

A Magnifying Glass and A Fine-Tooth Comb: Understanding Girls' and Young Women's Sexual Vulnerability, by Mzikazi Nduna. Pretoria: CSA&G Press, Centre for Sexualities, AIDS and Gender, University of Pretoria, 2020.

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We come together in our shared interest and work in sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) to review a body of work that promises to cast a critical eye on an old terrain of work and knowledge. Mzikazi Nduna's *A Magnifying Glass and A Fine-Tooth Comb: Understanding Girls' and Young Women's Sexual Vulnerability* is a welcome review of this terrain in SRHR as it pertains to young girls. In this review, we explore her recent monograph on adolescent sexuality intervention models within a Southern African context.

Ten countries make up the southernmost region of sub-Saharan Africa: Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Across Southern Africa, a person under 18 years is regarded as a minor and generally assumed to be in school. Nonetheless, there are differences within and between these countries in terms of what a "child" is permitted or not permitted to do. For example, in Namibia, childhood protection laws include protection of under-14-year-olds against child labour (Welge, 2020). Investigation also notes that matters of adolescent sexual and reproductive health remain neglected in the country and are difficult to consistently attend to, given the differing views on developmental stages of the child and adolescent (Namibian Ministry of Health and Social Services, 2021). Similarly, it has been noted that many of the policies aimed at adolescent SRHR in Botswana are outdated and rely on assumptions of adolescence that do not address the realities and needs of its young population (UNFPA, 2017–2021). In Zimbabwe, reports indicate that conceptual clarity is required if some adolescents are to not be excluded from the framing of SRHR policies and protection (Remez *et al.*, 2014).

Across Southern Africa, the shared adage that it takes a village to raise a child – alluding to the important and influential role played by the community,

including institutions such as the family, schools, churches, traditional courts, and the media – is a useful starting place to examine how adolescent sexuality and rights are considered. In her book, Nduna introduces the reader to normative sexual association in the context of the Southern African collectivist culture. Nduna suggests that girls and young women need to work twice as hard to be at the same level as boys or young men. Spanning five chapters, this book reflects on some underlying assumptions behind SRHR interventions aimed at girls and young women for preventing early pregnancy and reducing the risk of HIV infection by encouraging “sequencing”. The author begins the conversation by locating modern-day challenges regarding sexual and reproductive health prevention interventions for adolescent girls and young women within the historical context of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid. The background includes a discussion regarding government and vulnerability today.

In locating any discussion of SRHR within the historical-political context of gender and sexuality (including their intersections with race and class), Nduna sets an agenda that is unapologetic about shifting the taken-for-granted notions that underlie many interventions in adolescent sexual and reproductive matters. This agenda is an important one that properly locates the politics of gender and sexuality, highlighting the continued ramifications of a history of racial, gendered, and class oppression in South Africa and the continent more broadly. Adolescent sexuality, particularly as it portends to young black girls, cannot be read outside of these historical-political, cultural, economic, and racial contexts.

The introduction chapter lays the essential groundwork for the next chapters. It presents some of the dominant ontological assumptions underpinning favoured approaches to engaging with adolescent sexuality: the *sequential* and *combination* models of intervention. These ontological assumptions include: 1) *development as acontextual* and 2) *development as apolitical*. These assumptions have been at the core of much feminist theorising and activism in sexuality, reminding us of the significance of historical, political, and economic influences in how sexuality and gender are configured in the state and in everyday lived realities. Nduna’s work joins this debate in its firm situating of adolescent sexuality and policies focused thereon within a broader politics of colonialism, Apartheid, and continued formations of inequality. In so doing, she speaks back to gaps in the literature that continue to engage adolescents as a category for intervention who lack agency, as well as to intervention models that reproduce dynamics of gendered power in their undermining of the politics of gender and sexuality and how these impact young

girls and women. Her ontological positioning is unapologetically critical feminist, adopting a stance toward sexual reproductive health and rights work with the view that “individual agency is located and exercised within structural constraints borne of social, historical, cultural, economic and political contexts” (Nduna, 2020: 5).

The second chapter engages in more depth the sequential and combination models of intervention. The sequential model, for example, adopts an ontological assumption that presents adolescent sexual development as linear. Such an assumption rests on understandings of developmental trajectory that include abstinence from sexual intercourse in order to meet a set of linear and predetermined developmental targets, such as education, employment, marriage, and family. Whether for pragmatic reasons, or because it is rooted in traditional value systems, such a model downplays a myriad set of economic, political, social, and cultural factors that inadvertently reinforce and reproduce gender inequalities for many women and girls. Perhaps not always known by this name, the sequential model remains one of the more popular approaches to youth sexuality in many state and institutional responses and even among lay understandings. The combination model, relying on a more nuanced set of assumptions, incorporates the drive to attain and achieve set developmental goals while still exploring or even engaging in transactional sexual intercourse as a means to an end.

Nduna walks us through these different approaches and dissects their utility and complicity in reproducing configurations of gendered power in society and in relation to young girls and women. The author discusses the conditions in which adolescent girls and young women choose to sequence various goals in their lives in terms of five assumptions. One conclusion emerging clearly in this book is that sexual violence undermines the sequential model. Personal agency is important in terms of enabling adolescent girls and young women to make choices, but women in societies with a high prevalence of gender-based violence are unable to exercise such agency. Exposure to sexual violence is an adverse experience with long-lasting and damaging impact. Furthermore, the conversation in this book points out the need to strengthen the education system in our country to make it more viable, feasible, more practical and sustainable for girls and young women. We resonate with the following quote:

*“Kazi uphi loMiss owathi abafana abapheli sobathola abaryt, masiqede iskole ngfuna azongikhombisa wayesho baphi”* (page 72, figure 2),

translated as “*Where is the miss who said boys are many, we will find the right ones, that we should focus on school...I want her to come show me where they are now?*”

This is a traditional sequential assumption that states that adolescent girls are expected to arrange their expectations, consumption desires, and longings in a particular sequence. The expectation of a disciplined girl engaged in self-preservation is that she will maintain a certain discipline while in school and wait until she is gainfully employed before enjoying the life of a modern woman.

Chapter 3 goes on to critically interrogate the meanings of sexual vulnerability of young women, again challenging apolitical notions and approaches to vulnerability that do not attend to nuances of intersectionality that include race, class, and sexual orientation. In the words of Nduna, “...institutions do not act in isolation: they are also the products of history” (p. 47). The continued presence of history in the present is a political practice that must be considered in how we reproduce ontological assumptions and interventions that approach gender and sexuality as void of racial, class, and geographical inequalities. The chapter discusses these influences of vulnerability in tandem with the socialisation practices that many young girls and women experience as part of growing up. Chapter 4 fleshes out in more depth the different levels of assumptions that are entrenched in the sequential and combination models, engaging each one critically and interrogating its contributions and shortcomings. This is especially useful as a benchmark for development practitioners, policy influencers, education practitioners, and anyone interested in revisiting development models as they pertain to adolescents and adolescent sexuality especially.

The overall style of the book is refreshing in its accessibility. Deviating from a traditional objectivist approach that disembodies the researcher, Nduna speaks to her readers with a sense of personal situatedness. From the way she infuses moments of the dialogue with her personal accounts and experiences as a young woman, to her astute observations as an activist and a health and gender scholar, the reader is treated to a different mode of engagement that highlights truly that the “personal is political”. In dominant knowledge production contexts where facts

and figures and abstract theorising obscure and alienate more than engage, we can almost imagine what it means for a young girl child to read such a work: the voice and lessons of a researcher sharing lived experiences that include a mother anxious about her daughter's risk of teenage pregnancy. In an increasing knowledge production context that speaks on behalf of young women or that alienates how they may engage with experts about their sexual lives, here is a contribution that simultaneously addresses the seasoned experts in the field and the young girl child.

In conclusion, we found this to be an engaging contribution to the terrain of work in SRHR and in relation to adolescent sexuality. Nduna does indeed take a magnifying glass to tried and tested models of intervention, common-sense assumptions of gender and sexuality, and the traditional values that underlie how we think about and work with young girls and young women. The contextual focus of the book spans the schooling context, public health sphere, and the policy and state responses. Part of the book's strength is that it does not only tackle intervention models exclusively but also addresses the issue of how we conceptualise and frame adolescent sexuality as a social problem to begin with. The book suggests that socially constructed shame regarding rape, teenage pregnancy, and HIV infection needs to be addressed to ensure effective responses. If interventions designed for young women operate under conditions of continuing social stigmas regarding these issues, their efficacy will be limited. Read this book if you work in gender and sexuality, are interested in the psycho-sexual well-being of young girls and women, or care about the implications of continued racial, gendered, and class marginalisation in society and as they affect this population group.

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