Mapping Sexualities and Sexual Body politics on University of Botswana Campus: A Feminist Action Research Approach

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Introduction

> I have a lot to say, and I feel there is a tape across my lips stopping me from speaking my mind. I wish to have the tape removed (Young team participant)

It is generally agreed that higher education in Africa is in crisis. At the 2011 annual general assembly in Rabat, Morocco, the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) explained some of the challenges to be "a result of both deep crises and twenty years of structural adjustment, brain drain and sheer negligence on the part of the State" (http://www.codesria.org/spip.article1321). Studies on women students on university campuses have focused on "objective" studies to prove that universities are patriarchal, gender insensitive, have lower enrolments of female students, rampant sexual harassment of female students, transactional and intergenerational sexual relationships with older men, and draw attention to their bleaker job prospects after university (Gaidzanwa (ed), 2001; Hallam, 1994; Teferra and Altbach, 2004). This has led to some gender reforms including the implementation of sexual harassment and affirmative selection policies in countries like Botswana, Malawi and Zimbabwe (Bennett, 2005).

Despite the recognition of patriarchal cultures on campuses in earlier studies, many of the conclusions often drawn about young women regarding their lifestyles, sexuality, sexual and reproductive health tend to portray them as relatively ignorant, vulnerable and powerless. We are interested in exploring issues of gender and sexualities *with* young women (as opposed to *through* them) by engaging them directly in co-operative action and research, where the ultimate goal is to build and strengthen their voices and their sense of practical activism, especially around sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Against the backdrop of long years of research at the University of Botswana on gender equality and sexual harassment, and with the continued sense of an institutional climate hostile to independent thinking among young women, we chose to explore the women students' experiences of their sexual body politics and how they "come alive" or "get muted" in the different spaces on campus.

The Context of the University of Botswana

The University of Botswana remains the single university within a country where the demand for higher education grows yearly. In the past decade, as an educational and political space dialogue between the academic staff and the students reveals that the physical spaces on campus have evolved and the infrastructure has changed – the UB campus has more buildings and facilities; the UB student population has grown substantially; student politics have changed. In the 1980's students identified more with common regional and international movements and action – with frequent solidarity activities arranged against Apartheid and imperialism. This line of student activism has been displaced by more partisan politics in the 1990s. Campus has become a microcosm of the national political landscape. Student political activities appear to be "controlled" from outside by the main political parties. Student elections are also run much in the way that national elections are conducted. Students also have shifted towards mobilising around more individual concerns such as monthly allowances. Females play a limited role in student politics; and although UB commitment to gender equality has been demonstrated by the launching of the Sexual Harassment Policy in 2000, the implementation was poor. The University of Botswana (UB) campus is no exception to the crisis of higher learning in Africa, and least of all, an exception to the patriarchal bias of higher education institutional cultures.

Issues specifically affecting young women at the University of Botswana were identified by the researcher participants as *inter alia*: lack of safety for women on campus; higher failure rates; high pregnancy rates, and poor conditions for student mothers such as no provision for maternity leave; sexual violence including femicide or 'passion killings'; sexual harassment; lack of sexual education on sexual rights and reproductive health that specifically focus on young women and young mothers; and disability and HIV and AIDS related discrimination. They also identified the abuse of young women among Islamic cultures.

We decided to build a process which would include faculty and young women students within a feminist research action project to explore whether the physical campus offered young women space in which to control their own gendered and sexual lives. We understood feminist action research as a tool that helps researchers and participants to understand women's issues in a critical way because participants are part of the research team and they bring action and social change (Reid, 2004). Feminist action research recognizes that personal experience cannot be simply understood as anecdote, and in turn, encourages researchers to go beyond institutional "regimes of truth" about who has access to power and why.

Informed by a feminist action research approach, a UB team of faculty and students designed several events aimed at creating occasions where women students could speak about their experiences in supportive, but simultaneously, high-energy environments. The research team at UB was comprised of 3 staff members from the departments of Social Work and Sociology, and altogether 13 women students from different disciplines including Law, Sociology, Social Work, Psychology and Business Studies between 2010 and 2012. The number of participating students has fluctuated overtime as some students dropped out and others completed their studies.

We called ourselves the Young Women's Leadership (YWL) Research Action team. Activities we designed included a *Poetry Nite* which focused on opening up public institutional space for young women's creativity in their representation of their sexual "selves"; a *Girls' Nite* which was a follow-up discussion on some of the issues emerging from the Poetry Nite; and a *Shine Event* titled "*Find Your Sexual Voice*". All the events were documented, with the permission of all the team members, and the material was corralled into a number of different genres. The "Find Your Sexual Voice" event presented the "research findings" from the previous events through drama. *"I" Stories* were also collected where the young women participants in the team spoke about their experiences since they had joined the YWL team. Finally we did *Self and campus profiling and mapping* exercises. Team participants kept journals of their campus lives and from that, produced short documentaries about how they negotiate their embodied selves within campus.

This article addresses two interconnected themes that have emerged in the body and campus mapping exercises. The first theme is around the

centrality of the family environment in the way young women come to experience their new lives on campus and the relative "shock" encountered at UB where new expectations about gender and sexuality are part and parcel of campus culture. A second major theme is the lack of power and control within intimate relationships; connected to this, and discussed within the theme, is a kind of heterosexual fundamentalism among young women on the UB campus. Between home and campus, young women have to negotiate between safe and unsafe social spaces on campus. They have come to university to challenge their ideas about self and other, but in the process of this negotiation, they have also come to occupy hegemonic and often fundamentalist ideas about their available sexual options as heterosexual women. It also became apparent that UB was gender-dichotomised in favour of masculine and hetero-sexualities. Through the various processes, some of the institutional, physical and emotional barriers for young women in African universities that could hamper their leadership potential were better understood. Most importantly, it became evident that there is a strong case for feminist action research that not only helps identify barriers, but is also a self-empowerment process. In their *"I" stories*, young women in the project testified to how the project became their bridging platform between their families that were silent on issues of sexuality, and university spaces that are hypersexual, yet oppressive to female students.

The Sexual Baggage We Bring From Home, and the Baggage We Find at UB

My life in the University of Botswana is really like the weather, it varies and changes over time. Sometimes it's fun and lively, other times it's cold, grumpy and not a pretty sight! (one of the participants in the team)

The *"I" stories* were compiled at the end of Phase One of the project in May 2010. The process of recording was semi-structured, as we had aimed to use them as a means of getting some insights into the students' overall experience of the Young Women's Leadership Action Research Project. In the process they gave brief insight on family experiences and their expectations of UB.

The narratives analysed reflected variations in experiences of gender and sexuality within family environments:

Lesego:

> I grew up with in a large extended family. I grew up with my paternal uncles – I was the only girl at home. I learned from a very young age to be this assertive strong girl – tomboyish who always got what she wanted...

Rather than pointing to conscious gender-role assignment by her family, Lesego's narrative reflects gender self-assignment as part of her lived reality. While this was evident in her formative years, it seems to have come to odds with sex-gender assignment as she grew older:

> Then I grew up, started having feelings, started knowing that I am a girl and should behave in a certain way – I learned all of that in school in an unconscious manner that a woman has to behave in a certain way. I shouldn't sit with my legs apart – but rather I should sit with my legs in a decent manner, and there is a way as a woman that I have to speak – I don't just speak in this loud voice that I grew up using. Yeah, so that is how I discovered that I am a woman at school through my peers and teachers. At home I was just a tomboyish kid playing with my boy cousins.

Bonolo's story refers to struggles of being raised by a single parent without guidance on sexual matters from her mother:

> Growing up for me was a bit difficult – especially being bred by a single parent. Growing up was quite difficult – especially regarding my sexuality. My mother is not that type of person who likes to open up to me to talk about my sexuality or issues that concern me as a young woman, or me as a young person, especially when it comes to issues like sex or HIV and AIDS. She feels that it is a taboo to talk about such things because when they grew up their parents never talked to them about that stuff. It continued onto me...

Naledi experienced "silences" around sexual discourse in her upbringing:

> I lost my mother when I was doing Form 4 so I had to play that role –I had to play that adult role in my life...I had to advise myself about issues that surround young people at that age. I had relatives who were playing the role of parents. When it came to sexual issues they didn't really have the courage to talk to me about sexual issues so again that was the stage where it was very easy to be influenced by my peers...

Fako's quantitative study of the interface between poverty, sexuality activity and knowledge about HIV and AIDS among a sample of young people in Botswana (2010) refers to the significance of families as important socializing agents that ultimately shape young persons' sexual behaviour. While underscoring the significance of 'stable' family background as reducing the chances of young people engaging in risky sexual behavior, Fako's study neither problematises the concept 'family' nor provides insights into the internal dynamics of families in a rapidly changing socio-economic environment in Botswana.

Feminist studies of families, households and gender inequality in Botswana (van Driel, 1994; Women and Law in Southern Africa Botswana, 1997; Mookodi 1999, 2004) have documented the emergence of unmarried motherhood as a family form over time, as well as the predominance of female-headed households among the poor. Using the Women and Law in Southern African country studies of family forms [conducted between 1994 and 1997] as a basis of methodological and theoretical analysis, Mvududu and McFadden (2001) allude to the significance of re-visiting conventional notions of family around gender politics. While their discussion of gender hierarchies was based on culturally-based patriarchal male dominance, the use of feminist action research methodologies could unearth important information about mothers and daughters – especially the interface between power, powerlessness and the shaping of sexual identities and behaviour.

Coming from their diverse family backgrounds, Lesego, Naledi and Bonolo all alluded to expectations of UB as a(n) [exclusively?] serious academic environment:

> My expectation of the University was that it is all about people who are very serious about life – people who know what they need and want in life – people who are hard workers, responsible and mature – people who come here to get their degrees and leave – that is what I thought.
>
> My expectation of UB was that clever people – those 'Intelligent ones' go to. So as I saw myself I didn't fit into those intellectuals or anything. I thought that when you go there you have to be very intelligent [in] everything you do...
>
> I thought UB is a place where people are really intense into academic stuff...

Using a combination of structured survey and qualitative methods, a study of knowledge, attitudes and behavioural aspects of HIV and AIDS among students at the University of Botswana identified some of the issues as contributing to students' vulnerability to infection as unprotected sex, frequent change and exchange of partners, sex for financial gain, peer pressure, and sex for good grades (Jack, et al, 1999).

Subsequent studies conducted by Chilisa and others (2001) revealed the limited impact of knowledge on HIV transmission on behaviour. Chilisa notes factors responsible for limited behavioural change as high levels of alcohol consumption, which leads to irresponsible behaviour; students sometimes relieving 'academic stress' by engaging in irresponsible behaviour; prostitution and promiscuity around campus; and students engaging in moonlighting activities that entail high-risk, "irresponsible" sex (Chilisa, 2001: 34).

The *"I" stories* revealed an element of "shock" on the discovery of the variety of sexual identities and behavior at UB:

> ...when I came here [to UB] it was more like what we call 'mma pereko' [laissez faire] in Setswana. I just felt that people were just too crazy. I mean -- you would have young girls as young as 19 – very small -- in a mini skirt – getting into a car with an older man, and I was like -- what is that? because where I came from we didn't do things like that, so I thought – ah, these are city girls – that is why they are so 'clever' and 'smart'. Yeah, most girls fell prey to that, they joined that route of not studying but getting into cars with older men, going clubbing, drinking,
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> ...Seeing young women pregnant was a very big shock for me because back home one would not see teenagers being pregnant – it was a rare thing to see. When I came here I found that young girls go out with older men because they want money to catch up with the fashion-frenzy thing that is going on.

It was not only the *"I" stories* which highlighted the tensions of gendered and sexual expectations in which UB women students negotiate their lives. The research action project revealed at every stage the suggestion that the move away from home was rarely one that offered less restrictive notions of sexual pleasure or sexual possibility. The shape of the restrictions simply shifted from those about being a "good wife" some day to those of being a "sexually desirable woman" now.

Young Women's Experiences of Power Within Intimate Relationships

In this section, young women's experience of power within intimate relationships is discussed based on "a girls' Nite talk show" -an activity that was carried out as part of the process. The talk show was a follow up of the event which involved poetry, dialogue and music as a way of collecting data about young women's reproductive health and sexuality issues on campus. The main show included both female and male University of Botswana Students. After that, it was then decided that since the focus of the research is targeting young women, a follow up session involving young women students only was organized.

The session was recorded using a video recorder which was later analyzed using thematic analysis. The video tapes were watched and patterns of issues and experiences of young women were identified.

Most of the participants were in agreement that young women lacked power and control within intimate relationships. They indicated that sometimes they become victims of violence in intimate relationships because of lack of assertiveness. They mentioned that the lack of assertiveness silences young women; hence they fail to communicate their concerns and feelings to their partners. One of the participants became specific about the tendency of young women not to talk freely about sex to their partners by saying:

> It is not easy for all of us to say no to sex.

Another participant pointed out:

> High pregnancy levels at UB tell that people are not assertive to say No to sex.

These examples not only identify challenges of assertiveness but also reflect the assumption that women have minimal power over their own sexual bodies. Young women's silences in relationships therefore resonate with Parker (2003) who argued that unequal power does not only manifest in physical, mental and verbal abuse but it also relates to socially accepted behaviours and arrangement. In this situation neither partners may see the situation as a problem because women's silence about their own sexuality is an accepted norm, not simply in popular terms but within the university culture too.

Furthermore, the young women participants associated their lack of power in intimate relationships with limited financial resources, especially as compared to their partners'. They were of the view that the university setting

often requires them to live a certain lifestyle which they cannot afford with the limited funds they get from their student allowances and support from their parents. Often they find themselves having to rely on their partners who have the "cash power". As an example, one young woman said:

> Yes we are pressurized by ourselves to have sex with other people. Because we want to live the life that we are not supposed to live. That is we aspire to live certain kinds of lifestyles that we cannot afford.

Some students indicated that they not only use their allowances for themselves but they also assist in paying the bills at home, so their reliance on their partners for financial gain helps them to meet family needs too.

As a result of power inequalities in intimate relationships, research has suggested that women usually have limited choices in heterosexual decision making (Van Wormer, 2008). The participants in the girls' Nite show suggested that most of the time having "sex is not usually a choice for women even those who are at university". Despite their legal empowerment as citizens, these young women cannot readily communicate their own sexual choices within a university space (Gqola, 2007).

Many young women expressed a powerlessness and were unhappy in their heterosexual relationships. "*Your body betrays you*", one said. Most of the other young women clapped and giggled to that claim that when it comes to saying no to men, their bodies refused to cooperate! A young woman worried that "*be pure for your man is preached in the church, but I don't trust the men making these statements.*"

They were concerned about transactional and intergenerational sex: "*My expectation was that at UB people would be focused on their studies and serious about life. But people were playful, getting into cars with older men*".

The young women expressed shock at the high pregnancy rates in UB, a space they thought only the most intelligent people came. One woman said it bluntly: "*I don't want to offend anyone, [but] these mother fuckers did it to them and the girls were not assertive enough to demand safe sex*".

There were some dissenting voices, and one of the young women expressed a wish that: "*In future I hope the club teaches that life is not simply about the dogma of getting married, that there is more to life than that.*" Marriage, she argued, can lead women to forget "self" or give up "me" for "us".

Pragmatic concerns were that "*sometimes when a girl chooses to wait*" on any grounds including religious ones, "*a man may not respect that*"

and find other girls". Women then ended up "surrendering" or facing the prospect of going back to "*square one*". We often have to choose between "*Empowerment, having to go back, empowerment, having to go forward*".

What we noticed within the team was the interaction between ideas about women's power and control in intimate heterosexual relationships and a fear of homosexuality in the UB campus. At the *Girls Nite* questions around homosexuality were spoken about as the *difficult* questions. What is particularly intriguing about the discussions around homosexuality and queer issues was that the young women were as uncomfortable talking about LGBT issues as they felt about their lack of power in intimate relationships. One of the young women said about herself: "*I'm a leader...a volunteer (for breast cancer and other health issues)...an activist...and I can pose nude for charity...and a sexual heterosexual!* [her emphasis]". They confidently denounced homosexuality; however, they were not able to denounce abusive intimate relationships with men with the same level of confidence. Another said: "*We are young and beautiful, and we should be able to say no to gay sex if we feel we are simply heterosexual*". Within the same breath, she proceeded to say that it was difficult for a girl to "*refuse a guy sex*".

Many of the young women perceived homosexual relationships as a "*new fashion*" that some of their "*formerly straight*" ex-schoolmates were adopting as part of the university sub-culture. The group participants strongly disapproved of this. This appears not to be the minority view of young women in this project. One Mannathoko, claiming to be an MA Student at UB posted an opinion piece in a local newspaper, Mmegi, calling homosexuality "a disgraceful practice". He castigated the human rights approach used by LeGaBiBo (Lesbians, Gay and Bisexual People in Botswana) as promoting "immoral acts". This kind of heterosexual normativity leaves young women with no option but a kind of self-hate where they seem to believe men were entitled to some "perfect" female bodies and constantly agonized about the shortfalls of their bodies. This became evident in their revelations about their body image-issues, concerns around virginity and keeping the "rare commodity" safe so that they are desirable to men. One of them said, "*we want to lose our virginity to the man we want to end up marrying and when the relationships ends, the attachment stays on...Even in economics, we know that when a rare commodity is just given out, it loses worth*".

One result of this heterosexual fundamentalism is lack of knowledge, and lack of tolerance, about other types of sexuality. "*This is new to me*", said one of the young women.

Homophobia and patriarchy appear to need each other, as Tamale (2006) argues. However, it is more unsettling when homophobia is expressed by young university women. Earlier, a connection has been made between young women's family environments and how they come to engage with sexualities on campus. Coming from largely homophobic and religious families, it should not come as a surprise that they found discussions around sexual difference unsettling. Uncomfortable as they were, the young women also sometimes showed an interest to better understand the issues. One young woman opened the discussion by asking,

> What is the difference between being gay and lesbian, 'go diragala eng'
> – what happens?

The first response came cautiously:

> No offence, we need to ask ourselves difficult questions.

There was a discussion around how some girls were of the view that it was easier to be with another girl than a man because women better understood each other. "*There is a lot more trust and communication*" one young woman proffered. A different view was quickly provided: "*The girls are worse than boys, they are even more manipulative than boys because they know exactly what buttons to press to hurt you or make you happy...she knows when to dump you and make you want her back.*"

Conclusion: The Process Deepens

The action research project revealed that despite the protection offered to young heterosexual women legally (in terms of protection form sexual violence, access to sexual health care, and encouragement around access to political power), they are by no means secure within their own gendered and sexual lives. Ideologically, they are prey to very conservative notions of what they can expect of their own right to control their sexual bodies, and while they are interested in "empowerment" and "leadership," challenging the men to whom they are sexually attracted is a near-impossibility.

Through the use of the Feminist Action Research approach, however, this project has benefitted the participants, team leaders and some of the young people in the university who attended the events, especially the young women.

The project created an open space for the young women who were involved in the process to talk about their personal experiences from childhood up to university level. The team witnessed a tremendous growth in the participants' interpersonal and communication skills. The process built their self image and self concept. Some of those who were very shy and reserved at the beginning of the project had become very assertive, confident in expressing themselves and very eager to take part in various leadership roles. For example, the students were given a chance to organize the "girls" only nite show without the assistance of the team leaders. All the team members had an active role to play, and displayed a high level of confidence and cooperation.

One of the participants had emphasized the importance of the project by saying:

> This project gave me a platform to boost my self confidence. It also taught me to know where I stand, especially in issues that we do not usually talk about, mainly sex and reproductive health.

The team leaders equally benefited from the process because they were able to compare the current university lifestyles with the time when they were students. They were also able to reach out to those students who needed help in terms of processing and dealing with issues they were struggling with. We concluded with the knowledge that the project had, in a sense, only just begun; deepening a culture of open and respectful discussion on the interaction between "higher education" and young women's sexual rights.

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