

Sex in Utopia



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Much needs to be done if equality is to be achieved in Africa's bedrooms, but this does not mean we should stop trying

It is 2032. The continent's successes have been economic, political and social. Progressive voices and vibrant liberal movements have transformed sexual dynamics and there are equal rights for all. Lesbians are no longer subjected to 'corrective rape', young girls are no longer genitally mutilated in the name of culture and religion and unsafe abortions resulting in unnecessary death are a thing of the past.

Sadly, the state of affairs on the continent today is far removed from this ideal. Many African women are not comfortable in their own skins, and are not able to engage in safe, pleasurable and guilt-free sex. In countries like Nigeria, Ethiopia and Egypt, religion and culture still maintain a stranglehold over women's sexuality.

The rise of religious fundamentalism in these countries has resulted in the increased policing of women's bodies. "Fundamentalism is a wide tide that is absorbing the Egyptian population," says Fatma Emam, a feminist activist based in the Egyptian capital, Cairo. "Sex is a topic that summarises all the social constructed injustices on women. It is not making love; sadly it is an indicator of pain and injustice," she says.

In spite of this, many young Egyptian women are fighting back through active participation in democratic processes, through blogs and social media and by defending the ideals of the revolution they fought for in 2011. One initiative is the 'Harass Map' website which was launched by feminist Engy Ghozlan. It was established to collect data about sexual harassment in the country to help end "...the social acceptability of sexual harassment".

In Zimbabwe the 'Katswe Sistahood' is campaigning for better sexual, reproductive and health rights. They want young women to be able to go out at night without the risk of being arrested for loitering (as is the case today).

Elsewhere women

are also working towards sexual equality and freedom. In Ethiopia's conservative capital, Addis Ababa, activist Birikit Terefe describes her hopes for women in 2032: "In 20 years I hope that sex would [sic] focus more on pleasure for women than... reproduction. I hope that sex will be something women can choose to have."

Her hopes are echoed in Kenya by the queer social rights activist Gathoni Blessol who speaks of the important work that Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Questioning (LGBTIQ) activists are doing to "...reclaim our own histories of the diversity and complexities of African sexualities".

Positive work is underway, but more women, and indeed men, will need to join the fight if sexual equality across Africa is to be achievable over the next two decades.

As a starting point more women are needed in leadership roles. Today the continent has just two female heads of state. These women can at least make a start by repealing some of the abhorrent laws that currently exist on the continent. Malawi's President Joyce Banda has already indicated her readiness to discard the ban on homosexuality in her country. In my ideal world other African countries will follow suit and a stronger, more dynamic African LGBTIQ movement will emerge. But for this to happen it will also need the vocal and political support of straight allies, not to mention African leaders.

There are signs of hope. Today Uganda is seen as one of the most dangerous places to be homosexual yet the vibrancy of its progressive LGBTIQ and feminist groups could help pave the way to a better, safer and more equal society. There are many challenges but my wish list for Africa is this: stronger resistance to draconian anti-homosexuality legislation would be a good start. Women will be treated as equals and with respect; they will be able to remain single for longer if they so wish. They will be upwardly mobile and more in control over their sexual destinies than their mothers and grandmothers. All

people will be free to love whomever they wish. Maternal mortality rates will fall and the face of HIV/Aids will no longer be the one we see in the mirror.

It is a lot to ask for but I, for one, cannot wait.



Pride: being openly gay is very rare in Africa

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