

IDS POLICY BRIEFING

The latest development issues for policymakers
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Sexuality and Development

Development has generally treated sexuality as a problem – considering it only in relation to population control, family planning, disease and violence. However, sexuality has far broader impacts on people's well-being and ill-being. Using Robert Chambers' framework of the multiple dimensions of poverty, this *IDS Policy Briefing* highlights the many links between sexuality and poverty and suggests constructive ways to engage with sexuality as a development issue. It looks at how we can take a broader and more positive approach to sexuality, and how we can foster an environment that enables people to live out healthier, happier sexualities free from violence and fear. It gives examples of action which shifts the focus from negative to positive, from violence to pleasure, and shows how development can approach sexuality through health, human rights and sexual rights, gender, and religion.

Although sexuality and gender is a defining characteristic of each and every one of us, development policy and practice has tended to ignore sexuality, or deal with it only as a problem in relation to population, family planning, disease and violence. The idea of sex as a form of pleasure, intimacy, closeness, fun, love or indeed a way to survive the harshness of economic circumstances simply does not enter the picture. However, the need to respond to HIV/AIDS and the adoption of human rights approaches have created openings for a franker debate on sexuality and more resources in this area. But all too often, this has simply sustained the perspective that sex and sexuality are a problem that development agencies need to tackle, rather than a 'super force' that can be channelled to bring about positive well-being.



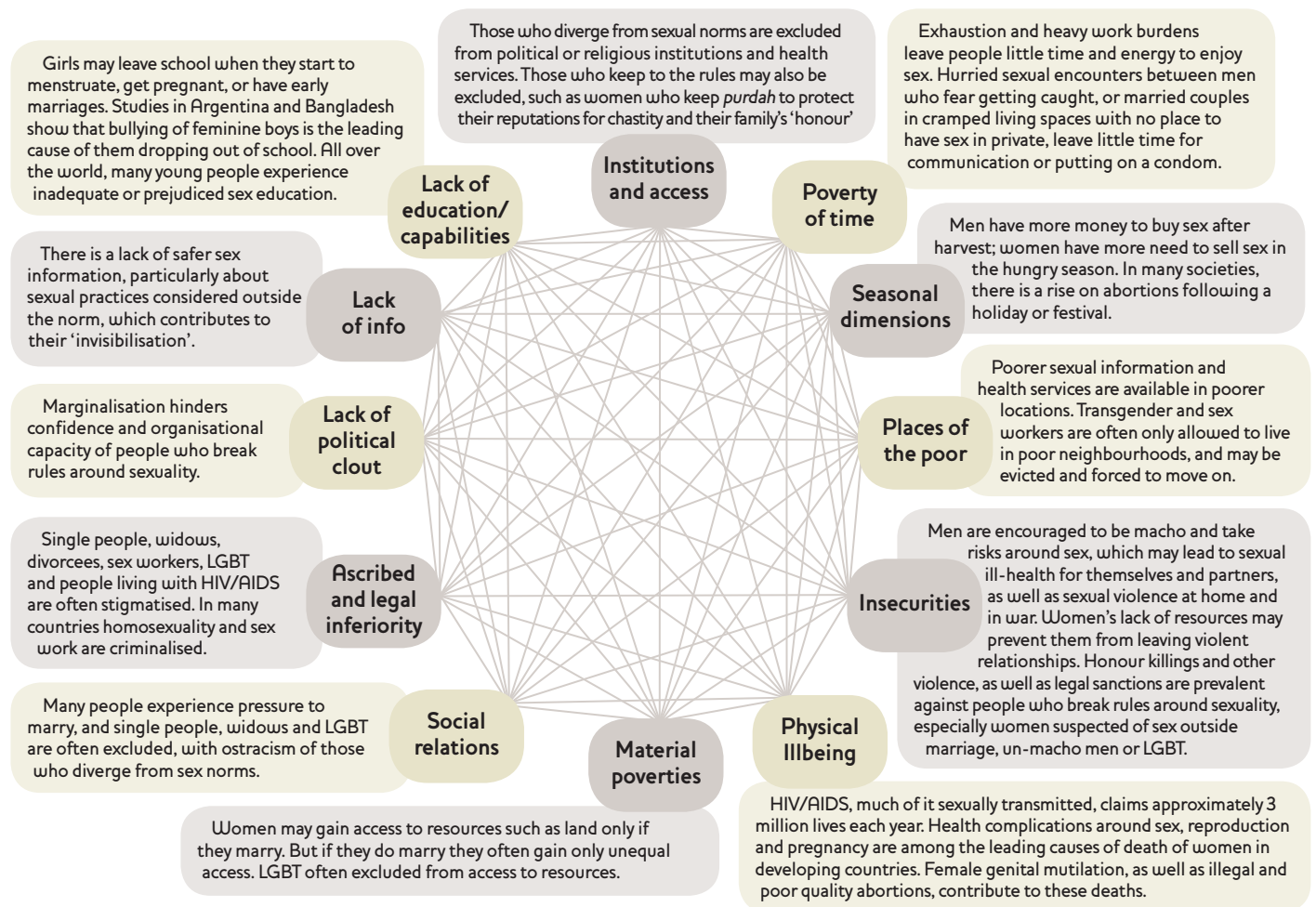
What is sexuality?

Sexuality is a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors.

Source: World Health Organization, *Working Definitions of Sexual Health*

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Figure 1 Web of poverty's disadvantages – with examples related to sexuality



Is sexuality a development issue?

Development should be about increasing people's well-being, particularly of those who are poor or marginalised. So where does sexuality come in? Social and legal norms and economic structures based on sexuality have a huge impact on people's physical security, bodily integrity, health, education, mobility, and economic status. In turn, these factors impact on their opportunities to live out happier healthier sexualities. The intersections between sexuality and poverty can be analysed using Robert Chambers' Web of Poverty's Disadvantages. Some examples from a variety of contexts are cited in Figure 1 to illustrate the connections.

How should development approach the issue of sexuality?

If sexuality makes such a difference to our ill- or well-being, then it is important that development organisations include sexuality in their analysis of local contexts and the realities of people's lives, and that they take action accordingly. How can this be done?

Health services and health education is one important entry point given the scale and impacts of sexual and reproductive

Achieving the Millennium Development Goals

Supporting better sexual health, education, and rights are clearly important to the realisation of MDG 3 (gender equality), MDG 5 (maternal health) and MDG 6 (combating HIV/AIDS). However, as the close relation between sexuality and poverty illustrated in Figure 1 shows, positive action on sexuality is essential to the realisation of the MDGs more broadly – in particular MDG 1 which is to halve world poverty by 2015. Tackling the funding conditionalities related to abstinence, abortion and sex work being imposed by the US Government, is also relevant to MDG 8 (global partnership for development).

ill-health, and the lack of accessible services for treatment and prevention. Those who break rules around sexuality such as women having sex outside of marriage and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people (LGBT) face particular obstacles in accessing appropriate services. An example of an initiative being taken to respond to such exclusion is the DFID-supported 'Chengdu

Gay Men's Community Care Organisation' in China, which trains doctors to offer appropriate and respectful treatment for men who have sex with men.

Human rights/sexual rights: Rights-based approaches are increasingly seen as useful in seeking to ensure that development projects and programmes are guided by the priorities and needs of the primary stakeholders. Many people are denied their basic rights by social rules around sexuality, whether they conform to or diverge from these. Supporting rights around sexuality could help redress such injustices.

This has been done at the level of the UN and international agreements, such as the Cairo Convention endorsed at the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 which understands reproductive health to include that 'people are able to have a satisfying and safe sex life' and the Beijing Platform for Action from the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 which asserts women's rights to 'have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality'. It is also being done at many other levels. For example, the organisation Women for Women's Human Rights in Turkey has run a human rights

A definition of sexual rights

Sexual rights embrace human rights that are already recognised in national laws, international human rights documents and other consensus documents. These include the right of all persons, free of coercion, discrimination and violence, to:

- the highest attainable standard of health in relation to sexuality, including access to sexual and reproductive health care services;
- seek, receive and impart information in relation to sexuality;
- sexuality education;
- respect for bodily integrity;
- choice of partner;
- decide to be sexually active or not;
- consensual sexual relations;
- consensual marriage;
- decide whether or not, and when, to have children; and
- pursue a satisfying, safe and pleasurable sexual life.

The responsible exercise of human rights requires that all persons respect the rights of others.

Source: 'Gender and Reproductive Rights', Department of Reproductive Health and Research, World Health Organization

training course for over 4000 women which includes discussion of 'sexual pleasure as a woman's human right', one of the most popular parts of the course! They have also succeeded in bringing about a major reform of the national penal code so that it now supports women's sexual and bodily integrity. At a regional level in the Middle East and South East Asia, the Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies works to promote rights around sexuality.



Transgender activists in Bangladesh ask what spaces there are for them in the system of male and female sexes

Gender: Gender power relations have a major influence on our lives, including our sexualities. This is the case whether for women, men or transgender people, although how we are influenced will differ according to our gender, as well as many other factors such as family position, class, race, religion.

In many societies, sexual norms encourage men to be macho and take risks and women to be passive and ignorant. This makes safer sex which pleases both partners more difficult.

Girl Power Initiative in Nigeria tries to counteract such influences by training adolescent girls to be more knowledgeable, confident and assertive in making their own choices around sex. Similarly, Programme H, a collaboration between four NGOs in Brazil and Mexico, works with young men in low-income settings to challenge oppressive gender norms around sexuality. They organise young men's groups, and have run a successful social marketing campaign promoting the idea that it's cool to be gender equitable, non-violent, use a condom and be a good father.

Gender norms also penalise LGBT and intersex people, who may be seen as neither 'proper men' or 'proper women'. In many parts of the world, transgender and intersex people are made invisible. In other regions, such as South Asia and Latin America, there are more visible and established transgender cultures and communities (which sometimes include intersex people), although they are often stigmatised and harassed, and their options for earning a livelihood may be limited to sex work. However, LGBT and intersex people are increasingly mobilising for rights, and some development programmes are beginning to take on these issues.



Catholics for a Free Choice poster campaign from USA

Religion: Many fundamentalist schools of belief presume only particular forms of sexuality are acceptable – generally heterosexual sex within marriage – while anything outside this is immoral. Such thinking is influencing US development policy and funding with new conditions being imposed, including dissociation from abortion services, promotion of abstinence and condemnation of sex work. Consequences are wide-ranging such as closing of clinics and undermining of safer sex education programmes. These stances have been challenged on many levels – for example Brazil's rejection of US\$40 million of US HIV/AIDS funding due to the conditionality on condemning sex work, and last year's World Aids Day statement by 22 European Union member states dissociating themselves from the abstinence agenda promoted by the USA.

However, within each religion there is diversity both in interpretations of religious texts, and in the ways individuals practise their faiths on a day-to-day level. Much work has already been done to reconcile religious frameworks with greater tolerance for different kinds of consensual sexuality – for example Catholics for a Free Choice works internationally to promote Catholic thinking and teaching which supports women's moral agency and free choice around abortion. In some Muslim contexts a pragmatic rather than moral approach is taken to 'forbidden' sexualities. In the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, for example, the National Aids control programme has supported peer education initiatives among men who have sex with men and sex workers, as well as working with religious leaders, to promote safer sex

“ Sexual rights are more than the right to freedom from violence and coercion – they include the right to seek pleasure and fulfilment and an enabling environment in which to do so. ”

From negative to positive, from violence to pleasure: Development work has tended to focus on sexuality only in relation to disease and violence, on the risks and dangers rather than the pleasures and fulfilments. This one-sided emphasis on the negative reinforces the stereotypes and fears around sexuality that prevent people from making active choices to be safer and choose the sexual relations they want rather than those imposed by dominating partners or social expectations. How could development programmes instead take a more empowering and positive approach that creates possibilities for change?

Promoting sexual well-being and pleasure is no simple thing. Opportunities to seek or even think about sexual pleasure, as well as how it is experienced, are influenced by many factors – including gender power relations, class, race, and the globalised media. Nevertheless, in spite of the complexities, there are ways forward. On a conceptual level, the issues are being explored in such forums as the on-line discussion on ‘Sexual pleasure, Sexuality and Rights’ hosted by the South and South East Asia Resource Centre on Sexuality, and in the Journal ‘Feminist Africa’. On a practical level many interventions are already promoting the pleasures of safer sex: some churches in Africa are promoting better sex among married couples to discourage people having sex outside of marriage; in Kerala, India, a sex workers forum organises an annual ‘festival of pleasure’ to promote sex workers’ rights and safety; the International Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS has produced ‘Sexual Healing’ a book that combines erotica and health messages for HIV-positive women to ensure that pleasure remains accessible to them after diagnosis; and numerous interventions aim to eroticise and make more pleasurable both male and female condoms in order to promote their use.

Ways forward

Development policymakers and practitioners have allowed their own prejudices and embarrassments to block the realisation of the connections between sexual rights and well-being. This tendency is now reinforced by a conservative backlash around sexuality spurred by fundamentalist influences. At the same time, however, new possibilities are opening up with the urgency of responding to the HIV/AIDS crisis, and with increasing activism around sexuality worldwide. If they are to effectively promote health and well-being, policymakers must now engage with sexuality. The following steps are needed:

- To recognise sexual rights as human rights, and repeal repressive laws, penal codes and personal codes. The Beijing and Cairo conventions constitute good starting points for this. Human rights approaches offer a promising basis for poverty, health and social policies and programmes to address sexuality as a development issue.
- To realise that sexual rights are more than the right to be free from violence and coercion – they also include the right to seek pleasure and fulfilment and an enabling environment in which to do so. A positive approach to sexuality and health will empower people to make safer happier choices around sex and relationships.
- To challenge gender norms which make men macho, women passive, and transgender people marginalised. This can be done by promoting and supporting more equitable and fulfilling heterosexual relationships, and countering prejudice and marginalisation of those with same-sex sexualities and transgender identities.
- To work with the more progressive strands of mainstream faiths and religions to promote enabling and supportive views of human sexuality.

Further reading

Material from the ‘Realising Sexual Rights’ workshop, IDS, September 2005, and links to other IDS work on sexuality www.ids.ac.uk/ids/particip/workshops/rsexrights.html

Ros Petchesky (2005) ‘Rights of the Body and Perversions of War: Sexual Rights and Wrongs Ten Years Past Beijing’, *International Social Science Journal*, special issue on Beijing+10

Anna Runeborg (2002) ‘Sexuality: A Super Force. Young People, Sexuality and Rights in the Era of HIV/AIDS’, Hanoi: Sida and UNICEF Vietnam, available at: www.unicef.org/vietnam/English-Sexuality_a_super_force.PDF

Siyanda Gender and Development Quick Guide to Sexuality www.siyanda.org (search ‘sexuality’).

Credits

This briefing paper was written by Susie Jolly with inputs from Andrea Cornwall and Hilary Standing. It was funded by the DFID-funded Research Programme Consortium on ‘Realising Rights: improving sexual and reproductive health in poor and vulnerable populations’ (www.realising-rights.org) and draws on a workshop on ‘Realising Sexual Rights’ held at IDS in September 2005 funded by DFID, IDS, the Ford Foundation, SDC, Sida and the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

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