Gender, Sexuality & Inequality

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In international development, work on gender and on sexuality tends to focus on apparently fixed *categories* of people: for example, working on gender is often assumed to be synonymous with working with women. Similarly, working on sexuality is often assumed to mean working with people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex or queer (LGBTIQ).

If international development is to effectively address inequity and injustice, it needs to move its focus away from categories. It needs to pay more attention to the shifting and intersecting *processes of understanding* and judgement related to gender, sexuality, and other intersecting social hierarchies such as class/caste or race/ethnicity.

This brief offers a concise introduction to the intersection of gender, sexuality, and inequality in international development. It considers three questions: How can we usefully define gender and sexuality in work that seeks to address inequality? Where are the intersections between gender and sexuality? What do we gain in our efforts to address inequality if we see gender and sexuality as linked?

Work that seeks to address inequalities must affect change in the social, historically shifting and political hierarchies and norms that create and sustain such inequalities. These hierarchies and norms include those related to gender and sexuality, as well as class or caste, race or ethnicity and, in some countries, age and religion.

As noted by Ilkkaracan and Jolly (2007: 3), the hierarchies and norms related to gender and sexuality can have 'repercussions related to poverty, marginalisation and death'. Gender and sexuality are not 'add-on' issues; they should be central to the development endeavour. So what do these concepts mean in the context of addressing inequalities?

Defining gender

In the 1970s, second-wave feminists began to differentiate between biological categories of *sex* assigned at birth, and socio-political processes of emphasising, valuing and judging human traits on the basis of historically created norms. These norms are positioned within what, for the sake of simplicity, I will call a typology of masculinities/femininities.[1] (See Butler, 1990 & 1993; Connell, 2002 & [1995] 2005; Rubin, 1975; Vance, 1980.)

The typology of masculinities/femininities is, in itself, unsexed; *every* body, regardless of the assigned biological sex of that body, can be continually repositioned within this typology. When I, sexed as a woman, sit on public transport, I display certain traits that are currently *likely* to be read alongside the evidence of my sexed body as a norm of femininity: long hair, dangly earrings. Yet I sit with my feet firmly planted at hip width; a trait usually characterised as masculine. An observer's overall reading of whether I meet, or transgress, dominant norms will depend on their own cultural/historical rendering of the masculinities/femininities typology.

None of these traits can be absolutely, unchangeably understood as either masculine or feminine, and none of them are biologically 'attached'. A body born male could display the same traits of long hair and dangly earrings and still be read as entirely in keeping with a form of masculinity: think heavy metal fan or a certain kind of motorcyclist. As noted by Weeks (2003: 41): 'Human beings … blur the edges' of masculinities/femininities.

Category or process?

When we consider inequality, neither masculinities/femininities nor the 'blurring of the edges' cause a problem. However, what can be called *processes* of gender are indeed problematic.

These are the processes by which we differentiate and judge, using historical and cultural understandings, norms, expectations and values about masculinities and femininities. Our perceptions of systems and relationships of power and their resulting or

reinforcing behaviours also inform these processes; they are often subconscious and implicit, and are continually generated and regenerated at both individual and structural level.

Of course, certain bodies bear the brunt of gender processes, but the sex of the body does not *cause* inequality.

This distinction between gender as *object/category* and gender as *a set of social and political processes* is all-important. Objects and categories have fixed parameters; processes can be influenced, and can shift and change. Twenty years ago, key gender theorist Raewyn Connell argued for the need to focus not on gender as 'an object' with distinct object categories within it but, rather, 'to focus on the processes and relationships through which [people] conduct gendered lives' (Connell, [1995] 2005, p.71). This argument is still valid, today, for international development work on inequality.

Defining sexuality

Basic descriptions of sexuality tend to focus on three intersecting strands: sexual desire or attraction; sexual activity or behaviour; and sexual identity (Clark, 2008; Mottier, 2008). These strands are neither predictably consistent, nor inconsistent; for example, if a man desires another man, and they have sex, this does not make either or both men 'gay'. Neither are these strands necessarily equally important to all; it is unlikely that the majority of those who could be considered heterosexual have ever thought of themselves as having a 'sexual identity'.

A 'working definition' of sexuality, arising from a 2002 technical consultation process convened by WHO, reads as follows:

> Sexuality is a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors. (WHO, 2006: 5)

The differentiation between object and process is also useful when thinking about sexuality. Key sexuality theorist Weeks (2003: 7) defines sexuality as 'an historical construction, which brings together a host of different biological and mental possibilities, and cultural forms'. So, like gender, sexuality is also best understood as involving cultural and historical, individual and societal understandings, norms, expectations, value judgements, and power relationships. We also need to understand the resultant and reinforcing behaviours related to the personal, social and regulatory worlds of sexual desires, practices and identities. If the personal is political, then we can never forget the sexual. And as with gender, these processes affect every *body*.

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Dempsey and Leonard (2009: 25) argued: 'If we limit gender analysis to dynamics between the male and female sexes it means we can only see gender where we can see sex difference'. The same is true of sexuality work. If we limit sexuality analysis to dynamics between heterosexuality and homosexuality, we can only see sexuality where we can see difference in sexual identity.

Where are the intersections?

Gender and sexuality inform and constrain each other. As noted by Rahman and Jackson (2010: 5), 'the social construction and significance of one can rarely be understood without considering the other'.

Norms about who should do what sexually with whom (or what), where, how, how often and why reinforce norms about masculinities and femininities, and vice versa. For example, regardless of the sex of the body, femininity is associated with sexual shyness, passivity and a desire to have sex because of love; masculinity is associated with sexual power, control, and a desire just to have sex.

This can be as true in queer[2] relationships as in heterosexual ones. For example, women in the English-speaking world who define themselves as 'stone butch' usually take a dominant sexual role in which they will penetrate their partner and not expect their partner to do so.

If someone is born male, but is perceived as being feminine in behaviour or presentation – or born female yet is perceived as being masculine – it is almost inevitable that they will be assumed to be non-heterosexual. How they might describe their own sexual identity will make little difference.

When gender, sexuality and inequality collide…

For many sex workers, structural and individual violence and discrimination is common. They can be excluded from the protection of the law, discriminated against in access to health care, housing and education, and physically and emotionally abused by customers and non-customers alike. The issue, here, lies not in the sex workers *themselves* but in the historical, social and political hierarchies and norms that judge them.

Linking gender and sexuality: the gains for addressing inequality

Inequality related to both gender and sexuality is created and sustained by processes of understanding and judgement. When we see gender and sexuality as linked in this way, we are challenged to focus on the processes that underpin all inequalities: similar processes are also at work in the other social hierarchies in which we are all entwined – hierarchies such as class/caste, or race/ethnicity.

Yet in international development, the focus does not fall on processes but on categories, and each category is addressed separately. Working on gender, for example, is often assumed to be synonymous with working with women (or working on men to help reduce violence against women). Similarly, work on sexuality is frequently seen as working with queer people, solely addressing the (non-heterosexual) sexual identity aspect of sexuality.

Connell describes this as 'categorical thinking', and has written persuasively of the limitations of such an approach to gender in international development work that aims to improve health outcomes. Her arguments are equally fitting for work that seeks to address inequality more broadly:

> Categorical thinking does not have a way of conceptualizing the *dynamics* of gender: that is, the historical processes in gender itself, the way gender orders are created and gender inequalities are created and challenged … we cannot rely any longer on categorical thinking if we are to come to terms with the actual gender processes that affect [equality], the complex social terrain on which they emerge, and the urgency of these issues. (Connell, 2012: 1676, 1681)

If we focus not on categories, but on the processes and value judgements that generate and regenerate *all* inequalities, then we have a chance of making a difference in the lives of everyone.

Further reading

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Endnotes

1. Masculinities/femininities should not be read as a binary formulation of two discrete, opposing entities. Rather, they are a historically and culturally fluid typology of human traits (such as ways of walking, dress, speech, etc.) that – at certain times and within certain contexts – are read as examples of masculinities and/or femininities.

2. I use the term 'queer' in place of the more standard international development practice of using English language abbreviations for identity categories – GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans), GLBTIQ (gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, intersex and questioning) etc. This is because a) it is an umbrella term that refers to one's world view, not a discrete category referring to one's sexual identity; b) these categorisations reinforce the perception that sexuality is about non-heterosexuality; and c) these are English language identity terms that can overwrite alternate cultural forms.