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The Politics and Economics of Body Image and Sexuality in Africa: Thoughts from a Path Less Travelled

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Abstract

Body image is internal and external. It is seen by ourselves and by others. Social body image constructs seem to be built on what is deemed to be beautiful within our cultural contexts, which in turn is perceived as valuable and in turn has higher social standing because everyone else looks up to it. The politics of body image is often a 'black and white' affair, without much room for manoeuvring. You are either the strong male or the weaker female. Together with the outward appearance, the sexualities of the bodies must also complement each other. But it is a semi-artificial construct which not all people can adhere to, much less attain, though they all try. What happens then with women or men who defy these constructs of body image and sexuality – who turn them on their head? How does the society adjust to these kinds of individuals in its already defined and constructed political arena? This article seeks to expose the lived realities of persons who fail to conform to the expectations of the society, namely sexual and gender minorities.

Résumé

L'image corporelle est à la fois interne et externe. Elle est perçue par nous-mêmes et par les autres. Les construits sociaux de l'image corporelle semblent trouver leur origine dans ce qui est considéré comme étant « le beau » dans nos contextes culturels, lequel beau à son tour est perçu comme étant gage de grande valeur et d'un statut social plus élevé, car suscitant l'admiration de tous. La politique de l'image corporelle est souvent une question de « noir et blanc », qui n'offre pas pour autant une franche marge de manœuvre. Soit l'on est homme, c'est-à-dire le sexe fort, ou femme, qualifiée de sexe faible.

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Conjugué à l'aspect extérieur, les sexualités des corps doivent également se compléter mutuellement. Mais il s'agit d'un construit semi-artificiel auquel tout le monde ne peut adhérer, et encore moins atteindre, mais auquel tout le monde essaie de parvenir. Qu'advient-il alors des femmes ou des hommes qui défient les construits de l'image corporelle et de la sexualité – ceux qui rament à contre-courant de ces normes ? Comment la société s'adapte-t-elle à ce genre d'individus dans son arène politique définie et construite d'avance ? Cet article vise à exposer les réalités vécues par les personnes qui ne parviennent pas à se conformer aux attentes de la société, à savoir les minorités sexuelles et de genre.

Introduction

Examples of sexual stereotypes are well articulated by Tamale (2011) as follows:

He is a man therefore desires only female sexual partners; Human beings engage in sex for reproductive purposes only; He is gay therefore his life is exclusively defined by the sex act; and She is wearing a dress; therefore she must be a woman. These are examples in a long continuous list of everyday stereotypes.

How we perceive ourselves in relation to the world is the basis of body image. Planned Parenthood adapted Maureen Kelly's information in *My Body, My Rules* (1996), and agrees that internally it is the mental opinion of how we view our own physical appearance and how we think others see us. Externally, it is how others actually see us.

How we see ourselves is not necessarily the same way our body appears to others. Our sexuality encompasses many aspects of ourselves; it includes our bodies, our sexual reproductive organs, our biological sex, i.e., male or female, our gender, i.e., boy or girl, our identity, i.e., our comfort and feelings about our gender, and our sexual orientation, i.e., our romantic or sexual attractions towards another person (heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual). These and many other aspects of body image are explored extensively by Lykke (2010); Butler (1990, 1997) and Haraway (1991). Body image is therefore part of our sexuality. Body image is viewed in relation to values that are learnt or expected culturally and not necessarily innate (Lightstone, 2006). The question therefore becomes 'how does biology and culture affect gender and gender roles within a society?'

There are people who may act, feel, think or look different from the gender they were raised as. We have people whose reproductive organs are both male and female and we also have people who experience romantic or sexual feeling toward persons of the same sex. These are the people called gender minorities and sexual minorities respectively.

Whether they existed in Africa in the past is an issue for constant debate and is neither here nor there. Phillips (2001) asserts that 'Rejections of same-sex relations in African cultures can be explained by a preoccupation with procreation and the reproduction of kinship rather than the psychoanalytic notions of perversion and object choice which have often led to homophobia in Western societies' (as cited in Ben Anderson 2007:130). The reality is that they exist in Africa today. This existence comes at a price especially in a continent where family, culture, ethics and religion has a huge influence on our sexuality. Continued persecution and extreme hatred is something that sexual minorities and gender minorities experience constantly around the world and in particular in the African continent. It is important to try and understand why their existence elicits extreme emotions, and if it is even realistic to expect everybody to fit within the confines of what is considered 'normal' and what it means to co-exist in a society of tolerance and diversity.

To understand the politics of body image in Africa and why sexual and gender minorities are ostracized, we must understand patriarchy as a social system and its continued role in social constructions in the society. Patriarchy is a system that has supported men's domination and teaches that women are not as intelligent or as strong as men. This system and its beliefs is well and firmly rooted in the African culture, probably more than any other culture in the world. Therefore, what this means is when a child is born, it is socialized according to gender expectation and gender roles of that culture. Male children take on masculine roles and are taught to think and act in 'masculine ways', while the female children take on the feminine roles and are taught to act in feminine ways. Individuals are born sexed but not gendered. As Simone de Beauvoir (1949:295) wrote: 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'.

In a social system of this nature, the roles are clear and defined with masculine roles seen as superior to the feminine roles. Since women are the ones who bear children, their role is expected to be more nurturing whilst the men's role then becomes one of providing for the family. This is what is considered 'normal' in a society. What happens to sexual minorities who clearly don't follow these constructs?

People on a Path Less Travelled

'Men who eroticize men instead of women engender a potential crisis in ruling ideas of true masculinity' Edwards (Ratele 2011). With male domination at the centre, it is no surprise that African culture that views women as subordinates would completely reject a man who would

otherwise be seen to have 'feminine traits', and frown on a woman who conveys masculine ways. In fact every time a discussion on homosexuality arises, you will hear someone asking 'who acts as the female in the relationship?', intimating that the female status is considered subordinate to the one who 'plays the role of the male'. It is also not surprising to see women themselves also looking down at the man who is perceived to be the 'woman' in a homosexual relationship. Interestingly, even in discussions on homosexual relations by homosexuals themselves, one often hears the question as to whether a person is a 'top' or a 'bottom'. This shows that political concepts of body image and social constructs cascade down to outlying communities which sub-consciously emulate male and female roles both in the bedroom and in the working sphere. Occasionally, however, one will find that a homosexual couple is 'versatile', i.e., that the individuals take turns to be the dominant or passive partner. Herein lies a domestic construct where tasks and responsibilities are also often shared equitably and equally. But less well understood, are the gender minorities – that is, transsexuals and transgender persons, whose relationships are even less well understood, let alone discussed.

In our traditions, male masculinities are put on a hierarchy from what is considered the ideal male behaviour such as leading, taking control, strength as being the best and what men should aspire to be, to the weak behaviours such as dependency, emotional, delicate described as behaving like a woman (referring to a man who did not meet the ideal male behaviour). Men who sleep around with many women are considered macho and are given praising words such as '*Ndume*' or '*jogoo*'. Raewyn Connell (1995:77) asserts the theory of hegemonic masculinity by saying that 'The term hegemony refers to the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life'. Patriarchal dynamics secure a general lead position for men over women, but they also marginalize all men that do not fulfil normative male attributes. In other words, all men are not equal, but subjected to hierarchies defined by race, class and other identity characteristics.

Often the roles of men are seen as protective and productive (where the product is of higher value than that of the woman). Women's roles are supposed to be nurturing and the products of their labour of lesser economic value. Yet in same-sex relations we often find gay men holding nurturing roles – such as raising children, whilst lesbian women may take turns to bring home the bacon. This therefore turns the social construct on its head and negates the commonly believed stereotypes of what a man and a woman should or shouldn't do.

Patriarchy firmly rooted in our African culture, conditions the mind of everyone, including the women to accept a subordinate role and even frown on their male counterpart who feels comfortable in that role that 'is considered to be for women'. We have had cases of men stripped naked and humiliated because they were found to be 'impersonating a woman' in their manner of dressing, walking or even behaviour. In contemporary Africa, we find that to some extent a woman who portrays masculine ways is looked at as moving up the scales and is tolerated, almost encouraged as long as she can combine the role by settling down eventually and having a husband to answer to. This is viewed the same in lesbian relationships. Lesbians are considered to have not met a 'real' man and that is why they would get involved in a lesbian relationship.

Then there is the debate about modes of dress. Here the discussion may take the following form: a lesbian couple may consist of a predominantly masculine woman and a more versatile or feminine woman. The masculine woman may not enjoy wearing feminine clothes, whilst the versatile woman does not mind it. In the mind of the masculine woman, her self-identity or body image construct orbits around a more 'male-ish' construct – one that she finds appealing and comfortable. She may also choose to keep her hair short, as the case may be. Should she be persuaded to wear more feminine clothes, she will need to adjust in her mind, her perception of her body image and how she is now perceived by others. With the new pseudo-body image, she may in turn feel pressured to follow the more socially accepted modes of feminine behaviour. For one construct supports the other – appearance and behaviour must be seen to be in harmony. After a little while of this pretence, the masculine woman may not find herself comfortable, and she quickly switches back to her usual mode of dress and mannerisms. For her, this fits her genuine inner definition and understanding of herself as well as her place in the world.

And what of transsexual or transgender persons? Here we have individuals who choose to be of the opposite gender, literally. This is where a biologically born man chooses to be a woman or a biological woman will, likewise, choose to be a man. Their wishes seem to go against all reason or logic of the present day disadvantageous implications of 'switching' gender. How else are we to understand a man – with all the trappings of living a good life – wanting to 'down-grade' to a woman? What difficulties and disadvantages await *her* in *her* new body and gender role? Why would a woman wish to have male genitalia whose full functionality is curtailed severely due to the fact that it is more aesthetic than operational? Perhaps those of us who feel well-adjusted to our gender

and biology will never fully understand what sacrifices gender minorities are willing to take and why.

The biggest loser in the politics and economics of the body image in the African setting has always been women. Our physical bodies have been the reason that our traditions founded on patriarchal values have given us a lower status and denied us full participation at all levels. The woman's body is imbedded in the very subject of morality and is therefore an object controlled by others. Real or imagined moral and legal regulation exists to restrict the expression of women's sexuality outside a marriage. A woman who sleeps around is branded a prostitute and labelled 'spoilt' (Human Rights Watch 2001). A label when scrutinized can be equated to a woman who is not controlled by men; if at the very least sexually.

Women who have sex with other women or are in a romantic relationship with other women are often seen as women who have lost direction and will have violence extended to them such as 'corrective rape' to force them to toe the line. They are ridiculed by their families for failure to settle down and have a family, labelled and more often than not denied safe spaces to socialize. According to Kapano Ratele, 'the main aim of such denunciation, assaults and vilification is not to exorcise society of same-sex desires but part of societal forces aimed at controlling all female sexuality and at subordinating female bodies and desires to men's commands' (Tamale 2011: 404).

A woman's body is given economic value depending on its use by others. If she bears several children, her body is valued as a machine that produces the future generation of a clan or society. If her body gives sexual pleasure – whether with elongated labia, infibulated and tightly sewn-up vagina and depending on whether she performs extra duties such as offering companionship, cleaning, cooking, advice or entertainment – her body will be valued accordingly. This further subjugation was noted by CEDAW (1994) as follows: 'The responsibilities that women bear and raise children affect their access to education, employment and other activities related to their personal development. They also impose inequitable burdens of work on women' (General Recommendation No. 21 of the CEDAW Committee, 13th session, 1994, para. 21).

Suppose a woman chooses to have fewer children or none at all. And supposing she chooses to use her brain and energies more in achieving other positive changes in society – because it is not necessarily a condition that all women must bear children in addition to being productive citizens, especially in the modern day. How then can she be viewed by society, her family and herself? The very fact that she has chosen not to

have children may be interpreted that she is lacking in some necessary feminine quality. But in actual fact she is reassessing her options, weighing her resources and the possibilities for the future – essentially becoming empowered and enlightened. This will have multiple implications for her home, her village, the society, its resource allocations and the economy.

Debate beyond Sexuality

These constructs come into play in every aspect of our lives. Men are expected to act in a certain way while women in another and if they do not conform to the roles set by the society, the society lashes out as a way to preserve the status quo.

In countries without laws to protect sex workers, drug users and men who have sex with men, only a fraction of the population has access to prevention. Conversely, in countries with legal protection and the protection of human rights for these people, many more have access to services. As a result, there are fewer infections, less demand for antiretroviral treatment and fewer deaths. Not only is it unethical not to protect these groups; it makes no sense from a health perspective. It hurts all of us (Ban Ki-Moon, UN Secretary-General, August 2008(6).

Politically, governments in Africa will go as far as criminalizing certain acts to ensure that they continue to remain taboo, usually with devastating consequences. A case in point is by refusing to recognize the existence of ‘men who have sex with men’ (MSM). This group has until recently existed underground and was found to be amongst the ‘most at risk population’ in the fight against HIV/AIDS. This denial of MSM and associated stigma has discouraged African researchers from objectively evaluating homosexuality for fear that others would ridicule them and question their sexual orientation (Tapsoba, Moreau, Niang, and Niang 2004). This created a huge gap in the data available for the government to make the necessary concession in its service provision. A problem that was only going to continue if the government and the society refuses to acknowledge their existence and make provisions for them in the health policies. With the acknowledgement of MSM, what would naturally follow is the realization and acceptance of women who sleep with women or in more agreeable terms, ‘women who love women’ – for surely where there is a male form of a less understood phenomenon there must be a female version of the same. If the government then, were to begin understanding not only the sexual practices of these sexual minority groups, but also their socio-cultural and economic aspects, it might see the complexity of the interactions of bodies, images, social and economic functions that each individual brings to the political table and appreciate differences in varied persona.

Conclusion

As societies are becoming increasingly diverse, body image and social constructs may better be understood by studying minority or marginalized social communities and their interrelationships across other constructs. Negative stereotyping of the 'female' gender roles encouraged by the system of the day has been the biggest contributor in fostering intolerance within the society. Consciously challenging the stereotypes is the only way all body images and constructs may find a place in our society. We also need to realize their unique links to various behavioural, emotional, psychological and socio-cultural aspects.

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