

Poverty through the sexuality lens

A HEALTHY POPULATION IS A PRODUCTIVE POPULATION. BUT WHEN A POPULATION IS POOR THEN POVERTY PREVENTS THE FULL REALISATION OF SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH RIGHTS OF MANY PEOPLE IN AFRICA. THERE ARE CALLS TO POLICY MAKERS TO ADDRESS THE ISSUE, WRITES JANE GODIA

OVER the last decade, there have been concerted efforts to "make poverty history" in Africa.

The continent is riddled with socio-economic injustices that have led to inequalities and ultimately, poverty and underdevelopment.

Socio-economic injustices occur when vulnerable members of society are excluded from the mainstream development process. Socio-economic injustices occur when a people cannot access medical care and are unable to exercise their sexual and reproductive health rights.

Many reasons have been put forward as to why over 50 per cent of Africans live below the poverty line. These include lack of access to land rights, resources and credit, corruption, culture and tradition, hunger, disease, illiteracy and gender inequalities.

In trying to find ways to reduce poverty, many instruments of development have been ratified all over the world.

For example, eradication of extreme poverty and hunger is the priority of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals crafted eight years ago.

While the fight against poverty has been intense, there has not been much change in the continent. Yet, the objective to kick poverty out of Africa is not lost.

Sexuality

Next month, about 500 delegates will gather in Abuja, Nigeria, for the Third Africa Conference on Sexuality and Sexual Rights. Under the banner "Sexuality, Poverty and Accountability in Africa", the goal of the conference will be to examine the interrelationships between poverty and sexuality.

Sexuality is a central aspect of humanity. It encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction.

It is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships.

Not all these dimensions of sexuality are always experienced or expressed.

Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors.

The conference brings together sexual health and rights advocates, policy makers and practitioners to share thoughts on progress made in the promotion of sexual health and rights of people in the continent.

The meeting will also explore how accountability affects sexual health and social wellbeing in Africa. Where injustices are experienced, it will state who should be held accountable.

Conference convenor, Dr Uwem Esiet of African Federation for Sexual Health and Rights, says: "The conference will look at how Africa has responded to international treaties like the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) as well as others that have addressed HIV/Aids and poverty."

In 1994 in Cairo, the ICPD confer-

ence agreed that population and development were inextricably linked. It was also noted that empowering women and meeting people's needs for education and health — including reproductive health — are necessary for individual advancement and balanced development.

In 2000, leaders of 189 nations gathered at the Millennium Summit in New York to discuss solutions to combat poverty, hunger, illiteracy, disease, discrimination against women, and environmental degradation. They agreed on a set of Millennium Development Goals aimed at cutting global poverty and hunger in half by 2015, reducing maternal and child deaths, curbing HIV/Aids, advancing gender equality, and promoting environmentally sustainable development.

Actions

Issues raised in some of these treaties form the bedrock that will guide discussions at the Third Africa Conference on Sexual Health and Rights.

Esiet explains: "The conference will look at the interrelationship between sexuality, poverty and crosscutting issues."

He adds: "Actions from the meeting will be taken on board by policy makers among other players in development."

Esiet has been coordinating the biennial conference over a period of time. The previous conferences in 2004 and 2006 were held in Johannesburg and Nairobi respectively.

Esiet regrets that Africa has not made much progress since the last two conferences. He cites stigma as a major hindrance. "Stigma has been a stumbling block to realising sexuality and sexual rights, and a lot can be achieved only if we work collectively, as this will bring a better understanding of issues raised," he explains.

For instance, he says, Africa has failed to work on the promotion of sexual rights. "South Africa has a liberal law on abortion but has not worked well on abortion and access to post-abortion care," he says.

The situation is aggravated by the US Gag-rule, introduced in 2001. The rule prohibits family planning assistance to any non-government organisation offering counselling on abortion.

Restrictive laws

In Africa — where most countries have restrictive abortion laws — four million unsafe abortions occur each year. In addition, more than 40 per cent of the world's deaths due to unsafe abortions occur on the continent. Esiet says these abortions would be greatly reduced if youth had access to friendly clinics. "What is needed is for the youth to have friendly family planning clinics to cater for their needs," he advises.

There has been much talk about introduction of sex education in schools. But this has not been fully done, yet the youth are sexually active. "If we don't allow sex education in schools, such problems will persist as long as the adults have a personal conflict with their own sexuality," Esiet says. He adds: "The youth will



Former Vice President Moody Awori and Dr Sarah Onyango, Regional Director IPPF-Africa during the Second Africa Conference on Sexuality and Health Rights. (Inset) Conference convenor Dr Uwem Esiet of African Federation for Sexual Health and Rights.

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only benefit if they get the right information at the right time."

He advises that programmes be established for adults to make them more comfortable with their sexuality.

Esiet says only adults who understand where they are coming from can offer the right information to the youth. "It is only with proper information that the youth will delay sexual intercourse, and when they choose to have sex, it will be at the right time with the right person," he says.

Over 10 organisations have offered sponsorship for the conference that will host delegates from all over the world. They include the National

Agency for the Control of Aids (Nigeria), National Human Rights Commission (Nigeria), International Planned Parenthood Federation Africa Region, John D and Catherine T MacArthur Foundation, Urgent Action Fund and David and Lucille Packard Foundation.

Others are Open Society Initiative of Southern Africa, IPAS, International Women's Health Coalition, Ford Foundation, Action Aid International Nigeria, Joint United Nations Agency

on AIDS and the host organisation, Action Health Incorporated (Nigeria). "We want to identify with personalities and advocates who can contribute to the discourse beyond the conference and continent," Esiet says.

The issues to be debated are as crosscutting as they are dynamic. The major highlights at the conference will be sexuality vis-à-vis culture, religion, women, sexual abuse, gender based violence, knowledge management and HIV/Aids.

It is clear that HIV/Aids has affected the world, continents, countries, and households. It has had a major impact on food security in rural areas, affecting agricultural output in most regions. Many people are dying young and in some parts of sub-Saharan Africa, life expectancy has been reduced to 30 years.

The conference will discuss HIV/Aids and sexuality under the sub-themes of family planning, access to treatment, sexual rights of people living with the virus, accountability, and integration of intervention programs and poverty.

Sexual violence

Women have been identified as the most vulnerable group. This is because a majority have no control over their sexuality. They cannot negotiate for safe sex even when their men have multiple partners. Most women have to take care of the sick and their families, even when they themselves are infected.

Sexual abuse and gender-based violence also bar women from realising their full potential. In Sub-Saharan Africa, many men unable to feed their families satisfy their anger or ego with violence. Families are threatened when men lose their economic dominance over women.

In some instances, women are forced to engage in prostitution for food. This is a glaring phenomenon in towns lying along Lake Victoria, where many women sell their bodies in exchange for fish.

To mobilise action on sexual abuse and gender based violence, the conference hopes to come up with a framework on dealing with issues like rape, intimate partner abuse, legal frameworks, childhood sexual abuse,



sexual harassment and exploitation and sexual initiation practices.

Knowledge is an important aspect in development. And population with high capacity building is said to be a confident one. This confidence can be achieved through adequate quality education.

Patriarchal

"Societies in Africa are patriarchal across everything including sexual health. This can only be reduced if every woman was educated at least up to secondary school level," says Esiet.

The patriarchal system tends to value men more than women.

The Abuja conference will discuss sexuality and knowledge management through research, training, capacity building and new technologies.

Evidence indicates that new technologies focus more on male activities. Thus, there is need to develop women friendly technologies that can make their roles lighter.

Esiet says: "As we seek to strengthen our understanding of sexuality and sexual rights, it is going to improve policy and programmatic actions and implementation."

This will mean clear-cut advocacy and lobbying.

Sexuality is often regarded as an "uncomfortable topic" in the media. Agents of change such as the media will have to play an important and more active role.

"As long as people are uncomfortable with their own sexuality, they may not understand matters of sexuality," Esiet says.

"There is need for the media to be investigative on matters of sexuality and sexual rights."

And as the world converges in Abuja, the message is clear:

"It is only when sexuality ceases to be a taboo topic in Africa that we shall manage Aids, unsafe abortions, maternal mortality and sexually transmitted infections".

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