

*Women, Sexuality and the Political Power of Pleasure.*  
 Edited by Andrea Cornwall, Susie Jolly, and Kate  
 Hawkins. London and New York: Zed Books, 2013.

Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah

My copy of *Women, Sexuality and the Political Power of Pleasure* travelled with me from Accra, where I live, via Johannesburg to Cape Town, where I was attending a workshop at the time of writing this review. In all these spaces the book drew attention: its vivid pink colour and its provocative title in particular led people to grab the book out of my hands, quite literally. Clearly the book concerns a subject about which people want to know more.

Edited by Susie Jolly, Andrea Cornwall and Kate Hawkins, the book is a collection of 14 articles, thought pieces and essays on a range of subjects related to women's sexuality and pleasure. That such a collection now exists is a political act. In their introduction to the collection the editors state:

This book shows why we should work with pleasure, and how we can do so in ways that change people's lives, on an individual and collective level. It also shows how pleasure can contribute to empowerment.

Making space for pleasure can contribute to challenging gender and other power relations (2013: 21).

This is the radical focus of the collection. How can the politics of pleasure disrupt gender norms and oppressive power relations? Can this be done in ways that empower women and communities? The contributions in the book state a resounding yes.

The real strength of the book lies in the fact that it includes contributions from women across the world working on various aspects of sex and sexualities. Experiences and lessons are shared from countries as varied as India, Turkey, Nigeria, China, the United Kingdom (UK), Malawi and Uganda. As an African feminist, I was pleased to see a diversity of intellectual contributions from the likes of Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, Dorothy Aken'ova and Sylvia Tamale.

The collection is not divided into particular themes; on the contrary, one gets the impression that the editors tried as much as possible to explore the gamut of sexualities. This, to me, is a real plus. Bibi Bakare-Yusuf's chapter, 'Thinking with Pleasure: Danger, Sexuality and Agency,' offers some useful feminist theoretical underpinnings for the book, critically highlighting the limitations of dominant narratives of sexuality that focus on disease, violence and the absence of bodily integrity. Bakare-Yusuf reminds readers that "Telling stories about female sexual pleasure, agency and power allows us to uncover a tradition and community of powerful, feisty, indomitable women who will not be cowed by oppression or violation" (2013: 37). Telling stories is a central part of Bakare-Yusuf's *raison d'être* in her capacity as a co-founder of Cassava Republic Press, a publishing house based in Abuja, Nigeria. It is for this same reason that her publishing house is compiling a collection of erotic stories by African women.

However, the following words by Bakare-Yusuf gave me cause to pause:

The moment we allow ourselves to see pleasure as preceding violation, it becomes possible to reframe violation into a redemptive discourse or narrative. And once you do so you are taking the sting out of it. So, for example, rather than viewing rape or violation as the dissolution of one's world or as an opportunity to retreat from the world, that experience can be recontextualised in terms of a bigger project of one's life (2013: 39).

This is not an argument that I am comfortable with. Yes, in an ideal world, we could see pleasure as preceding violation, yet we know that too many women and girl's first experience of sex involves violation. How, then, can such violation be redeemed and re-contextualised? In the context of systemic violence against women a reframing of narrative seems far from adequate.

The fact that contributors to the collection came from different backgrounds – academics, activists, people working in non-governmental spaces – means that its pace and tone vary considerably. This is both a strength and a weakness. The second, third and fourth chapters, for example, concern sexuality workshops held in North India, Turkey and Nigeria. These chapters offer many useful lessons to individuals and organisations that may wish to replicate similar training sessions, yet the very nature of workshop reports means that these were not the most scintillating chapters to read.

A real eye-opener for me was the chapter on 'Building a Movement for Sexual Rights and Pleasure' by Xiaopei He of Pink Space, an NGO in China

working on 'Sexual Rights to Pleasure for All.' I was especially interested in the work done with the wives of gay men, who suffer the negative consequences of hetero-normativity and the attendant risks of violence, depression and isolation. Meetings, workshops and training sessions held by Pink Space also brought together different groups of marginalised women – women living positively, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered women, as well as women sex workers – to build solidarity towards the fulfillment of the organisation's mission.

Lorna Couldrick, a health practitioner, educator and researcher, and Alex Cowan, a disability consultant and trainer who is described as using a wheelchair due to multiple sclerosis, wrote 'Enabling Disabled People to Have and Enjoy the Kind of Sexuality They Want.' The strength of this partnership came through in the multi-faceted recommendations and experiences in their chapter on how to support the sexual rights of disabled people. Through multiple methods including interviews with multidisciplinary teams working on health and social care for disabled people, and interrogating policy documents, they clearly demonstrate the failings of the UK health system in supporting the sexual rights of disabled people. They also include personal stories and examples from beyond the UK which can provide some leadership in how these rights can be recognised and bolstered.

The concluding parts of the book include chapters entitled 'Challenging Clitoraid,' 'How Was It for You? Pleasure and Performance in Sex Work,' as well as 'Laughter, the Subversive Body Organ.' A particularly strong chapter in these final accounts is the republication of Sylvia Tamale's 2005 article 'Eroticism, Sensuality and 'Women's Secrets' among the Baganda', initially published in FA 5. Part of the reason this chapter struck me is because, recently, two women in their early 30s asked me if I knew of an older woman who would be willing to share traditional sex tips with a select group of women. The woman who would play such a role among the Baganda of Uganda is called a Ssenga, "a parental aunt (or surrogate versions thereof) whose role is to tutor young women in a range of sexual matters, including pre-menarche (first menstruation) practices, pre-marriage preparation, erotics and reproduction" (2013: 265). As someone who blogs about sex and sexualities, it is clear to me that even in this day and age, women and girls would appreciate advice on all aspects of their sexualities from more experienced women. Particularly interesting in Tamale's chapter is how she shows the evolution of the Ssenga,

including its commercialisation and the subversive ways in which the women create opportunities for radical dialogue on sex, the erotic and pleasure, even within a climate of heteronormativity and state efforts to control women's sexualities.

*Women, Sexuality and the Political Power of Pleasure* is an important contribution to the discourse of 'feminisms and development.' The one area in which I felt the book had a significant weakness was its lack of attention to how feminists are utilising online spaces to facilitate empowering conversations on sexualities. This includes the blog I co-founded, Adventures from the Bedrooms of African Women as well as spaces such as Ms Afropolitan, Black Looks and HOLAAfrica. I hope a subsequent edition will be more inclusive of some of the pioneering work being done in such online spaces.

### Cited websites

[www.adventuresfrom.com](http://www.adventuresfrom.com)

[www.msafropolitan.com](http://www.msafropolitan.com)

[www.blacklooks.org](http://www.blacklooks.org)

[www.holaafrica.org](http://www.holaafrica.org)