Not So Strange Bedfellows: Sexuality and international development

ABSTRACT Susie Jolly in conversation with three activists whose work relates to sexuality, Henry Armas (GRUPAL, The Working Group for Participation, Peru), Pinar Ilkkaracan (Women for Women’s Human Rights, Turkey), Veronica Magar (CARE, Asia Region) explores the links between sexual rights and international development. The conversations are based on the discussion she facilitated at a panel on sexual rights and development, with the aim of exploring development – sexuality connections and the possibilities for more positive and empowering approaches to sexuality.

KEYWORDS pleasure; human rights; mobility; democracy; violence; norms; desire

Should the development industry be working on sexuality?

Susie – There is a myth that the development industry\(^1\) is not engaged with sexuality – and some fears that if it does engage with these intimate areas of our lives, it will do harm. In fact, the development industry has always dealt with sexuality related issues, although usually only implicitly, and negatively, in relation to population control, disease or violence. Now the need to respond to HIV/AIDS, and the increasing legitimacy of human rights approaches in development, are creating spaces for more open discussion of sexuality, however, many in the development industry still see sexuality as secondary to ‘survival’ issues such as poverty. Clean water and having enough to eat are seen as more important than sex and love. There are many ways to respond to this concern.

First, sexuality itself is a survival issue. A woman can be stoned in Nigeria for suspected adultery, or die from honour killing in Jordan. Men have been murdered in Mexico for being gay, and transgender people killed in the USA. Even if you escape such violence, norms around sexuality can restrict your opportunities to make a livelihood. Women’s mobility is restricted due to fears of sexual violence, as well as ideas about chastity and reputation. Employers discriminate against those who are gay or transgender.

On the other hand, norms and practices around sexuality may create economic opportunities, for example if you become a sex worker or marry a rich man.

Another response is to ask why the development industry focuses so much on material poverty. Poverty is not just about material deprivation, but about ill-being more
broadly, including the misery caused by family or social rejection for failing to conform to norms around sexuality. Development needs to tackle injustice along with poverty.

How do you respond to the argument that sexuality is secondary to poverty?

Veronica – Sexuality is a survival issue, and you see this in relation to mobility. Women’s mobility is restricted worldwide due to fears they will jeopardize their chastity or the family reputation if they move around too freely. I once read, men’s honour is located between women’s legs! These restrictions make women vulnerable in many ways. When the Tsunami came, and women’s clothes were ripped off by the wave they curled up in shame instead of trying to get away. Those that observed purdah were disoriented and didn’t know where to go outside the boundaries of their home so did not run. In the women’s movement and development interventions we promote greater mobility for women, but fail to tackle the factors underlying this restriction, which are to do with sexuality.

Should development focus on poverty? CARE’s main goal is poverty alleviation. There are good reasons for this, but also bad ones. CARE staff are not necessarily western, but are often upper class, and used to working with people seen as poor and victims. Working with ‘poor defenceless women’ keeps us in a position of power. A new approach is needed. We need to recognize that we can learn something from all people. This is one of the aims of CARE’s sex worker programme in Bangladesh – and it is happening. One CARE staff member said ‘I learnt so much from the sex workers. It has completely changed my sex life with my husband’. That’s transformation!

Pinar – Oppression of women’s and girls’ sexuality lies at the core of several women’s human rights violations related to development. Aside from the blatant violations such as honour crimes or female genital mutilation there are less obvious practices that are directly related to development targets. For example, look at girl children in Turkey. There are still hundreds and thousands of girls who are not sent to school because there is a fear that they will choose their own husbands, and not accept marriages arranged by their parents – thus costing the family both honour and the bride price.

Sexuality is a crosscutting issue that lies at the heart of disempowerment of women. So if women are to be empowered, work on sexuality is essential.

Henry – In Peru, many transgender people are excluded from the national health system because some doctors refuse to care for those dressed in the ‘wrong gender’. They also face discrimination in access to work. And there’s forced migration when lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people are thrown out by their families or move to cities to escape stigma from their communities. We had the painful experience of more than 10 years of terrorism in Peru, when lesbians and gay men were murdered and labels placed on their bodies saying ‘that’s how homosexuals die’. Peru later established a Truth Commission which published its Final Report in twelve volumes and seven annexes in a work that took two years, documenting the violations of human rights, however only one page talked about these kind of crimes.

I think the problem is ghettoization of different themes. The links are often not made between poverty and exclusion, and between feminism, human rights and LGBTI issues. Donors are surprised that we, an established NGO working on participation, work with LGBTI groups. Our discussions around citizenship, participation and power have helped us to bridge the different areas. The links become clearer if you think about poverty as a lack of liberties. What is needed is not just having money in your pocket, but to be able to hold the hand of the person you desire in the street.

How can the development industry move towards a more positive approach to sexuality?

Susie – The development industry has always dealt with sexuality, but usually only in an implicit and negative way, with sexuality still being seen as a problem. How can we move towards more positive, empowering approaches to sexual-
ity? Can we move away from scare tactics towards promoting the right to seek pleasure and a more enabling environment for doing so?

Sexual pleasure is no simple thing. How we experience pleasure is influenced by all sorts of factors – including gender power relations, class, race, the globalization media and the market. Nevertheless, several development agencies, NGOs and activists are beginning to talk about sexual pleasure, for example in safer sex promotion, or as part of the struggle for women to gain greater autonomy and control over our own bodies.

Have you or your organization found a way to work on sexuality within a positive framework?

Pinar – In my organization we have always constructed sexuality as positive, and sexual pleasure as a human right. When we tell this to donors, they look at us in shock as if we are only talking about orgasm. Donors tend to concentrate on practices that are perceived as ‘exotic’ in the North, such as FGM or honour crimes. However, such practices are only the tip of the iceberg, and in fact you cannot eliminate them if you do not work on programmes that support women’s sexual and bodily integrity. We have honour crimes because of the political and religious control of women’s autonomy and because of economic factors in semi-feudal settings. Working for sexual and bodily integrity and for economic empowerment of women will eliminate honour crimes.

As part of this empowerment strategy, since 1993 we have run training courses on human rights for women in community centres in 35 cities in the least developed and most conservative areas in Turkey. It is a four-month training and includes three modules on sexuality that talk about sexual pleasure as a women’s human right. These modules come in the ninth and tenth week after the women have already built up mutual trust, and an understanding of human rights frameworks. So far, we have trained 4000 women and these modules are among those that women value most. Not one woman has said she did not like to talk about sexuality. On the contrary, most say they want to spend more time talking about it!

In our national penal code, we just succeeded in bringing about a major revision. In our campaign, we could have said we were working against honour crimes, rape, and sexual abuse of children. Instead, we said we are for sexual and bodily integrity. As we formulated our demands in a positive way, it took the wind out of our opponents. They could not say they were against sexual and bodily integrity.

Five years ago, we started with this positive framework, now it has spread regionally and in response to demands we have started the ‘Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies’, which brings together organizations throughout the Middle East and South East Asia.

Veronica – Ali Miller said it used to be so difficult to talk about sexual violence, and now it is all we can talk about. We do not want to stop talking about negative things but we do want to balance these with other aspects of sexuality, including pleasure. We have to move beyond protecting women, it is not just about saying no to what we do not want but also how to say yes to what we do want.

In CARE, we are trying to move beyond the ‘women as victim’ model to recognizing women’s agency including around sexuality. Where it is really moving is in our youth programmes. In one example in Uttar Pradesh (India), where virginity is highly valued, a girl who was caught having an affair with a boy, was then protected by the other girls in her youth group. They began to challenge their community’s ideas on virginity to parents, teachers, and other young girls.

We are finding that a critical piece of this work is that of ‘accompaniment’ of both staff and communities, so people such as these young girls are not left alone to face the risks of taking radical stances. In CARE Cambodia, one woman staff member went on the radio to talk about safer sex. Instead of just talking about condoms she also talked about masturbation and other safe ways to find pleasure. Afterwards, she faced public ridicule. However, she had first talked to her husband, colleagues including her supervisor, and CARE partners, and established support, so was not dealing with the reactions alone.
Henry – Rights and obligations are useful frameworks for all this. People have obligations to respect others and be accountable and democratic in their sexual interactions. People have a right to pleasure, desire, sexuality, as well as a right not to experience these if they do not want to. How can we tell if these rights are being realized? We do not need to measure sexual pleasure, instead we can measure rights.

GRUPAL run democracy and participation workshops, which include reflection on sexuality: Are you democratic with your sexual partner? Do you listen to your own desire? Are you respected when you say 'no'? Do you dialogue about pleasure? What are the power dynamics of sex and sexual orientation and how do these interact with those of gender, race, and education? This can be quite a good entry point for encouraging people to think about democracy. We have 16 and 17 year olds who have lived through 10 years of dictatorship and think politics are a dirty space. Talking about the personal dimension of politics (and sex as a part of it) gets them interested.

One activity in our workshops is ‘The Sensuality Party’. We invite people to express their own sensuality. We often feel shame in thinking about ourselves as sexual beings, or we think that we cannot be sensual when our bodies do not fit stereotyped models of beauty. The sensuality party moves people to think about how accountable they are to their own desires, and if they respect their own bodies and sexualities. It encourages reflection on workshop topics such as participation, citizenship, and dialogue in relation to a new space: the politics of our own bodies and sexualities.

Notes
1 Here, I use the term ‘development industry’ to mean all those involved in giving or spending international development funding. This includes United Nations Agencies, donor governments, recipient governments, international foundations, consultants, Non-governmental organizations, activists, and development studies institutions – including the Institute of Development Studies where I work.
2 Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex.
3 The South and South East Asia Resource Centre on Sexuality is currently hosting an online discussion on ‘sexual pleasure, sexuality and rights’ (see http://www.asiasrc.org/forum.php). ‘The Pleasure Project’ has produced a global mapping of pleasure-focused projects, which shows a whole range of initiatives already taking place (see http://www.the-pleasure-project.org/Global%20Mapping%20of%20Pleasure.pdf).