within all religious traditions. Inspiring examples, such as the work of Catholics for a Free Choice ([www.catholicsforchoice.org](http://www.catholicsforchoice.org)) and the Coalition of Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies, show what can be done to reframe religious narratives and build progressive alliances.

### *Building alliances*

The workshop brought together people who might otherwise never come to talk to each other. Some of its most inspiring stories were those in which new coalitions were built around common concerns. But it equally raised critical challenges for the construction of such alliances, from ways of bridging political differences to the conceptual and personal dilemmas that working together can raise. Lively debate and an appreciation of the significance of alliance-building demonstrated the importance, and need, for more reflection and discussion about ways of bridging differences between movements struggling for sexual rights. Some of these challenges arise from the very self-identity of movements, who may be so wedded to certain ways of thinking and doing that change becomes difficult and threatening.

A case in point is that of feminist movements, among whose members there may be considerable hostility to struggles for, for example, transgender rights or safer working conditions for sex workers. Can other feminist movements follow the example of the Bangladeshi women's movement, and revisit their assumptions about sex work and the sex/gender distinction? How might gay rights and women's rights movements work together to press simultaneously for the enforcement of some laws and the removal of others? And how might movements built around identities find a new politics of 'inter-est' (Arendt 1958) that goes beyond what Sonia Correa described as 'the perversity of identity'?

### *Making sexual rights real*

In a world in which these conservative forces threaten the very right to exist of people who fail to conform to heterosexual norms, placing the issue of sexual rights on the development agenda requires a multi-faceted approach that can harness diverse

arguments – whether in terms of human rights, welfare economics or theories of development that emphasise the centrality of freedom, dignity and respect, and work with and from a broader notion of human well-being, than that provided by current development policy. Evidence, arguments and advocacy are needed to make the links between sexuality and development so apparent that the mainstream development establishment can no longer ignore them.

Addressing this agenda for research, communication and action calls for investment by development agencies in bringing issues of sex and sexuality out of the shadows. So much dynamism, commitment and creativity exist among those working to realise sexual rights. It is time that development agencies made more of the tremendous potential that this offers for re-orienting development thinking, practice and spending to making sexual rights real.

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*While I have tried my best to do justice to the incredible richness of debates and experiences shared at the workshop, this is inevitably a partial and personal take on the issues we explored. I owe a huge debt to Susie Jolly, with whom this workshop was organised and with whom this article had to be written, due to pressure of time. Many thanks go to our donors, for making this workshop possible and for their support to the IDS Participation Group's work on sexuality, rights and development, and to Susie Jolly, Katja Jassey and Hilary Standing for helpful comments on an earlier version.*

## Notes

- 1 For further details, including a number of the workshop papers, see [www.ids.ac.uk/ids/particip/research/sexrights.html](http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/particip/research/sexrights.html).
- 2 See, for example, the debate between McFadden (2003) and Pereira (2003) in *Feminist Africa*.
- 3 For further information, see [www.the-pleasure-project.org](http://www.the-pleasure-project.org) and [www.icw.org](http://www.icw.org).

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