Why is sexuality a development issue?

Over the past 13 years, the Sexuality and Development Programme [1] at the Institute for Development Studies [2] has been developing a portfolio of evidence from scholars, activists and practitioners around the world to challenge the inadequate treatment of sexuality in development theory and practice. Authors from a range of backgrounds and disciplines have questioned the assumption that sexuality is not a development issue and have introduced new ways of understanding the links between sexuality, poverty and citizenship.

This cutting edge work has been brought together by Kate Hawkins in an Annotated Bibliography [4] (2013) which summarises each of the contributions commissioned by IDS to this diverse and growing body of work. This bibliography provides useful background information for those who want to understand more about the theoretical context of their work and how the debates have developed over time.

The following text summarises learning from the Sexuality and Development Programme [1] at IDS. The issues and debates outlined here are explored in more depth in the nearly 100 articles brought together in Sexuality and Development: An Annotated Bibliography [5].

The Development Industry

This section of the Annotated Bibliography shows that one of the key issues for development theorists interested in sexuality has been the relative invisibility of sexuality in development theory and practice. Scholars have shown that while sexuality relates directly to development interventions to tackle issues such as population growth, health, and poverty - including those dating back to colonialism - these links remain hidden and are rarely made explicit in programme documentation, policy or public debate. For example:

- Many contemporary policy debates on maternal health avoid any mention of conception; bypassing culturally and politically sensitive questions about sexuality, abuse, responsibility, contraceptive use and access to abortion.
- The sexual health and rights of lesbian and bisexual women are often completely missing from sexual and reproductive health and rights policies, materials and documents.
Sexuality and gender non-conformity can restrict access to employment and other forms of economic and social support and this is rarely addressed in analyses of economic growth and the distribution of the benefits of development.

Even where sexuality is addressed directly, the terms of the debate are often very narrow. For example:

- There is a tendency in development interventions to view sexuality as a source of danger, harm and disease which means that the positive aspects of sexuality are ignored.
- Sexuality is often addressed through fixed epidemiological categories or population groups such as ‘sex workers’ or ‘men who have sex with men’ (MSM), which may not reflect how sexuality is lived or understood by individuals and communities themselves.

With these examples (and many others) in mind, development theorists interested in sexuality have worked to make sexuality more visible and to show how it is intertwined in all aspects of development. Programmes on sexual health and HIV, for example, have been seen to provide important entry points for a wider discussion of sexuality and development.

**Human rights, law and policy**

In this section, the summaries indicate that using the language of sexual rights is one way that scholars and activists have attempted to challenge discrimination on the basis of sexuality and to prevent abuse and gain legal redress. This strategy is often underpinned by the notion that sexual rights are human rights in and of themselves and that they are, therefore, vital to the attainment of all development goals. Activists and researchers are increasingly looking at how the invisibility of people marginalised because of their sexuality in development makes interventions less effective. There is now research to show that breaking norms related to sexuality can affect people’s basic human rights such as access to health and education services, work, housing, political participation and many other spheres of development intervention.

The sexual rights as human rights approach has been met with resistance by those who see it as a foreign or ‘Western’ imposition which is at odds with ‘traditional culture’. This has been disputed by those who reject the notion that culture is static or homogenous and that sexuality is not a concern of poor people in low- and middle-income countries. Some authors have looked to popular culture – such as TV programmes, storytelling, and pop music – to demonstrate counter narratives about sexuality which show how ideas about sexuality shift over time creating new ideas about accepted roles and behaviour.

Others have cautioned that rights language and legal approaches on their own may be insufficient. They argue that changes in law and policy alone will not necessarily alter social, political and economic norms. For many, sexuality cannot be separated from the economic conditions of everyday life which need to be tackled in conjunction with efforts to achieve sexual rights.

Evidence suggests that efforts towards law reform are often the starting point for discussions, awareness raising and challenging norms around sexuality rather than the end point itself.

**Gender and Women’s empowerment**
This section of the Annotated Bibliography brings together the growing body of work on the ways in which sexuality is linked to women's empowerment. For example, in the ways sexuality is linked to 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 wellbeing and ultimately undermines their political, social and economic empowerment. Women's sexual rights are one of the most contested areas of human rights and are often under attack in national and international policy spaces. Some have argued that sexual rights are a lightning rod for negative reactions because they constitute a direct threat to patriarchal power, conservatism and male privilege.

**Pleasure**

In response to criticisms of development theory's focus on the negative aspects of sexuality, there has been a move to understand how to harness the positive aspects of sex and sexuality - 'love', 'desire' and 'pleasure' in development interventions. Some researchers and practitioners have suggested that a pleasure-based approach to sexuality can provide new ways of organising interventions and policy. This approach acknowledges people's agency to choose the type of sex that they want and challenges the predominant idea in development that women are victims within all sexual encounters. These authors argue that if women are taught to be fearful about sex it leaves them with little space to negotiate their own desires.

This critical engagement with the pleasurable aspects of sexuality has prompted debate about the ways that pleasure is constructed and mediated by power structures such as gender, class and race. It has shown that pleasure is shaped by technology and market forces, for example, by pornography and the pharmaceutical industry, in ways that can be both oppressive and empowering. Some point out that the heteronormative idea that the only good and proper sex is penis/vaginal intercourse excludes other forms of sexuality from the debate and can contribute to feelings of guilt and shame when people cannot, or do not want, to conform to the heterosexual norm. Research has shown that some people, such as those who are HIV positive or disabled, may be considered ineligible for pleasure and that this is also an important area to be challenged.

Others have cautioned against an uncritical acceptance of the 'pleasure approach' arguing that the levels of danger and abuse related to sexuality mean that it is critical that these harms are addressed as a priority. Others suggest that pleasure and danger are often intertwined and that both elements of sexuality need to be addressed at the same time.

**Heteronormativity**

Evidence has been used to show that the failure of development actors and policy makers to address sexuality in their
poverty reduction strategies, can actually cause or compound poverty for certain groups. Some have argued that this is because sexuality is seen as ‘trivial’ or irrelevant by those working to meet basic economic needs. This section illustrates that this approach has also been developed through a focus on heteronormativity, a term used to describe the social and power dynamics which privilege, support and reinforce the heterosexual, nuclear family as the basis for development interventions. For example, research has highlighted the way that economic and social assistance programmes tend to be structured around a certain family type which means that households headed by single parents, or containing same sex couples, may not be able to access the same entitlements. Conversely, research also indicates that breaking sexual norms does not always leave people worse off. For example, people who choose to sell sexual services may earn more than their peers. Also, those who adhere to norms may incur negative consequences. For example, people may stay in unhappy marriages because they provide them with certain financial advantages or social acceptance.

In recent years, activism on sexual rights has opened up greater spaces for the analysis and discussion of sexuality, illustrating the importance of viewing development interventions through a sexuality ‘lens’. Queer Theory has stimulated new ways of looking at sexuality and poverty and how not fitting into ‘norms’ around gender and sexuality can affect people’s access to basic resources. Feminist analysis has demonstrated how sexuality intersects with other axis of oppression. Understanding poverty as multi-dimensional and relating not just to economic goods but also to areas such as insecurity and physical ill-being (see Web of Poverty [7] for more details), has also been used to show the multiple levels of disadvantage experienced by those whose sexuality does not conform to the norm.

Scholars have challenged the assumption that norms govern us entirely. By creating a binary between the ‘normative’ and the ‘non-normative’ there is a danger of privileging certain identities and overlooking the different ways that people navigate those norms. Furthermore, we may overlook the strategies that people marginalised because of their sexuality use to reject or resist norms.

Further issues to consider

The social justice issues relating to sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) are currently receiving significant attention from development theorists, practitioners, donors and NGOs, as well as the international media. The political and social implications of focusing on fixed categories of sexual and gender identity are discussed further in the section ‘What’s wrong with labels [8]’. In addition, there is a concern that the current focus on SOGI or LGBT issues has meant that they are increasingly being ‘silied’ or separated off from broader sexuality and social justice issues. One implication of this is that the negative effects of norms around sexuality on heterosexual women and men, are obscured. In addition, a politics of sexuality and development which only focused on LGBT issues would ignore the laws and policies that: leads to women being married to the men who rape them, sterilised because they are HIV positive or arrested for wearing a mini skirt; deprive men and women of basic citizenship rights for selling sex; criminalise consensual sex between people with disabilities; enshrine notions of shame and honour in relation to women’s sexuality; fails to recognise men as victims of rape and sexual assault. These issues are raised in the Annotated Bibliography and also in the Case Studies and Policy Audits featured in this toolkit and the ongoing work of the Sexuality, Poverty and Law Programme at IDS.

Discussion Points

• How do you understand the links between sexuality and development issues such as poverty reduction?
• What are the benefits and challenges of forming coalitions with other rights-based groups for your organisation?
• What obstacles have you encountered when trying to raise sexuality issues with development actors or policy makers?
• In what ways have western notions of sexuality enabled or impeded your work?
To read more about these issues and debates please see the Annotated Bibliography [9] (2013)

**Related Documents**

**Sexual Pleasure Empowers Women!** [10]

Contestations, Issue 2

**Pathways: Sexuality and Women’s Empowerment** [11]

Eldis, Resource Guide

**Heteronormativity** [12]

Eldis, Key Issues Guide

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**Links**


[9] http://mobile.opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/123456789/3199#.UuodILTtXQA

[10] https://www.google.co.uk/search?q=Contestations+sexual+pleasure+empowers+women&amp;ie=utf-8&amp;oe=utf-8&amp;rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&amp;client=firefox-a&amp;gws_rd=cr&amp;ei=Mk_hUp-PIMHDhAe2ylH4DQ
