
CHAPTER 6: TOWARDS A SEXUALITY OF ACCOUNTABILITY AND INTEGRATEDNESS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The third aim of this study is to contribute to a responsible and accountable sexual ethics for young black women in particular and young people in general. We are living in challenging times and sexual ethics is especially challenging. It is understandable that “practice speeds ahead both of theology and church reform” (Isherwood 1998: 42) and any ethics needs to address the gradual alienation between church and society and children and their parents. My attempt to suggest solutions for the creation and perpetuation of a healthier sexuality for young adult women is seriously marred by profound ambiguities. On the one hand female sexuality is firmly situated in the patriarchal discourses prevalent today and on the other hand feminist theologians propagate a celebratory, ecstatic sexuality that celebrates and honours womanhood. The freedom of women to express their sexuality in the African context can lead to illness and death. Patriarchy and androcentrism are still curtailing their choices. The young women taking part in the research also clearly and univocally indicate that their sexual behaviour is responsible, yet statistics show that 31% of young adult women are HIV-positive (Rakoczy 2004: 142). It is imperative to eschew a narrow, exclusive formulation of sexual ethics and attempt to address the difficulty of an inclusive sexual ethics holistically and comprehensively. In this chapter, I address some themes that can contribute to an ethics of accountability and integratedness.

6.2 A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST VIEW OF SEXUAL ETHICS

When addressing sexual ethics from the perspective of the social constructionist paradigm, the assumption that social construction is more powerful than human choice prevails, but the other assumption at play here is that women can subvert social constructs with their bodies and become moral agents. Moral agency will in due course lead to an authentic morality.

“Moral understanding is constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed within the realm of the social” (Parsons 1996: 76). The fluidity and changing nature of social life, of sexual constructs within that social realm, ask for a constant critique and reconstruction of sexual ethics. The prevalent discourses on sexuality are embedded in sexual control and power structures and need to be systematically deconstructed. Sexual ethical thinking asks of women to critically and judiciously “examine the construction of their lives and identities within the Christian tradition” (*Ibid*: 84).

An ethical construal of accountability asks for the examination of the traditions, symbols and praxis of sexuality, the manifestations and evaluation of power in sexuality and the reconstruction of discourses that can lead to a better, fuller life for all. Accountability places responsibility on the bodies and the conduct of participants, and asks for the ethical advancement of mutual moral behaviour. Because sexuality is a social construct, reconstruction can only be achieved holistically. Reconstruction of sexual discourses and changes in existent sexual behaviour can only be achieved if the issues are approached holistically and involve all the participants. An ethics of accountability and integratedness is therefore proposed to address the issues.

A sexual ethics of accountability and integratedness posits that sexuality should contribute “to the wholeness, the well-being, the freedom of women’s lives” (Dorothy Sölle in Parsons 1996: 85). An ethics of accountability and integratedness should create a new subjectivity of women, empowering them to speak and act. This ethics should lead to a new openness about sexuality, a dynamic view of God’s revelation and a hope and a dream beyond all reason for a better life for all. Indian feminist and author Arundhati Roy expresses her hope for infinite justice as follows:

To love. To be loved. To never forget your own insignificance. To never get used to the unspeakable violence and vulgar disparity of life around you. To seek joy in the saddest places. To pursue beauty to its lair. To never simplify what is

*complicated or complicate what is simple. To try and understand. To never look away. And never, never, to forget.*¹

6.3 A VERY GOOD PLACE TO START

6.3.1 INTRODUCTION

The African women theologians' plea for empowerment of women in relationships is noticeable in many of the relationships in this research, in one regard. Most of the young women who are already sexually active are able to negotiate for safe sex using condoms. This empowerment does not come from either their parents or the church, so it can be concluded that educational programmes at schools and media messages about safe sex have enlightened and empowered these young women. The previous discourse about the use of condoms has successfully been deconstructed and reconstructed. It can be done!

The question arises, though, whether young women are empowered in all aspects in their relationships to achieve equality with their partners. The research indicates that a number of young women are worried about their partner's infidelity and the fact that trust only comes from their side. Some young women are also concerned about being forced into sexual behaviour that they abominate, but they still do this in order to please their partners. This does not show empowerment and equality in relationships, but focuses on inequality and links sex with male aggression.

6.3.2 THE MATTER OF INTENTIONAL CHOICE

Some young women taking part in the research indicate that their decision to become sexually active has brought unhappiness and regret in their lives. I deduce that these erroneous decisions show a lack of proper instruction and a consequent lack of proper conceptualising about sexual actions. Young people need to be educated that sexual behaviour is a personal decision that needs to involve a lot of thought and consideration, and that reasons like loneliness, the yearning for affection and caring, drug or alcohol abuse, peer pressure or

¹ Roy, A. 2002. *the algebra of infinite justice*, 15. London: Flamingo

experimentation (Greathead 2002: 102) are never good reasons for entering into sexual relationships. They also must be made aware of the fact that individual behaviour has an impact on the greater context of their lives.

Young people need to understand that caring, sharing, commitment and intimacy must accompany sex, and that sex is only one part of a relationship (*Ibid*: 101). A sustained relationship is necessary in order to lead to a healthy sexuality. Young people need to understand that “sex can be healing and joyful, that it can lead to personal growth, that it is a way of knowing God, above all that it is *good*” (Furlong in Nelson and Longfellow 1994: 263), whether it takes place inside marriage or outside marriage. Sexual decisions that end in tears, regret and hatred can only lead to body-despising suppositions.

Karen McClintock includes a list of questions in her book *Sexual Shame: An Urgent Call to Healing* (2001: 56) to be asked before entering into any sexual relationship. The United Church of Christ in the United States propagates the use of questions like these to make moral decisions before committing to a sexual relationship. I advocate the use of a contextualised list of questions in any educational programme that educates young people about sexuality. A list would include the following questions:

- Am I motivated by love for my partner and myself?
- Will this act produce human fulfilment and wholeness?
- Will this act contribute to my relationship with God?
- What will the consequence of this sexual act be in this relationship?
- Am I committed to the depth and power of intimacy with my partner that a sexual encounter will produce?
- Have I done everything possible to protect myself and my partner from the risk of sexually transmitted diseases?
- Will my partner and I be fully responsible if a pregnancy happens?
- Will I be able to tell others whom I love about this intimate relationship?
- Will I be fully empowered as an equal partner in this relationship?

- Will I be an object in this relationship or will I be able to conduct myself as a subject of my own sexuality?

6.3.3 SEXUAL EDUCATION: A HOLISTIC AFFAIR

Sexuality must be addressed from the perspectives of religion, culture and social practice in order for education about it to succeed. Sexuality is a delicate issue that leaves people feeling vulnerable. “Any topic that involves sexuality, the birth process and marriage in many cultures of the world is a sensitive subject. It follows, therefore, that whoever dares to tamper with such an area arouses deep emotions within the people concerned” (Gachiri 2000: 130). Many feminists refer to the risk-taking involved in addressing issues like sexuality. To address sexuality in a context where female submissiveness and a male superiority complex is a given, takes courage and defiance. The enormity of the HIV/AIDS-pandemic has brought sexual issues to the surface and the realisation that such issues must be addressed, has become pertinent and urgent. A new openness to talk about sexual matters is slowly becoming discernible in society.

Sexuality is not simply a privatised issue between parents and children or between partners; it involves a whole community in some way. Sexuality locates itself at the heart of social and spiritual identity (Armour in Ackermann, Draper and Mashinini 1999: 162). I therefore assert that the issue of sexuality must be addressed holistically by all the stakeholders in the wellbeing of the community. Here I will speak to all the role-players in the education and promotion of an accountable sexuality.

6.3.3.1 THE CHURCH

The church needs to become purposefully involved in the sexual education of young people. Most of the young adults who participated in the research are regular church attendees or at least nominal churchgoers. Many of the young adult respondents indicate that they would like to attend seminars or workshops on the issues that influence young adults. They would also like to talk more about sex in groups and have guidance from the elders and/or the pastor. 86% of the respondents actually feel that the church has a duty to give young people

guidance on sexual matters. The church can thus exert an enormous influence on the definition of sexuality for young adults. The respondents also indicate that they actually listen to what the older generations have to say – the latter only have to speak! The church already possesses existing structures, activities and resources that can be broadened to encapsulate programmes for sexual education.

6.3.3.2 THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Education systems reinforce what children learn about gender roles in the family situation. What children are taught in schools is therefore extremely important in transmitting predominant social values (Mabunda and Lephala in Malherbe, Kleijwegt and Koen 2000: 122). Most of the respondents indicated that they received some sexual education at school. This is commendable, but most of these programmes focus on factual information and are normally contraceptive based. The programmes ignore the greater context in which sexuality is played out and certainly do not lead to abstemious behaviour. Christine Gudorf (1994: 155) highlights the assumptions of contemporary sexual education as being:

- The assumption that the goal of sex education is sexual abstinence
- The assumption that sex education is primarily cognitive, and should therefore promote rational, informed decision-making
- The assumption that sexuality is essentially private.

Sex education based on the above fallacies is doomed to failure. Sex education should rather lead to the development of healthy attitudes that lead to concern and respect for self and others. Sex education should provide “the student with the tools and skills – cognitive and emotional, communicative and meditative, technical and moral – to construct a responsible, satisfying sexual life for her/himself both in the present and into the future” (Whatley in Gudorf 1994: 156).

Parental silence and discomfort on sexuality exacerbates the mystification of sexuality and leaves young people with the feeling that there is no value in sex. Sex education should affirm the intense love involved in sexual relationships and

teach that sexual pleasure is a powerful force. Sex education programmes should provide to students “in a holistic manner the skills and information necessary for them to be able to responsibly pursue sexual satisfaction as both adolescents and adults” (Gudorf 1994: 159).

6.3.3.3 WOMEN’S GROUPS

Throughout Africa, women’s groups have played a major role in the empowerment of women. Many of these groups are a powerful force in communities and contribute to the equalising of gender in society. Not all mothers are comfortable talking with their daughters about sex. Women’s groups can share with young adult females their own experiences of value and meaning in sexuality and empower young women to live out their sexuality in life-affirming ways.

6.3.3.4 THE COMMUNITY

To humanise sex means to conscientise the entire community. The privatisation of sex needs to be eradicated and the whole community must be made aware of the quandary of sex and sexuality in society. The idea that sexuality means sex and that gender is a separate issue (Webster 1995: 189) must be addressed in the whole community. South Africa has one of the most liberal, women-friendly constitutions in the world and a good starting point for an appeal to equal treatment could be this constitution. The reshaping of sexuality in the community will imply the breaking of silence, the deconstruction of sexuality as having meaning only as a private matter and the conscientisation of equality in relationships. Involvement of the whole community can also ultimately benefit the whole community: healthy physical intimacy as the foundation of all human attachment and affection can contribute to eradication of hate and violence in society.

6.3.3.5 THE MEDIA

Ephigenia Gachiri (2000) feels that the media is a powerful agent for change and a tool for raising awareness amongst a variety of people. The perpetuation of female stereotypes and the eroticisation of male dominance and female

submission in the media are hardly beneficial to the cause of gender equality, but effective utilisation of media can raise the levels of awareness of the cause of gender justice.

6.3.3.6 THE PARENTS

The research makes it clear that parents wish for their children to have a good life. They hope that their children will find fulfilment and most parents warn their children about becoming sexually active too soon in their lives. The problem is, though, that parents are not equipped or willing to educate their children in matters of sex. Parents do have a tremendous influence on their children's sexual behaviour. Parents must strive to be open, healthy and positive role models for their children. They must also strive to be life-long educators about sexuality and must endeavour to teach their children how to incorporate sexuality into committed relationships. Parents can go a long way to instil beneficial feelings about sexuality in their children that will contribute to a truly accountable sexuality.

6.3.4 PROCLAIMING ABSTINENCE

The discourse about abstinence from pre-marital sex for the sake of virginity should move from the perception of male domination and ownership to a discourse of choice based on a desire for healthy and empowered sexuality.

Parents, educators and the church indeed have a duty to proclaim abstinence. Sexual encounters, worldwide and especially in Africa, are dangerous. It is a feminist imperative to enhance life and "even feminists need to call things wrong" (Isherwood 2000: 23). I shall therefore not hesitate to mention a few such wrongs. Sexual activity that endangers the lives of young women is wrong. Parents who neglect to educate their children in sexual matters are wrong. It is wrong to let young people rush headlong into sexual relationships without giving them the knowledge and ability to make informed choices. If parents, educators and the church fail to communicate the dangers of sexual relationships in a world where sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS abound, this is wrong. The failure to condemn promiscuity is wrong. The condoning of male infidelity and promiscuity in society is wrong.

Richard Wetzel (1998) is a medical author who is appalled by the increase in sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS in society. The positives of sexual relationships are affirmation, love, passionate encounters and the gift of new life, but the harmful consequences of sexual behaviour are prevalent in society. Genital sexual activity receives inordinate attention, so much so that society seems to be fixated on sex. Although Wetzel writes from the point of view that committed, heterosexual monogamy is the only alternative to sexual activity, he highlights many of the unhealthy aspects of sexuality today. He points out that many young people fall into relationships, taking risks that reaffirm “the misconception that boys ‘need’ relief from uncontrollable sexual impulses and initiates, in insecure girls, the idea of ‘giving up control of their bodies’ for the security of a boyfriend” (Wetzel 1998: 210). He blames the failure of contraceptive-based educational programmes for the following negative consequences for young people:

- greater promiscuity and risk taking among teenagers
- no reduction in pregnancy rates
- higher rates of abortions
- increased rates of sexually transmitted diseases
- overall reduction of self-esteem.

He advocates a model of pre-marital abstinence where a young couple can still enjoy a full and varied relationship; engaging in respectful, accountable and life-affirming romancing without engaging in genital sexual activity. He also supports parental guidance in sex education, where open and honest attitudes and communication of information provide a basis for sexual behaviour and attitudes.

One of the outstanding responses in the research undertaken (refer to 3.2.2.2) is the voice of a young woman whose parents got it right:

We have a typical African family. Both my parents are involved in my life and I think I was fortunate to be raised in such an environment where I was taught to make my own decisions and be supported no matter what the outcome. So when I

was twelve years old my parents told me everything I was to know about sex so that I could think of the benefits and bad things of having sex at an early age. They even took me to a clinic, so I decided to wait.

Instead of focussing on changing behaviour, the focus should rather be on instilling the correct behaviour and attitudes right at the beginning. Empowering young people to make their own responsible and accountable choices, based on a positive view of healthy sexuality, is the ideal in any educational programme.

6.4 REIMAGINING YOUNG ADULT RELATIONSHIPS

6.4.1 COMBINING *EROS*, *PHILIA* AND *AGAPE*

“Men look for a place, women look for a reason” (Caron 2003: 82). This statement highlights the difference between the sexual expectations of men and women. In order to reconstruct a healthier sexuality that acknowledges “the full and equivalent humanity of women in partnership with men” (Ruether 2000: 207 – 208), a new ethic must be constructed to replace the old ethic of silence, shame and hierarchy in sexual matters. An ethic of accountability and integratedness will endeavour to replace old ways of patterning with a true mutuality and sharing in relationships. Rosemary Radford Ruether speaks of covenant relations (*Ibid*: 214) that can replace the traditional sacraments of heterosexual marriage, baptism and confirmation in the life-cycle of Christians. These new covenants can unify the three forms of love, namely *eros*, *philia* and *agape*, which intend firstly to combine erotic love with friendship and eventually develop into a mature love of sharing and self-giving.

Rosemary Radford Ruether envisions that every relationship start with sexual-friendship vows that would give relationships significance and legitimacy without the decisions for permanency:

Such temporary vows by cohabiting couples would recognise the transitional stage between teenage sexuality and permanent commitment that is already a fact of life for many people, but that is denied or covered up by parents and youth because there exists no means of affirming it as its own stage of life. This crucial period of early sexuality between the teens and midtwenties would no longer need

be veiled in lies, with dangerous consequences for the future of both the youth and any possible offspring.

(Ruether 2000: 213)

These vows would combine *eros* and *philia*, excluding child-creation in this stage of life. A second covenant, combining *eros*, *philia* and *agape*, would then follow later when a couple wants to enter into a permanently committed relationship. This model addresses the gap that exists between the teenage years and full commitment to marriage. It takes seriously the love and sexual attraction between young adults and the sexual education that these young adults need.

6.4.2 DEVELOPING A NEW *ARS EROTICA*

According to Rosemary Radford Ruether (in Isherwood 2000: 51 – 52), sexual education during the teenage years is imperative. She propagates the development of an *ars erotica*, which will help people develop their capacity for sexual pleasure embedded in an ever-deepening friendship, “so that sex becomes increasingly an expression of love, commitment and a caring that seeks to be truly mutual” (*Ibid*: 51). *Ars erotica* has an ethical connotation, because it contributes to moral growth over many years. She envisions that the development of an *ars erotica* could take place during initiation ceremonies where young females and males can be taught

how to develop their capacity for erotic delight, practice contraception so that they can responsibly choose when to have a child, and regard their sexual partner as one to be loved and cherished. They should be helped to see this as a process of moral development, not a once-for-all leap from virginity to marriage that can take place overnight at the point where church and state pronounces them ‘man and wife’.

(*Ibid*: 52)

An *ars erotica* would entail a deeper friendship and fidelity along with love, commitment, caring, erotic delight and moral development. *Ars erotica* entails the humanising of sex, which “carries an element of socializing the male to the female point of view on sex and relationships, and controlling the male tendency to view sex, and hence women, as casual conquest” (Ruether 2000: 218). The

development of an *ars erotica* can help young people who are already sexually active but not ready for permanent commitment to see sex as a maturation process and a process of growth towards relationality and mutuality. Premarital sex will then not be judged as sexual immorality, but casual, violent, abusive and non-caring sex would be immoral. “Sex becomes moral as it moves increasingly to integrate eros and friendship, to inspire partners to be faithful and committed to one another’s wellbeing” (*Ibid*: 219).

The application of an *ars erotica* in an African context would mean the defeat of patriarchal hierarchies in society and church, the development of an aversion to the male preference for casual sexual relations and the celebration of sexual pleasure combined with deepening friendship and respect. The initiation ceremonies already exist in Africa; it is just the aim and content of these ceremonies that must change to lead towards new cultural developments. This also has the added benefit of involving the community in the initiation of young people. They must supply the guidance and knowledge. It will help lift the veil of shame that shrouds sexuality in the community and which has led to immutable suffering and pain.

6.4.3 SEXUAL PLEASURE AS MUTUALITY

In a sex-preoccupied society, it is important to note the findings of two recent cross-cultural studies². Lisa Isherwood (2000: 26 – 32) reports that the findings of the WRAP and MRAP projects make for depressing reading indeed. Young women in sexual relationships are left with little choice and need to negotiate their position within a structurally unequal relationship. Sex education strengthens male superiority, dominance and desire and takes no cognisance of female desire: “Young men felt that they had to express desire and young women that they had to satisfy it” (*Ibid*: 28). Pleasure in sex is gender defined and young women “are drawn into their own disempowerment through their conception of what sexual

² The first study reports the findings of the WRAP (Women, Risk and AIDS) and MRAP (Men, Risk and AIDS) projects, published in *The Male in the Head*, 1998, by Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe and Thompson, The Tufnell Press, London. The second study, *Daring to Desire: Culture and the Bodies of Adolescent Girls*, by Deborah L. Tolman is published in *The Politics of Women’s Bodies*, Rose Weitz (editor), 2003, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

encounters are about. Sadly they are understood as his orgasm and her part in it” (*Ibid*: 28).

Men find female desire threatening and in some cases, the display of female sexual desire leads to women being typecast as nymphomaniacs and whores. All the young women taking part in this project report that they experience undue pressure to have penetrative sex. Consent is given for fear of either violence or the erroneous belief that they are responsible for the male arousal and they have to satisfy it in the way the male requires. Most of the young women report that they fake orgasms and that there is a general disinclination on the part of the men to use condoms. Men are actually more willing to use condoms if they perceive the women as sluts and the use of condoms as then protecting them from disease. The study indicates that women’s sexuality is disembodied and women are simply reduced to “passive and fragmented sexual objects” (*Ibid*: 30). Young women feel powerless against this powerful patriarchal discourse and although they are aware of the dichotomy, they accept it as inevitable. It leaves women with little choice as women “are encouraged to gain control over the surfaces of their bodies but to give away control in social relations, intercourse and pleasure” (*Ibid*: 30). Many findings of the WRAP and MRAP studies correlate with the findings of my own research.

The second study focuses on the absence of any discourse about the young female’s sexual desire in the literature. This void is explained by feminists as follows: “the cultural context of women’s lives denies female sexual desire or acknowledges it only to denigrate it, suppressing women’s voices and bodies by making it socially, emotionally and often physically dangerous for women to be in touch with or speak openly about their own sexual feelings” (Tolman in Weitz 2003: 101). Deborah Tolman goes on to show that young women do experience sexual desire, but that this desire is embedded in relationships. This is in accordance with Audre Lorde’s definition of the erotic as a powerful, intense, affirmative relational force.

Tolman finds that social contexts tend to impact on the way young women experience sexual desire. She reports that the girls in the study do not have the language to describe their sexual feelings and that they find talking about their bodies and sexual feelings difficult: "While many of them did speak about their bodies, they also spoke sparingly and said little. When they voiced their bodies in response to my direct questions, their reticence suggested their knowledge, which I shared, that in speaking about desire itself, we were breaking with culture, resisting a cultural taboo that renders the body, particularly a girl's body and the sexual parts of her body, unspeakable" (*Ibid*: 105). The young women in this study also voice their vulnerability in sexual relationships and Tolman finds a direct link between their sexual desire and danger. Voicing sexual desire can often lead to humiliation and many girls in the study "describe a self-silencing and portray a vigilant caution regarding their own sexual desire" (*Ibid*: 110). Social stigmatisation silences the erotic voice, the voice of the female body.

Interestingly, Tolman differs from the WRAP study about the disembodiment of young female sexuality. She finds when "they spoke of their responses to their sexual desire, they gave voice to an agency in which they are sexual objects of their own feelings rather than simply objects of the desire of others. This agency is informed by their own embodied erotic voice and the voices of the social world in which they live" (*Ibid*: 105).

The extreme difficulties of young women in voicing sexual desire and in being subjects in sexual relationships are highlighted by the two abovementioned studies. According to Lisa Isherwood (2000: 225) contemporary sexuality on the whole is deeply dysfunctional. Feminist theologians must continue working towards sexual justice where women find self determination and sexual self esteem. The male monologue on sexuality needs to be interrupted so that women's voices can also be heard. Safe sex needs to transgress the current pleasure/danger dualism and find imaginative and creative ways of expression. "Safe sex is radical incarnation in that it embodies all our eschatological hopes in and between us in acts of vulnerability and passion. It is also redemptive as it ushers in a revolution that turns the existing order on its head" (*Ibid*: 226).

An ethic of accountability and integratedness propagates the full humanity and equality of male and female. An ethic of accountability propagates values like mutuality, maturity, cooperation, responsibility and reciprocity. The implementation of such values would lead to a re-evaluation of the values and attitudes predominant in patriarchally-defined relationships. This should lead to liberation from sexual stereotypes and a different regarding of sexual pleasure. It should also eradicate the danger inherent in relationships.

6.4.4 ESTABLISHING A VIABLE LINK BETWEEN SEXUALITY AND FRIENDSHIP

The idea that sexual desire is irrevocably linked to genital activity precludes friendship and relating significantly outside the rigidity of genital sex. Many feminists advance a model of friendship as the basis of relationships. When friendship enters a relationship, relationality becomes a central tenet. Women generally have a high regard for friendship, but friendship as a model has never taken root, because male experience has always been the normative paradigm. Friendship is propagated by feminists, though, and “is now understood from a feminist perspective as a normative adult relationship, a standard by which all relationships can be evaluated” (Hunt in Isherwood and McEwan 1996: 74).

This view places sexuality within the realm of friendship and defines it as a qualitative experience. Friendship in relationships incorporates love, power, sexuality, mutuality and commitment. Friendship as the norm can form the basis of a sexual ethics of accountability. It can contribute to a healthier notion of sexuality where an ever-deepening friendship integrates into erotic pleasure, mutual respect and moral maturity. Young people must be educated to regard friendship in relationships as a normal part of culture.

6.5 CHALLENGING THE CHURCH

6.5.1 INTRODUCTION

“Most churches, like families, don’t do a very good job of talking with their young people about sex” (McClintock 2001: 15). The research undertaken indicates that

most pastors do not talk about sex in church. The research has also shown that approximately eighty percent of young adult women are sexually active in pre-marital relationships. According to the July 2002 UNAIDS report the statistics show that 31% of the HIV-infected in South Africa are young women (Rakoczy 2004: 142). If this statistic is applied to the research population, it means that more than a quarter of the respondents are already infected by HIV. The reality is that the church has a sexual ethic for twenty percent of the young adult women, while it ignores or condemns eighty percent of the young women, leaving them vulnerable and exposed. The contribution of the church to the problem of sex and the problem of HIV/AIDS cannot be disputed; therefore the church has a responsibility to become involved.

6.5.2 ACCEPTING RESPONSIBILITY FOR SEXUAL EDUCATION

The church can no longer remain silent about sex. It must address the sexuality and spirituality of young adult women. It is imperative to incorporate this body of young adult women and men into the body of God. The church needs to accept responsibility to prepare and guide young people for an accountable sexuality and to adequately educate and prepare young people toward healthy sexual behaviour. The church needs to reach compassionately out to young people who are in dire need of guidance, not condemnation. The church must fill the existent void with apposite sexual training.

The church is quick to condemn female sexual activity, which is more visible by virtue of pregnancy and childbirth than that of the male, whose sexual activity is more hidden. Male behaviour and male infidelity have been identified as problematic in relationships. If the church does not address sexuality in terms of male and female behaviour, this means that it condones male behaviour, which perpetuates the *status quo* of male domination and female submission.

6.5.3 CHALLENGING THE CHURCH TO RESPOND

Madipoane Masenya (in Phiri, Haddad and Masenya 2003: 125 – 126) highlights the responsibility of the church towards human sexuality that specifically

addresses the alleviation of the above mentioned problem: “the church membership needs to be re-educated to undo the problematic education received from the traditional male leadership and its teachings”. Education must address the issue of women’s empowerment and should redefine and transform African culture in a manner that is life-giving to men and women. Education would imply that patriarchy in the church and the African culture must be exposed as an immoral system of suppression, which is used to propagate inequalities between people who are created equally in the image of God. Madipoane Masenya asserts that patriarchy idolises the male sex at the expense of the female sex to the detriment of the latter.

The church must furthermore revisit and reinterpret male interpretations of the Bible, which purport that the female is inferior to the male. Androcentric interpretations of the Bible lead to unequal sex roles and distort African womanhood. Bible interpretation should be empowering and life-giving and should affirm the full humanity of the female. The church must affirm the full humanity of the African woman, even in the face of resistance from its membership. Madipoane Masenya feels that women must insist on the redefinitions of womanhood, “particularly if they prove to be life-giving in our death-invested HIV/AIDS contexts” (*Ibid*: 126).

6.5.3 A TASK FOR THE CHURCH: REIMAGINING SEXUALITY

The church faces a credibility problem with an antiquated and inadequate sexual ethics that asks for unmarried celibacy and married fidelity. I am in agreement with Sheila Greeve Davaney (in Chopp and Davaney 1997: 6) that religious teachings and practice still play a vital role in the production of culture. The church thus has a role to play in the formation of a healthier, inclusive sexual ethics that takes into account the sexuality of everyday life. The church has to address many untouched faces of sexuality. The moral substance of a committed, faithful and loving relationship between two adult partners is beyond question, but falls beyond the moral rigidity of church sanction on sexuality. Marvin Ellison (in Nelson and Longfellow 1994: 236) posits that the

church's lack of moral leadership on sex has in fact infantilized people, disempowering them to make responsible sexual choices. By defining a whole range of sexual experiences as sinful, the church has promoted guilt rather than sexual maturity; it has not helped people learn how to accept what they need, give and receive sexual pleasure freely, and direct their lives in order to enhance their own and others' joy and self-respect. If the church is going to be helpful here, it has to be willing to undertake a major shift in its ethical sensibilities.

An ethic of accountability that takes seriously responsibility of choice and deed, and which advocates gender justice and equality, would alter the unjust norm of heterosexuality and gender inequality. The church must therefore challenge and critique the misconceptions in society, culture and ecclesiology. Equalitarian marriage would then become only one representation of accountable sexuality, leaving space for alternative models of accountable sexuality to be created. An ethic of accountability would require from a relationship a high degree of ethical responsibility, mutual commitment, trust, respect and sexual delight. The task of the church is to deconstruct the archaic model of sexual ethics and teach new, resourceful ways of embodying sexuality and transgressing previously impenetrable moral borders.

Marvin Ellison (*Ibid*: 240) also makes suggestions about the role of the church in educating young people on sexuality. He posits that young people

need an ethic of empowerment rather than control. They need access to accurate, reliable information about human sexuality, encouragement to explore their own values and needs in a nonjudgemental and supportive environment, and recognition of their self-worth and ability to make genuinely life-enhancing decisions, as well as their fortitude to deal with the consequences of their choices.

These words describe exactly the moral ground for an ethics of accountability. The church has a further task to renounce unjust sex: relationships where people are abused, violated and exploited. The church also needs to acknowledge the fact that it often revictimizes victims of sexual and other abuse by employing spiritual abuse. David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen (1991: 98 – 99) say in this regard: “The travesty of how abused women are silenced and made to remain in

abusive situations through the use of God's Word is as widespread as it is appalling".

A sexual ethics of accountability will enhance peoples' self-respect, self-esteem and general well-being and will always be liberating and just. Sexual pleasure will become mutual and responsive without the fear of the woman to be shamed and labelled. Erotic power in relationships also has the additional benefit of carrying justice into the social realm and contributes to a more just, ethical world.

6.5.5 REIMAGINING GOD

6.5.5.1 INTRODUCTION

As already mentioned in 2.3.2, Mary Daly famously contends, "if God is male, then the male is God" (quoted in Isherwood 2000: 119). The prevailing images of God as male have created copious problems for women. For many feminist theologians an answer to the problem of a patriarchal God is in the theorising of the divine outside the constraints of patriarchy. This branch of feminism, theology, reflects on the divine in feminine and feminist terms. In theology the divine is often called the *Goddess*. Theology has not taken hold in Africa and the rehabilitation of old images of God seems to be the answer here.

6.5.5.2 DECONSTRUCTING GOD AS MALE

Elizabeth Johnson (in Russell and Clarkson 1996: 128 – 132) contends that the literal conception of God as a masculine ruler destroys the assertion of God as an incomprehensible mystery beyond all imagining. The ontological connection between the divine and human maleness has led to the legitimisation of male supremacy and domination. The reimagining of God is an ongoing task in feminist theology. Women's experience contributes greatly to rethinking symbols and concepts of God and to creating new metaphors for the divine, aiming at women's messianic equality. The image of God is open-ended and continues to seek "symbols of the divine that function to endorse women, build just and equal relationships in the community of women and men" (*Ibid*: 130). A more inclusive

image of God will contribute towards a more balanced, equalitarian view of male and female, which will consequently become apparent in sexual relationships.

6.5.5.3 GOD AND EMBODIMENT: FULFILLING THE IDEA OF FULL HUMANITY

Ntozake Shange (in Grey 2001: 73) verbalises the feminist image of an embodied divine when she exclaims: “I found God within myself and I loved her, I loved her fiercely”. This idea of embodiment comes forward consistently in the present research, where the young women find God inside themselves or with them in everything that they think and do.

The positive reappropriation of female embodiment and the fullness of the woman’s humanness, lead to a revitalised worthiness and equality before God and mutuality in female-male relations. Full humanity is only to be found in the very embodied image of the divine. The constant yearning of the African woman for justice and full humanity is woven into the hope for transformation and new humanness. Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2001: 115) quotes the yearning of an African woman for a loving relationship and full partnership as follows:

I yearned to be a liberated woman who needs a man for the right reasons – reasons of friendship, mutual respect and support, trust, reciprocal dependence, and love which, in going beyond mere sex and childbearing, encompassed the feelings and the soul.

6.5.5.4 GOD AS RELATIONAL

The yearning for a new and reciprocal mutuality in sexual relationships finds an echo in the longing for women to reimagine God as relatedness. God is then no longer the cold, distant and jealous God of patriarchy, but the possibility of relatedness in all human beings. Relatedness then becomes “*utterance, word, attraction, flux, energy, and passion*” (Gebara 1999: 103); Gebara’s emphasis. God *is* relationship and discourse on God is dependent on relationships and relational behaviours. Relationships therefore affirm God.

Feminist theology has a task to consider other images of humanity and of God. God reimagined as relatedness means that God is in all and that all is in God. The reconceptualising of womanhood as full humanity means that the goodness of female bodily experiences can also be reclaimed. Carter Heyward (in Grey 2001: 78) defines the relationality between humanity and God as erotic power:

The erotic is our most fully embodied experience of the love of God. As such, it is our capacity for transcendence, the 'crossing over' among ourselves, making connections between ourselves in relation. The erotic is the divine spirit's yearning, through our body selves, towards mutually empowering relation, which is our most fully embodied experience of God as love.

It is only through truly mutual and equal relationships that we become accountable towards one another in a new self-understanding and understanding of others. An ethics of accountability and integratedness will renew and recreate the lives and relationships between young people and create the awareness that they themselves are accountable for their future destinies.

6.6 CONCLUSION

Parents, the church and belief influence the sexual lives of young women in varying degrees. The research has shown that these influences are not adequate to address the issues that young women have to face in contemporary society. Sexual formation needs to be addressed holistically and responsibly by all the caretakers of young people. The culture of silence about sexual matters must be broken so that sexuality can be lived in a healthy and fulfilling way. Any sexual education and formation must take into account the socio-cultural-sexual context of behaviour and society as a whole must contribute to help young people subsist wholesomely in an age of turmoil and confusion.