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Toward a Vision of Sexual and Economic Justice
Thought Paper

Intersection of Economic and Sexual Justice (?)

The questions posed here are challenging -- too many and too broad to do justice to. So I will address myself to some general notions and some of the specific issues raised by the questions provided, in no particular order or ranking. I must begin by admitting that I am not wholly clear on what is meant by sexual justice in this particular context and how it differs from gender justice. But I will add that gender justice remains controversial in Kenya, indeed in most of Africa; and sexual justice, if I understand it, is a downright combustible topic.

In a few days I will be at a conference in Johannesburg focused on funding for African women's human rights. Among the organization listed as attending the conference is the Association of African Lesbians, a group that is no doubt challenging Africans' very definitions of themselves and the continent. If I had written this paper two years back, before I relocated back home to Kenya it would also have been a different paper, different and perhaps less accurate views of this/such a debate in the African context. As of this writing, my response is that across almost all of Africa, except, to some degree, in South Africa, the notion of sexual justice is a concept that is difficult to articulate let alone get people to understand or support.

A few anecdotes from my Kenyan experience inform my assertions above. The very notion of gender justice - not sexual justice - is often ridiculed and painted as un-African, unacceptable, and perhaps as the beginning of the end of civilization as we know it, by many politicians, religious leaders, and even some women. In the lead-up to a referendum on a new constitution for Kenya in November 2005, there were entire ethnic communities that opposed the draft constitution on the grounds that it provided for the right of women to inherit land. Also in the last year Parliamentary debate on a proposed Sexual Offences Bill was so sexist and offensive that at one moment all the women members of parliament walked out - I believe they had showed remarkable restraint.. In that debate, it also became clear that a huge majority of men and women do not believe in the very concept of marital rape. On the other hand, wife inheritance (where a widowed woman is inherited and/or 'cleansed' through sex by her late husband's brother or other male relative) is more and more frowned upon, undoubtedly because of the risks it presented in the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic . But the battle is far from over.

Sexual justice is a concept that is not understood and that is likely to be narrowly construed to only relate to sexuality - here I am assuming this is not how the conference organizers meant it to be understood. Perhaps in most African contexts, I think an interesting, and most potentially productive area to

consider is working on economic justice and progressive politics in general within a context that largely rejects the notion of sexual justice, at least insofar as homosexuals are concerned. The perceived U.S./European/Western "obsession" with sex and sexuality is seen as what distinguishes Africa from the ostensibly overly-modernized West. While most people in the "west" will not openly articulate or express sexist or bigoted ideas and attitudes in 'polite company' that is not the case even in so-called progressive circles in Africa.

I have listened to African colleagues try to explain why, for instance, gay and lesbian rights should not be part of progressive discourse or space, as in the case of the World Social Forum events in Bamako (2006) and Nairobi (2007). The catch all and 'don't need further elaboration' reason being that this is not an African issue. However, given the loud volume and bellicose nature of the discussion about the ordination of openly gay Episcopalians by leaders and members of the African Anglican communion, it is clear that this is an issue that not a small number of Africans feel very strongly about.

Currently, it is difficult to imagine when and in what space and on what scale one can approach questions of economic and sexual justice. The moralistic, socio-cultural construction that sex and sexuality-related issues are often couched in make it even difficult to respond because stereotypes, propaganda, and just plain misinformation surround discussion of these issues. The debate on economic justice is a different ball of wax; the notion of economic justice is widely embraced in its diversity and specificity. Economic justice activism at local levels to transnational solidarity and campaigning is quite common from the struggles of the Khoi San in the Kalahari and anti-gentrification campaigns to huge campaigns such as the ones to cancel debt or end poverty. It is clear that issues of economic justice have respectability and are widely raised across socio-economic, political, religious, racial, gender, and many other lines. And the crossover to the rather obvious links to other justice campaigns (gender, race, labor, environmental, health, social justice, etc.) is often easy and desired.

In fact the economic justice arena is the one area where links are easily made and it is less about looking for leadership from outside and more about people asserting their rights. The state, corporations, and multilateral institutions are often the targets (the accused) in many economic justice struggles. Economic justice campaigners target and engage in advocacy directed at the state, corporations, and the multilaterals as the offending parties or as potential 'allies' in many of the campaigns. I believe the same is/should be true in the case of sexual justice, but due to some of the aforementioned issues, sexual justice does not enjoy the same 'respectability' or support.

And combining the two is/would be perceived as a waste of time, energy, and resources; thus raising some questions: Is there an intersection of sexual and economic justice? How can we bring the intersection front and center of popular struggles, say like what happened with gender and environmental justice? Should we bring about the intersection of sexual and economic justice? Is there a hierarchy of struggles and where does sexual justice fall in the 'mainstream' of struggles?