

# “Our culture does not allow that”: Exploring the challenges of sexuality education in rural communities

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*Within sub-Saharan Africa, AIDS is becoming a greater threat to rural communities due to the high numbers of urban dwellers and migrant labourers who return to their rural villages when they fall ill and due to the lack of information and health services. Previous studies have found a reduced rate of infection among people who have high educational attainment, and thus advocate for education as the vaccine against new HIV infections among the youth. However, very little research has focussed on the delivery of sexuality and HIV&AIDS education in rural classrooms. With teachers positioned at the forefront of the pandemic, especially in rural communities, it is important to understand how teachers experience teaching about sexuality in rural schools. In this paper, I explore the experiences of eight women teachers through focus group discussions. Thematic inductive analysis was used to identify the stumbling blocks within sexuality education classrooms in rural schools. Societal constructions of childhood and nostalgia for past traditional practices were found to be the major challenges to teaching. The findings highlight the need for a sexuality education curriculum that integrates traditional ways of knowing into formal sexuality education in order for it to be effective in reducing further spread of HIV.*

**Keywords:** HIV&AIDS, sexuality education, curriculum, rurality, Lesotho.

## Introduction

An overwhelming 68% of the 34 million people living with HIV&AIDS globally live in developing countries (UNAIDS, 2011). In such countries AIDS is becoming a greater threat in rural areas than in cities. In addition, rural communities bear a higher burden of the cost of HIV&AIDS as many urban dwellers and migrant labourers return to their rural villages when they fall ill. Unfortunately, prevention information and health services are often less available in rural areas than in cities. Hence rural people are less likely to access these resources against HIV and, if they fall ill, less likely to get care (UNAIDS, 2010).

Responding to the challenges posed by HIV, Hargreaves, Bonnell, Boler, Boccia, Birdthistle, Fletcher, Pronyk and Glynn (2008) argue that education is a ‘vaccine’ against HIV due to relatively lower rates of infection among people with higher levels of educational participation. With sub-Saharan Africa bearing the brunt of new HIV infections and education being hailed as the vaccine against HIV infections, UNICEF (2007) advocated for the inclusion of Life Skills Education in the curriculum for sub-Saharan African countries as a niche for sexuality education. This has placed teachers, especially those in rural communities, at the forefront of the pandemic as prevention agents. Thus it is important for curriculum developers within developing countries hard-hit by HIV to be aware of the factors that affect the effectiveness of school-based sexuality education, such that these can be taken into consideration during curriculum planning. It is also important for teacher training institutions to be aware of the challenges faced by teachers in the classroom in terms of addressing sexuality education such that training programmes can be tailor-made to the specific needs of teachers and the contexts in which they will be teaching.

This paper draws from a postgraduate research project that aimed at exploring women teachers’ experiences of teaching sexuality education in rural Lesotho schools in the age of HIV and AIDS in order to identify the factors creating impossibilities for their teaching. This article, therefore, aims to present and discuss some of the stumbling blocks against effective teaching of sexuality education in rural schools. The rural villages where the study was conducted are characterised by homesteads of thatch-roof huts surrounded by aloe-plant fencing and kraals for livestock. The villagers are very traditional and thus

still adhere to most Basotho cultural practices. This set-up is not different from rural contexts in other African countries, especially South Africa, and the Basotho cultural practices are similar to those of most indigenous groups that populate South Africa. Thus, through the lessons learnt from the Lesotho context, the South African education system can possibly reshape its offering of sexuality education for rural communities.

## **Rural areas and schooling**

Rurality is not an easily defined concept. According to De Gennaro and Fantini (2002), being rural as opposed to urban is an attribute that people easily attach to a place based on their own perceptions, which may include low population density, abundance of farmland or remoteness from urban areas. The common assumption is that rural areas are more likely to have community contexts conducive to tighter social control, less anonymity and the development of pro-social peer groups and family cohesion. Because of these attributes, rural communities are expected to exhibit more conforming behaviours. On the contrary, urban areas are more likely expected to display characteristics that create community contexts in which opportunities for greater involvement in deviant peer groups and weakened family control occur (Wilson & Donnermeyer, 2006).

Discussing rurality and schooling, Corbett (2007) documents the ironies and contradictions of formal education and rurality. He demonstrates how education is implicated in the depopulation and decline of rural areas as a consequence of increasing urbanity fuelled by global forces. Challenging Corbett (2007), Kelly (2009) argues that an education that encourages an investigation into the nature of people's affinities and attachments, especially to rural areas, is an ethical project. She argues against an education that romanticises or zealously mobilises attachments to rurality. According to Kelly (2009), when we understand the structures that constitute our melancholia and nostalgia towards a lost rurality, we are better able to adopt a critical stance that embraces mourning as well as new opportunities. Thus, as Kelly argues, education in rural areas must create the conditions for students to leave their home places and travel intellectually and emotionally within themselves and across the borders of their own communities and elsewhere in search of the forces that constitute who they are culturally, emotionally and socially.

However, many teachers in rural schools are un- or underqualified, making it impossible for them to deliver the kind of education that could be transformative of rural contexts and rural people (Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2005). According to the Nelson Mandela Foundation (2005), a high proportion of teachers in rural schools cite lack of cooperation by parents and learners, shortage of teachers and poor infrastructure as the main stumbling blocks towards quality education. Despite these challenges, parents in rural communities want an education that is "useful to them and their children in making a living and recognizing and appreciating their history and culture" (Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2005:98). Thus, in terms of sexuality education, rural communities would want a sexuality education that recognises and appreciates rural histories and cultures. In order to do this, educators must understand and appreciate the history of sexuality education within rural communities.

## **Sexuality education in rural villages**

To set the context for the arguments raised in this paper, it is important to understand the traditional practices of the Basotho in relation to sexuality issues. Only young people who were of marriageable age were engaged in discussions on sexuality. Basotho boys learnt about their bodies from elder brothers out in the wild while shepherding livestock. Upon reaching adolescence, young boys were expected to join the traditional initiation school. During the initiation period the young men were circumcised and then taught about sex (Mangoela, 2001). Upon graduation from the initiation school, the young men were expected to choose brides from the village girls, preferably those who had been initiates, and get married as soon as possible. The immediate marriage was to prevent the initiates from practising their newly found sexual skills out of wedlock (Makatjane, 2002; Sekese, 2002), and to ensure that those who have been initiated into sex do not mix with non-initiates, as it was believed that they would corrupt their sexual innocence (Motalingoane-Khau, 2010).

Basotho girls also learnt about their bodies while out collecting firewood with friends or doing laundry in nearby rivers. Older sisters and aunts taught girls how to pull their inner labia at an early age before their first menstruation (Thetela, 2002). It was believed that menstruation made it difficult for the labia to elongate upon pulling (cf. Arnfred, 2007). It was argued that elongating the inner labia increased *mocheso* (heat) in women and this made sex more pleasurable for men, while at the same time reducing the sexual excitability of women so that they could not desire sex (Khaou, 2009). In addition to covering the vaginal opening, the elongated labia were supposed to increase a man’s sexual pleasure by elongating the passage through which the penis passed, and was considered as the most effective way of “winning the favours of a husband” (Parikh, 2005:134). Thus labial elongation was used as a contraceptive measure and a way of regulating female sexuality.

Adolescent girls were expected to attend the traditional initiation school where they were taught about sex and how to become good wives (Matsela, 1979). What actually happened during the traditional initiation ceremony was labelled as *koma*<sup>1</sup> and was never revealed (see Paroz, 1993). Mturi and Hennink (2005:133) also observe that “little is known about the content of the sex education curriculum at initiation schools as these schools are not regulated ...”. Paroz (1993) writes that any initiate who dared talk about the practice of initiation was supposed to be killed before they could corrupt the innocence of those who had never been to the traditional school. This was partly because anyone who had never been to the traditional initiation school was treated as a perpetual child irrespective of their age, and hence did not need to know about adult issues such as those taught at the school.

Considering the above, it is important to explore how rural communities perceive formal sexuality education in relation to traditional ways of teaching about sexuality. This would provide an understanding of the current negative reception of sexuality education in rural Lesotho schools. Thus, in this paper the question: “What challenges do women teachers face when teaching sexuality education in rural schools?” will be explored.

## Methodology

Feminist research brings to light the practical and lived experiences of women in everyday life through problematising the meanings associated with the complexities of women’s daily lives (Grumet & Stone, 2000). Thus, while I present and problematise the women’s lived experiences of teaching sexuality education together with mine, I have valued their voices in the meanings they make of their experiences.

This article draws from data produced through focus group discussions that were prompted by participants’ memory accounts, drawings and photo-narratives of their experiences of teaching sexuality education and their positioning as women teachers. Focus groups are important in the advancement of social justice for women because they can serve to expose and validate women’s everyday experiences of subjugation and their individual and collective survival and resistance strategies (Madriz, 2000).

Participants for this study were eight purposively selected Basotho women teachers, aged between 32 and 42 years, with more than five years’ teaching experience. The selection was based on the women being science teachers who are teaching sexuality education within the Life Skills Education curriculum. Participants were informed of the aims of the study and were assured that their contributions would be treated with confidentiality. I assured the women that their participation in the study is voluntary and that they can withdraw at any point when they feel uncomfortable, or withdraw parts of their contributions which they feel uncomfortable disclosing to a wider public. I also sought their permission to audio-record the discussions which were later transcribed *verbatim* (Patton, 2002). Pseudonyms have been used to present the women teachers’ stories.

The data was analysed using thematic inductive analysis, whereby themes are generated from the data and coded for meaning (Patton, 2002). I familiarised myself with the data through *verbatim* transcription of the discussions. The transcribing was followed by what Marshall and Rossman (2006) describe as immersion in the data, which involved reading and re-reading through the data. I then generated codes using open or data-driven coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006) where the data are opened for categories, patterns or themes emerging from the manifest content and then organised into meaningful groups. This was followed

by generating themes through axial or second-level coding (Sarantakos, 2005) which involves identifying relationships between and among the generated codes. The themes were then reviewed and refined so that the “data within the themes should cohere together meaningfully, while there should be identifiable distinctions between themes” (Braun & Clarke, 2006:91). After generating a satisfactory list of themes from the data, I selected higher order themes with theoretical saturation and high explanatory power and named them in a way they were to be presented as research findings. I also analysed the data within these themes to ensure the internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity of themes. The participants’ words have been used *verbatim* when presenting the findings.

## Findings and discussion

### Societal beliefs regarding sexuality

Many societies still operate within the discourse of childhood sexual innocence (Epstein & Johnson, 1998), and Lesotho is no exception. Thus teachers are afraid of being labelled as the ones who corrupt children’s innocence through sexuality education, despite the apparent need for such an education. When one of the women teachers was faced with a question of whether donkeys enjoy sex like human beings, she could not provide a response because she would also have had to address sexual pleasure as part of human sexuality. With parents believing in childhood sexual innocence, this was a challenge because talking to children about the pleasures of sex would, according to her, be tantamount to promoting teenage and premarital promiscuity.

*I could not respond to that question ... how could I tell them that sex was pleasurable? Parents would accuse me of leading their children astray. ('Mathuso)*

*It is not easy talking to the children because when they get home they tell their parents and we get in trouble ... one time the chief accused me of being against Basotho morality and that I had to be disciplined ... just because I had taught about sex in class. ('Mathato)*

In addition to teachers’ fears of addressing issues of sexual pleasure within the classroom, the curriculum is also silent on sexual pleasure and desire. Programmes existing in schools are silent on issues of pleasure and desire, while emphasising risk and vulnerability and positioning women as victims of male sexual violence (Ingham, 2005; Jolly, 2007; Klugman, 2000; Petchesky, 2005). According to these scholars, even in cases where sexual desire is discussed, it is only related to heterosexuality while other sexual identities are hardly mentioned. In the case of Lesotho, this happens because homosexuality, supposedly, does not exist (Epprecht, 2000; Kendall, 1999). With the current scarcity of information reaching rural villages, rural communities in Lesotho do not have much knowledge regarding any other sexuality except heterosexuality. Thus any mention of homosexuality positions teachers as deviant and creates difficulties for them to address it in the classroom. While Basotho people within towns are becoming more open to different sexual identities and are embracing sexual diversity, there are still tensions that need to be addressed in relation to homosexuality in rural villages.

The fear of going against societal norms and morals makes it difficult for teachers to effectively facilitate sexuality education. They argue that:

*Anyone who talks about sex is regarded as a bad person...anyone who talks to them about sex leads them astray ... ('Mathuso)*

*Yes, any adult talking to children about sex is someone with no morals. ('Maneo)*

*We still live in communities that regard sex and sexuality as issues to be kept a secret or taboo... the names they give us for teaching about it are horrible ... ('Mathato)*

*My school principal asked me to stop teaching against the beliefs of the church. He said if I wanted to keep my job I should align with abstinence teachings and nothing else ... ('Mathato)*

The rejection of anyone who dares talk about sexual issues to children presents intergenerational sex talk as taboo. Within Lesotho rural communities it is believed that only those who have been to the traditional initiation school have the moral standing and capability to effectively address issues of sexuality with the youth. This is reflected in this statement: “*Mathisa ana a rutang bana ba rona a fosahetse. A bua ntho lisele le bana ...*” (These non-initiates are a bad influence to our children because they teach them bad things). It is worth noting that in Basotho communities issues of sex are referred to as ‘bad things’. The implication, therefore, of the above statement is that non-initiates are not capable of properly handling issues of sexuality. This becomes problematic for formal sexuality education because most Basotho people with high educational attainment have not been to the traditional school.

Apart from teachers being regarded as unfit for the task of teaching sexuality education, parents within the rural communities contradict the manner and content of sexuality teachings offered in schools:

*You tell the students that diseases and pregnancy can be avoided through safer sex practices such as using condoms or practising non-penetrative sex and the parents tell them something else. (‘Mathato)*

*Yes. The children tell us that diseases are caused by witchcraft and therefore can be healed using combinations from traditional healers. Arguing against this sometimes proves fruitless ... (Matumo)*

*The thing is who to listen to. I would be confused too if I was a student. Traditional healers do heal most ailments within the village ... we cannot deny that. (‘Mathato)*

*I think we need a meeting point between what we teach and what the parents believe in ... (‘Matsebo)*

Parents are not necessarily against sexuality education but are against the content and how it is taught. While rural communities and the formal curriculum are not in agreement on what should be taught in sexuality education classrooms, students miss out on vital information that could save their lives. Mitchell, Walsh and Larkin (2004) argue that this is as good as gambling with the lives of the youth. Rural villages have limited authoritative sources of information whose use should be maximised. Instead of communities challenging teachers’ authority as sources of information, community leaders and teachers should collaborate to provide sexuality and HIV information to the youth.

One reality of rural livelihoods is that everyone knows everybody’s business within the community (see Wilson & Donnermeyer, 2006). Hence working and living within the same rural community creates additional challenges for the women teachers because they have to ensure that when they arrive home at the end of the day, after teaching such controversial issues, they are still accepted as good members of the community. They feel that if they were staying in a different community from the one where they are teaching, it would be easier on them to teach about sexuality because they would not have to meet their students or be confronted by angry parents after school within the community (see Peltzer & Promtussananon, 2003).

## Nostalgia for past cultural norms

The current state of HIV infections, teen pregnancies and parenthood among Basotho youth has led to a situation which invokes in adults a nostalgic glance to the “good old days” and past cultural norms. There is a popular Basotho call - “*Sekoele Basotho*” – which asks for going back to basics, re-establishing past cultural practices, which would curb the spread of HIV and teen pregnancies (*Public-Eye Online*, 2009). This call and inherent nostalgia, however, do not take into consideration the current state of youth sexuality and the challenges young people face. The participants in this study state parents’ argument as “in our days we were not taught about sex at school and we managed just fine”. Parents wish for their children to be taught past cultural practices which would instil moral values, resilience and pride in the children. They believe that these should be given equal or greater attention within the curriculum instead of the current sexuality education content.

One such practice that is being advocated for is the elongation of inner labia for girls. Within the Basotho culture, labial elongation is a rite of passage into womanhood (Maitse, 2000; Thetela, 2002). The teachers argue that their school communities believe in this practice and want students to be taught about it at school to reduce the high rates of pregnancy. The curriculum requires students to be taught about modern contraceptive devices and safer sex practices while parents believe elongated inner labia is the best contraceptive required for girls. Teachers who do not believe in labial elongation, or those who do not know about it, face difficulties in addressing this issue in class especially because it is not in the syllabus.

Parents are also advocating for traditional male circumcision which is done in the initiation schools. They argue that traditional initiation schools are a better setting for teaching about sexuality than modern sexuality education classrooms. The value placed upon the initiation school in rural Lesotho villages and the perpetual child status imposed upon those who have never attended it make such schools irresistible to youth who want to be accepted within their communities as good citizens. This creates a challenge for formal schooling as every winter male students leave formal schooling to attend the traditional initiation schools and most of them never return to formal schooling. This also creates a challenge for teachers as the curriculum requires them to teach about medical male circumcision in which rural communities do not believe.

On coming back from the initiation schools the students are regarded as adults irrespective of their age. The women teachers argue that boys who have been to the traditional initiation school pose problems in formal schooling, especially if they are taught by someone who has never been an initiate:

*The boys are impossible ... one of them told me that he could not be ordered around by a girl ... he believed that I should respect him in class as I had never attended initiation school. ('Mathato)*

*Yes ... they also believe they know all there is to know about sex and they hardly listen in the classroom ... I am scared of teaching about sexuality in a classroom that has initiates. ('Matumo)*

*Me too ... they look at you like you are naked and they also become very rowdy in class disturbing the other children. ('Matau)*

*I think they are not taught everything about sex in the initiation schools ... If only they listened to us they would spare themselves from many dangers. ('Matsepo)*

These discussions show the apparent contradictions between the traditional initiation school and formal schooling. They also highlight the challenges this poses for both students and teachers in rural Lesotho sexuality education classrooms. The high pregnancy rates among rural youth prove their sexual activity and therefore, according to the teachers, it is not realistic to deny them information on contraception and safer sex practices. However, until parents are accepting of modern contraception and its inclusion in the sexuality education curriculum and teachers can address indigenous contraception methods in classrooms, Basotho youth in rural schools will have a knowledge deficit on this important aspect of their sexuality.

## **Conclusion: So what?**

Human beings are sexual beings irrespective of gender or age, even though acknowledging human sexuality within classrooms remains a challenge for teachers in many schools. While the stories unpacked in this paper are from a few women teachers in rural Lesotho classrooms, they highlight some common challenges faced by teachers tasked with addressing a private matter such as sexuality in the public domain of the classroom. The women teachers' gendered identities and socialisation determine how they acknowledge and address sexuality discourses within the school setting in relation to societal norms. As women and mothers they are expected to protect children from the supposed corruption of sexual knowledge while as teachers they are expected to address sexuality education freely. While some of the women are challenging societal beliefs in relation to youth sexuality, they do this at the risk of their social standing within communities.



The sexuality education curriculum taught in schools does not acknowledge traditional ways of knowing regarding human sexuality, thus creating further impossibilities for effective teaching. As the teachers argue, there should be linkages between tradition and formal schooling. The experiences of these women teachers highlight the need to consider the gender dynamics and cultural politics within the schooling context if sexuality education is to be effective. The taboo nature of sex talk combined with the nostalgia for past practices need to be addressed by all education stakeholders such that rural youth benefit from sexuality education classrooms. It is important for curriculum planners to interrogate traditional practices within their communities in order to adopt or adapt those which prove beneficial for rural communities and ensure that there is a linkage between traditional and formal sexuality education. There is also a need for schools to use parents and traditional leaders within communities as resources in sexuality education in order to reconcile the two.

Rurality has always been associated with lack and characterised by loss (Corbett, 2007; Kelly, 2009). However, rural communities have always survived irrespective of the loss or lack, proving rural communities’ resilience and determination to make it with what they have. Thus, an education for rurality should view lack and loss as opportunities to re-examine old certainties, provoke new knowledge and forge new relations. Unless rural communities have a sense of ownership of the curriculum, unless the curriculum reflects aspects of what people believe in, and unless the sexuality education offered in schools is what is needed by people within rural villages, then school-based sexuality education in rural classrooms will not have the desired effect on youth.

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## Endnote

1. According to Paroz (1993: 184), *Koma* means initiation secret, or a special song sung during the night when boys are being initiated.

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