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Toward a Vision of Sexual and Economic Justice
Thought Paper

CHALLENGING AN OLD (AND FALSE) DILEMMA: ECONOMIC (AND SEXUAL) JUSTICE REVISITED

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As we seek to articulate a vision that leads to a deeper understanding of the connections between economic and sexual rights, we need to address what keeps both activists and scholars from approaching both realms as co-constitutive. While exploring the obstacles to responding effectively to sexual and economic injustice, both in political activism and conceptual representations, we face the challenge of reconfiguring our basic assumptions around justice.

In the time of a well funded and escalating global conservatism, I strongly believe that social movements rely mostly on the force of ideas and on their ability to advance them in the court of public opinion. In this context, I would like to address here some of the challenges that, in my view, a social movement for economic and sexual justice would have to meet in order to articulate a new conceptual horizon towards this vision.

An initial key challenge I see is the need for a political vocabulary and an ethical framework to discuss sexuality from a social justice perspective.

It is an indisputable reality that medical language and thinking continue to define the social and legal debates around sexuality and continue pervading all expressions of public opinion, while naturalizing compulsory heterosexuality.

The naturalization of sexuality as the heterosexual model has been, on the one hand, an obstacle to locate historically and deconstruct certain sexual practices based on inequity and coercion. On the other hand, this depoliticization process has split off the debates on sexuality from the social justice and human rights agendas. Furthermore, some of the acts of torture and violations of bodily integrity perpetrated by a number of medical treatments in the name of sexual normalization are often perceived as “beneficial” for those who “suffer” the disorder, and not as human rights violations.

What I would like to suggest is that the recognition of sexual rights as human rights will demand transcending the limits of the medical “scientific” model, to look at the ethical dimensions of human sexual experience.

This ethical perspective on sexuality is hardly achievable if we continue to define human sexual experience exclusively as biology, and not as a contested ethical domain; if sexuality is viewed solely as nature, and not as culture.

The absence of an ethical perspective on the conditions in which sexual activity takes place is clearly reflected by what we could describe as some legal aberrations. We know, for example, that marital rape continues to be legal in many cultural and political contexts, while loving relationships between men, for example, even in consensual and responsible arrangements, are punishable, in certain political contexts, even with death.

In face of a legal system that has codified mechanically sexual acts by identifying through which parts of the body and between which persons they take place, Jeffrey Weeks proposed already in 1986 to rather consider the context and the meanings that the relationship has for those individuals involved in it, assigning freedom of choice a crucial role.

Ultimately, the goal of a social struggle for sexual rights can be envisioned as the possibility of fostering new practices based on human rights principles and as the aspiration of endowing human sexual experience with new meanings. Beyond the challenge of putting an end to the impunity enjoyed by persistent power abuse in the exercise of sexuality, lies the challenge of moving from the language of denounce exclusively to the language of possibilities.

And yet, it is impossible to underestimate that our point of departure is a dominant sexual culture in which all sexual practices, particularly if they are pleasurable or not linked to reproduction are *guilty, unless proven innocent*.

The development of a new ethical framework in this regard could possibly layout the vision of a political culture in which we can revisit sexuality as a practice of freedom, as a legitimate domain for the for the search of pleasure or a loving form of communication based on equality, responsibility and choice.

A new understanding of sexuality from this perspective could possibly be also the gateway to more effective strategies to counter an international right wing that has made opposition to sexual rights one of the main points of its agenda, while it imposes its monopoly over ethical claims. It can only be ironical that at a moment in time when the traditional nuclear family has been publicly associated to serious moral problems, such as domestic violence, child abuse or marital rape - exposed and challenged by the women's movement, while systematically ignored and denied by conservative ideologies- it is the right wing voices that have been self proclaimed the guardians of "family values".

Another task I envisage towards a vision of economic and sexual justice as co-constitutive is challenging the false dilemma between the social justice agenda and the sexual rights agenda.

The social movements that have brought to public debate the regulation of sexuality, along with its control and exclusion mechanisms, have struggled for a

very long time with political and conceptual dynamics that have persistently split off the issue from the social justice and human rights agendas.

In exploring the obstacles that the issue of sexuality has faced to be incorporated to the economic justice debates, we need to recall that the discussions around Development throughout the second half of the 20th century were dominated by the false dichotomy (resulting from the dynamics of Cold War) between civil and political rights, and economic, social and cultural rights.

In the context of the alleged conflict between civil and political liberties and the satisfaction of economic needs, the international system dedicated the past few decades to promote Development. Meanwhile the economic situation of the so-called “developing world” continued to deteriorate considerably.

As much as economic disparities keep growing, we often witness also the strengthening of the false dilemma between the efforts to end poverty and the struggles for sexual justice, the former generally seen as the agenda of the “truly pressing” issues, and the latter as a frivolous concern, in face of a situation of extreme economic injustice.

This misperception around sexuality has not only distorted the understanding of numerous social realities. It has also permeated the funders’ criteria regarding what are considered relevant projects for their Development and Human Rights programs.

In order to fully incorporate the notion of sexual rights to the economic justice agenda, it is imperative to rethink and document the connections between sexual exclusion and poverty. Much documentation work is needed, for example, to assess the cost of the silent migration of LGBT people from several rural areas in search for the distance from their communities and for the anonymous lifestyles big cities offer. The lack of housing opportunities and the denial of health rights for same-sex partnerships. The lack of job opportunities when one’s personal life is not properly concealed. The need to leave school in search of the financial independence that often precedes sexual independence.

Also, in the context of globalization and increased –and “feminized”- poverty, a sexual rights agenda would need to address the linkages between economic exclusion and the lack of access to sexual autonomy, in a prevailing social setting that “locks” women through marriage into an entire system that limits their sexual options by the promise of material support and the status of respectability, in exchange for sexual constraint. The social assumptions of compulsory heterosexuality have normalized the economic subordination of women. And the linkages between economic dependence and vulnerability to sexual violence are nowadays a well-documented social reality.

In order to articulate the demand for sexual rights as a crucial aspect of the struggles for economic justice we certainly need to articulate a new vision of justice. I envisage the need both for a vision of economic justice that doesn't remain blind to sexual injustice and its economic consequences, and a more integral struggle for sexual rights, sharply aware of the economic enabling conditions to achieve sexual justice.

Towards this vision, the renewal of the international debates on the meanings of Development seems an invaluable conceptual resource.

As we know, Amartya Sen, one of the most eloquent exponents of the new theories of Development, has challenged not only the notion of « economic growth », but also the very premise that such growth can be attained without striving for social inclusion, freedom and equality.

Furthermore, Sen states that Development can no longer be anything other than a process of expanding the actual freedoms that may be enjoyed by individuals, as much as economic growth reflected in indicators is no more than a **means** to expand the opportunities and freedoms enjoyed by the human beings that build societies.

I see in this new understanding of Development a powerful vision in the process of advancing the struggle for sexual rights as an integral and indivisible aspect of a larger struggle for social and economic justice.