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Toward a Vision of Sexual and Economic Justice  
Thought Paper

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**On Sexual-Economic Relations**

The most pressing concern for me as an academic/activist is the liberation of sexual-economic relations in “the Third World” – especially the Caribbean - from oppressive laws and policies, conservative moralities, negative beliefs, stigma, prejudice, and violence. In other words, of concern is to unearth these relations from their current criminalized and stigmatized status’ and to have them recognized and accepted in dominant discourse as a part of everyday social life. By sexual-economic relations I refer not just to sex work, but especially to that which is defined in the Caribbean and African countries as “transactional sex” - activities that involve a deliberate exchange of sex, often by young women, for some form of “betterment” – material goods, clothes/fashion, education/school fees, accommodation, meals, social status. The urgency here is that sexual-economic relations have long histories in regions such as the Caribbean, seem to be widespread and on the rise, have important consequences for social and economic relations as well as for public health, yet are ignored or discriminated against in political, academic and activist discourses.

In order to do justice to sexual-economic relations, I propose that we need a fundamental transformation of understandings of sexuality. Important to such work is the interrogation of underlying assumptions and cultural meanings of sexuality. For example, in light of the pervasiveness of transactional sex in Caribbean societies, we can ask whether a notion of sexuality as separate from the ways in which we feed, clothe and house ourselves, is useful for apprehending contemporary social relations and identities. Or should we be open to the idea that sexuality is, in some instances, always-and-already “contaminated” by economic needs, wants and conditions?

If sexuality is an unstable category, and we allow that sexuality may at times be saturated with the economic, sexual praxis that involves economic dimensions need not signify degradation or alienation but can instead be viewed as part of a range of expressions of sexuality. Sexual relationships inspired by economic interests might then be considered equal to those that are inspired by physical desires or ideas of love, and conceptualized as equally valid and legitimate. In other words, I am suggesting that we need a close examination of the ways in which contemporary forms of sexual-economic praxis produces alternative conceptions of sexuality, and an engagement with the ways in which this discourse challenges and changes existing notions of sexuality. And if we are to follow this line of reasoning, some struggles for sexual justice would appear as struggles for economic justice.

Moreover, thinking through struggles of sexual-economic justice in this intersectional way may mean attending to other matters that may not appear immediately as “sexuality” issues. One clear example of this lies in the phenomenon of “the Caribbean beach boy” or

“Rental” who sexually and otherwise services female and male tourists, and whose relationships with the tourists, while gendered and economic, are overdetermined by racialized constructions, fantasies and desires. We are forced then to engage with processes of racialized globalization, (neo)colonialisms and new imperialisms that continue to position “black” and “brown” peoples and the “Third World” as sites for western or EuroAmerican political and cultural domination, maldevelopment and hyperexploitation. The challenge, then, is not just to ask questions about how race, gender, sexuality and economics are linked or inscribed in the social but, rather, to develop conceptual tools for capturing complex sexual expressions, and to build struggles with these new conceptualizations.

Obstacles to responding effectively to the notion of sexual economic justice are ideological, political, legal, academic, social – and complicated!

One major obstacle is that there are a number of double-standards in operation.

For example: prostitution and other types of sexual-economic relationships are on the one hand quite widely accepted as something poor women in the Caribbean engage in “to make do”: as a survival strategy under patriarchal capitalism. On the other hand, this behaviour is coded in most laws and policies as illegal, and women are heavily policed, judged and discriminated against if seen to be engaged in sexual-economic relationships.

With regards to racialized sexual-economic relationships, we find on the one hand that the (white) global north and global metropolises are held up as the epitome of development, their populations welcomed to poorer areas of the world as tourists for the economic benefits they bring, and that race is strategically deployed to lure tourists to the

countries. On the other hand, young black and brown men and women who engage in sexual economic relations with tourists are disparaged – as “low-lives” “traitors” to the community or ethnic group, “MSM” or “whores” etc, - and believed to sully the national and regional reputation.

A second obstacle surrounds the subject of sexuality itself, both at social and academic levels. On the social, it is often shrouded in double-entendre, secrecy and shame. In many families it is still taboo to talk about sex with girls, and the idea of sexual-economic relations evokes a social response about impropriety that is heavily influenced by conservative or fundamentalist religious beliefs. This obstacle easily wends its way from the social into academic work and research, politics, or HIV/AIDS and social activism.

At the academic, level, sexuality theories draw strength primarily from GLBT social identity movements and studies in the global north from the second half of the twentieth century. “Sexuality studies” then has traditionally paid little attention to the economic, other than occasionally as an issue of class location of sexual identity groups. Sex work and other forms of sexual-economic practices have barely been taken up or recognized within this field, leaving huge gaps and silences in the academy that are replicated in political and activist domains.

A third major obstacle is the uneven global economic development that sustains racial and gendered imbalances of power, and ultimately supports the gross exploitation of sexual-economic relationships through industries such as tourism.

Initiatives that could be invoked/supported in the struggles for sexual-economic justice could involve:

- i) campaigns to remove laws that criminalize and oppress sexual-economic expressions, including laws against prostitution and homosexuality;
- ii) the production of academic and cultural work that expose the double-standards, development of more knowledge about transactional sex, and support for the appreciation of the messy connections between sexuality and the economy;
- iii) the creation of safe, sustainable income-generating alternatives for poor young women and men to participate in the global economy that may include, but does not place a premium on sexuality;
- iv) opposition to limited or conservative views of sexuality that may be articulated through the Church, schools, the media, and the academy;

In such areas of the world as the Caribbean and Africa, HIV/AIDS activism is one of the main areas for developing this agenda, as it is through the lens of the epidemic that sexual praxis is made visible. And it is here that we are seeing some of the greatest strides in addressing sexual-economic relations (i.e. through sex worker rights health campaigns). There are several constraints and complications here, which require attention (and would need to be taken up in another paper).

For such a struggle to be effective we would need to start from the local, taking a “bottom-up approach”, starting at the level of community in the global South with women’s, sex worker, and “all-sexuals” organizations, drawing upon knowledge and actions of feminist academic communities and labour unions, and building upwards to

influence national politics and agendas as well as regional and transnational policies (with and through UN agencies and feminist INGOs).

Building resistance to sexual-economic injustice in the present context requires much patience, and involves small-steps. We need to continue to collaborate with people outside of the academy, particularly through involvements with communities and individuals at the local level, building good communication strategies and using appropriate technology and media (i.e. not everyone is internet connected).

Global sexual-economic justice ultimately needs a redistribution of wealth, so that people are not economically pressured or forced into relationships with others – for sexual, racial, or gendered reasons – as well as alternative systems of production and consumption, the decriminalization and destigmatization of prostitution and homosexuality, an acceptance of sexual labour as a legitimate form of work, and greater appreciation of sexual difference and diversity.