CHAPTER 7
REFLECTION AND VISION

7.1 INTRODUCTION

This study was inspired by the continuing and worrying problem of risk in the sexual relationships of young adult women. It is my responsibility in the workplace to train and educate young black women and also to undertake HIV/AIDS awareness training. This has sensitised me to the issue of sex in a precarious and unsafe environment and to young people’s seemingly hazardous sexual responses in this environment. In the last chapter I want to reflect on the study and my findings and put forward the strains of hope and empowerment that the study yielded.

7.2 MY JOURNEY

My journey started by exploring what the literature has to offer in order to answer the research question. As this study was undertaken from a feminist theological viewpoint, I focussed on what has been written on this subject. I found that the experience of women in society and the lack of their full humanity are accentuated in the literature. I found an interesting and important convergence of facts on issues of embodiment. The noticeable lack of sufficient research on the sexual behaviour of young adult women intrigued me. Apart from casual references to or emphasis on deviant behaviour, the literature is devoid of comprehensive research about the general sexual behaviour of young adult women, especially in South Africa where almost a third of young people, mostly female, are HIV-positive. I therefore feel that this study is timely and necessary.

The questionnaires yielded a lot of interesting material to be analysed. The abyss between what parents and church propagate and what young women actually do, became apparent as soon as I started analysing the responses. I also realised that the context and discourses in which sexuality is lived, colour everything that these young people do and believe in. It became apparent that the context and discourses are unhealthy and very dangerous for young women. The
questionnaires give young black women voices to speak about sexuality in their own life-worlds.

In order to understand the sexual issues of young black women better, I analysed the context and discourses prevalent in women’s lives. I found that the current context and narratives contribute to a toxic sexual environment. My analysis pointed towards one major contributing factor to the danger of contemporary sexuality: the culture of silence and mystery surrounding sexuality actually influences and exacerbates the idea that male sexuality is a male prerogative and right, regardless of the consequences for themselves and women. Women and children are victims in male dominated societies and only male behaviour transformation can stop the uncontrolled spread of the killer disease AIDS.

Analysis of the context and discourses prevalent in the lives of young black adult women led me to conclude that social discourses override parental discourses and religious discourses. Sexual behaviour is hence a consequence of societal voices, which unconsciously govern everyday behaviour and where men cast women in a subordinate position. I realise that although women indeed need to change their vision of themselves in order to resist predominant societal voices, society must also change the way it perceives women and the role women play in society.

My analysis of the context and discourses about sexuality forced me to look for alternatives. I turned to what secular feminists and feminist theologians have to say about sexuality. Sexuality is approached from a wide range of perspectives, but all seem to concur that patriarchy and the perpetuation of male dominance in society leave women vulnerable and at risk. The aim of feminist theology is the full humanity and redemption of women. I found the critiques, perspectives and alternatives that feminist theology offer very exciting and they certainly widened the perspectives that I originally had on the issue of young female sexuality.
So many factors impact on the sexual behaviour of young women that I realised that limiting my suggestions towards an enhanced sexuality to a new parental and ecclesiastic openness, would be narrow and confining. I therefore explored themes within an ethical notion of accountability. I posited that young people, parents, church and society are all accountable for educating each other towards a healthier societal sexuality. I also put forward the argument that existing discourses and behaviour need modification to encompass a sexuality of mutual well being, as contemporary discourses actually harm young women. I finally contend that sexuality needs to be re-imagined in order to be completely just and relational.

In the next section (7.3) I will continue to summarise the research findings more comprehensively and simultaneously point out the unique findings of the research.

7.3 THE INFLUENCE OF PARENTS, CHURCH AND BELIEF ON THE SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS OF YOUNG ADULT BLACK WOMEN

The research undertaken gave me the chance to explore and analyse the sexual issues prevalent in the lives of a group of young black women. 42 young women filled out a lengthy questionnaire handed to them and through these questionnaires I explored their views on sexuality and also established the influence of the parents, church and belief on their sexual behaviour.

7.3.1 THE INFLUENCE OF PARENTS ON THE SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS OF YOUNG ADULT BLACK WOMEN

I found that although parents are very concerned about the sexual behaviour of their daughters, they are also generally hesitant and shy to talk about sexual issues with their children. They tend to lay down the rules and voice their expectations and then expect their children to abide by those rules. They do not extensively discuss issues of sexuality with their children. The young women in the study indicated that they are actually eager for their parents to discuss these matters with them and that they are willing to listen to their parents. Young women
therefore do not have the power of knowledge and a solid grounding needed to make moral choices. Parents are left powerless because their daughters do exactly the opposite of what they expect from them and parents actually do not have the skills to address sexuality issues. I concluded that parental voices are weak and insufficient in the face of social voices that prescribe the sexual behaviour of young adult women.

7.3.2 THE INFLUENCE OF THE CHURCH ON THE SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS OF YOUNG ADULT BLACK WOMEN

The church has a very rigid moral framework and mostly adheres to an antiquated moral doctrine. Sexuality is an issue that is not often discussed in church. Although the study showed that most pastors are vigilant in discussing HIV/AIDS in church, the broader issue of sexuality is not addressed in church. This omission creates a void in the moral lives of young women and they are left without clear and definite guidelines for their moral behaviour in contemporary society. The voices of their peers often speak louder than the voice of the church and they therefore continue to participate in their death-inducing sexual behaviour. The moral guidance of the church propagates ethical rules that cannot find application in young adults’ contemporary lives. A third of the young women taking part in the research indicate that they no longer find the church a spiritual home and that they would rather leave the church than change their sexual behaviour. Here I deduce that the sexual ethics propagated by the church is outmoded and cannot address the sexual issues in contemporary society. Pastors are floundering because the traditional sexual ethics of the church cannot find application in today’s society. They voice an antiquated ethics that very few people listen to or adhere to.

7.3.3 THE INFLUENCE OF BELIEF ON THE SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS OF YOUNG ADULT BLACK WOMEN

The deep belief of the young women taking part in the research and their obvious love for God cannot be disputed. But many of these young women’s lives are compartmentalised. On the one hand they believe in and love God, which places them in a specific theological framework, while on the other hand they are
influenced by social discourses that place them in a disparate societal framework. The dichotomy between belief and behaviour leaves them with very difficult and conflicting choices. They are also left with constant, nagging guilt-feelings about their behaviour and they often feel shamed about their behaviour. It is interesting that many young women feel that what they do with their bodies, is something separate from their belief in God. Sex and God cannot be merged into a comprehensive whole. In the face of sexual choices religion is relegated to the fringes of life, which contributes to a separation between religion and sexual behaviour. Here I conclude that religious voices are lost in the greater context of social voices and this leaves young adult women disembodied and confused.

7.3.4 CONCLUSION

I have concluded that the moral guidance, which young adult women receive from their parents and the church, is not adequate to equip them for ethical choices. Their own beliefs do not empower them enough and therefore leave them with feelings of helplessness when they need to make moral decisions. Societal discourses are dominant in their lives and suppress the parental and religious discourses they are exposed to.

Young adult women are left torn between what their parents and the church expect from them and what they actually do and want. They view sex as necessary, natural and an expression of the love they feel towards their partners. Young African women often suffer from a lack of self esteem and they want to feel normal and align themselves with peer attitudes and behaviour. Social discourses dictate that they become sexually active. Parental and religious voices are too weak to tell young women otherwise and to convince them to do otherwise.

7.4 THE INFLUENCE OF THE MAIN DISCOURSES ON SEX ON THE BEHAVIOUR OF YOUNG ADULT WOMEN

I found in the research that the influence of parents, the church and belief is actually limited and these voices are definitely not the predominant voices that impact on the sexual lives of young adult women. Their sexuality is lived in a
context where many social discourses dictate behaviour. The research undertaken clearly indicates that many young adult women are left helpless and vulnerable in the face of male hegemony in society. Parental control and education, the views of the church and the internalised convictions of voices and discourses in society actually contribute to and exacerbate the vulnerability of young adult women. A discourse prevalent in African society is that men have the right to regular sex, often concurrently with multiple partners. Women are left without choices in their relationships and sex is something that happens to them. Sex is something where they do not even have a modicum of power.

The perpetuation of irresponsible and arbitrary male sexual behaviour was identified as a major issue in both female subjugation and the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS. It is abundantly clear that a lot of sex goes on outside the primary sexual relationships, contributing to the susceptibility of women to the HI-virus. Another problem which was identified, is the erroneous belief that marriage is the only safe place for sexuality to be practised. Marriage is often a very dangerous place for women to be.

7.5 FEMINIST RESPONSES TO THE MAIN DISCOURSES ON SEX

As I found the context in which the sexuality of young adult women is lived inadequate and actually dangerous, I turned to the alternatives that feminist theologians and African women theologians offer, with the hope that these alternatives can actually contribute to a healthier and safer sexuality.

Feminist and African women theologians critique the participation of women in sexual acts where they are not truly free but where they are subjected to male power play and dominance. They posit that sexuality must be deconstructed and then reconstructed to equalise female participation, to banish the sexual shame that accompanies sexuality and which both females and males are often subjected to, and to raise sexuality to a level where it can be experienced as celebratory and empowering. Healthy and affirming embodiment should then inevitably lead to healthy and life-affirming sexual behaviour.
I deem the feminist perspectives on sexuality to be very important in this study. I agree with Helene Cixous (in Greer 1999: 107) when she expostulates: “Censor the body and you censor breath and speech ... Write yourself. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth”. Feminists contend that sexuality is invariably social and public in its implications and that a female body is a social construct that serves male needs. Throughout this study, the following questions arose frequently in my thoughts: Why do these young black women become involved and continue with sexual behaviour that can end their lives? Why do these young women so willingly submit to the sexual domination of their partners? Why do they so blindly buy into the hetero-patriarchal meta-narratives and allow themselves to be positioned in dangerous places? The answers to these questions are not easy and many feminists reflect and theorise on the issues surrounding sexuality.

Body theology abhors the fact that women have so little power over their own bodies and that they lead disembodied lives. It affects their own lives as well as their relationships. Bodiliness is highly personal, but also interpersonal and intrapersonal. Theology should be embodied and grounded in experience and the interconnectedness that arises from embodiment. God must not be seen as something outside bodiliness but “experienced as the erotic power manifest in relationships based upon justice and mutuality which creates a passion for justice in all relationships” (Stuart in Isherwood and McEwan 1996: 24).

The body is therefore not a disembodied entity, but real, important and vital. Theology must be concerned with the everyday bodily experiences of people and not only with the so-called higher, spiritual issues. When the spiritual is viewed as superseding the bodily, it fragments human reality. Lived sexuality and full embodiment point to “the essential nature of God, which is relationships” (Nelson in Isherwood and Stuart 1998: 43). Healthy embodiment is therefore essential to know, to experience and to love God.
7.6 EXPLICATING AN ALL-ENCOMPASSING SEXUAL ETHIC

I lastly explored themes of sexuality within an ethics of accountability and integratedness, where I posit that more role-players than only parents and the church are needed to educate young people about sexuality and that these role-players need to be challenged to contribute towards a healthier sexuality for young adult women.

While parents and the church must indeed still play a primary role in the sexual formation of young women, the sexual behaviour of young people is a societal problem and needs therefore to be addressed by the entire society. I consequently proceeded to identify the following role-players that should contribute to the sexual education of young women: the church, parents, the education system, women’s groups, the community and the media. It is only through holistically subverting current social discourses that behavioural change can be brought about.

Parents and church are challenged to open up and speak about sexual matters to young people and to challenge the current sexual discourses that leave women vulnerable and powerless. The limited influence of parents, church and belief must be strengthened and all role-players are challenged to become involved and to approach sexual education holistically and contextually. The idea that male sexuality is all-pervasive must be challenged and sexuality must be re-imagined within an empowering context of equality, choice and mutuality. Sexuality must celebrate female strength and creativeness and lead to a better future for all.

7.7 EXPLORING THE INITIAL AIMS OF THE STUDY

7.7.1 THE FIRST AIM

The first aim of this study is to give a voice to young adult black women to talk about their experiences of sex and influences on their sexual behaviour. The literature study revealed that very little is actually said about the sexual behaviour of young adult women. Where the literature addresses this topic, it focuses on
deviant behaviour. Teenage sexuality seems to be a popular topic and is well represented in the literature but very little is said about the target group: young adults between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four. It is as if this age group does not exist or as if they are not deemed important. The few voices which I came across which actually address this issue, express concerns about behaviour and do not address the interface between sexuality and religion in great depth.

The comprehensive questionnaires handed to the young women allowed them to speak out about sexuality; for most of them the first opportunity in their lives. They discussed issues that concern them – the first questionnaire made provision for them to choose issues that they actually wanted to talk about. The seriousness with which they approached the questionnaires impressed me. They wanted to speak and they wanted to be heard. The first aim of this study was certainly achieved – the voices were open, honest and beyond my expectations.

7.7.2 THE SECOND AIM

The second aim was to describe the actual influence of the parental home, the church and young women’s belief on their sexual behaviour. My findings here are very definite and clear. The research shows that the influences of parents and the church on the young women’s behaviour are limited, prescriptive or absent. Parents are very tentative and reticent to talk about sexual matters at home. Apart from warnings and sometimes tantrums about behaviour, parents generally do not sit down and discuss sexual issues with their children.

The church also does not address sexual issues directly and comprehensively with young adults. There are warnings and admonitions about HIV/AIDS, but very little about a healthy sexuality. The young women indicated in the research that their pastor knows very well how young people behave but they generally ignore the behaviour and do not equip their young parishioners with the skills to handle sexual issues. I also found that pastors themselves approach sexuality from different positions. Some never talk about it, some condemn pre-marital sex outright, some see AIDS as the retribution of a punishing God, while others advocate safe sex. My research indicates that the sexual ethics propagated by the
church is simply too narrow and obsolete to address sexual issues in contemporary African societies, and I therefore conclude that the clergy do not have really workable answers to the problems.

Belief impacts a great deal on the young women in the study. Some young women believe that sexuality is such a natural and integral part of their lives that God condones their behaviour, while most of them put God aside when they engage in sexual relations. But more often than not, sexual behaviour is accompanied by guilt and shame. To have sex means to pray frequently for forgiveness! I also found it significant that a third of these young Christian believers do not find a spiritual home in the church any longer because many of them feel that the underlying, often-silent reproaches about their behaviour drive them from the church.

The second aim of this study thus reached the conclusion that the influences of the parental home, the church and own belief are inadequate to equip young women with decision-making skills about sexuality in today’s world.

7.7.3 THE THIRD AIM

The third aim of this study is to contribute to an accountable and healthier sexuality amongst young black women. Achieving this aim was complicated and thought provoking. I found in the research that the parental voices and the voice of the church do not really contribute towards a healthy sexuality for young adult women. Pummelled by voices from society, the media and their peers, they do not really listen to the pleasure-killing voices of their parents and pastors. There are reasons why parents, the church and belief are not adequate to address the important issue of sexuality. There are also reasons why pastors find it difficult to address sexuality in the spiritual environment of the church and why the young women feel guilty and ashamed about their behaviour. I found it necessary to attend to these reasons.

I consequently explored the problem of sex – the power-dominated male discourses about sex that are prevalent in church and society. These discourses
give men the right to strut about and dominate women sexually and otherwise. They give men the right to have sex when they want and where they want with whom they want, with little regard for the consequences. The biggest problem that I identified here is that male infidelity and male promiscuity place women at risk and set them in the centre of an ever-increasing spiral of violence and abuse. The silence of the church in sexual matters exacerbates this problem and a lack of proper understanding of the socio-cultural-sexual-religious context in Africa contributes to the unbounded escalation of HIV/AIDS in Africa and especially in South Africa. Another problem that I identified is the fact that women have very little choice in sexual matters, rendering them helpless and vulnerable.

I then turned to feminism and feminist theology in order to find better alternatives to the problem of sex. Feminist theology is serious about analysing the sexual cultures of societies and the infringement of female bodily rights. These theologians also critique dualism, patriarchy, misogyny and male supremacy in society, that demote women to secondary beings and the property of the all-powerful male. They bemoan the split between body and soul that the church intensifies, because the church exclusively represents spiritual matters. This split between body and soul, which is not characteristic of African holism, very clearly emerged in the research, where young women start leaving the church because their sexuality is not welcome there. Feminist theology claims the re-alignment of male and female equality, the right of women to negotiate bodily safety and health and spiritual egalitarianism in society and church.

The analysis of feminist perspectives gave me hope and clarity about the exposition of a sexual ethics. I decided to explore themes that can contribute to a holistic and accountable sexuality for young women. Promiscuous behaviour, pre-marital sex, pregnancy without two responsible parents, sexually transmitted diseases, violence, abuse, HIV/AIDS are societal problems and cannot be privatised to belong to the home only. More people than only the parents and the pastor must become involved. I found that parents lack the necessary skills to educate their children about sexual matters and that pastors are caught in an inadequate sexual ethics paradigm. Young women are in constant conflict about
what social discourses and religious discourses prescribe. I therefore contend that society as a whole is accountable for the sexual health of the young people in the community.

I also explored the restrictive sexual ethics that society and church apparently support but do not manage to live by. Male victory and female submission seems to be the expected scenario for any sexual encounter. Females have little power in sexual matters and they are not expected to experience any pleasure. I also have a nagging suspicion that the fact that the young women can negotiate sex with condoms may not indicate power on their part, but rather merely a decoy from the male, in order to entice or cajole the young women into sex. A sexuality where male and female are equal partners must be taught and propagated in society. Male fidelity must be taught. Here I support the Ugandan model where male infidelity dropped phenomenally in a just more than a decade (refer to 7.8). It was taught and propagated in society and therefore showed the necessary results. Young people, male and female, must be taught that sexual relationships should include the powerful forces of love and friendship in order to have authentic meaning. Young people must be taught that giving pleasure is greater than asking for pleasure. Mutuality and responsibility in relationships must be disseminated in relationships so that the male monologue about sex can change into a spontaneous and loving dialogue between equal partners. I finally challenged parents and the church to respond in an accountable way to lighten the female sexual burden and to create safe spaces for women to exercise their sexuality.

The identification of the problems concerning sex in society and the establishment of solutions to these problems means that I have addressed the issue of sex and accomplish the third aim.

7.7.4 CONCLUSION

The three aims that I initially set were formulated to answer the research question: *What is the role of the parental home, church and belief in the sexual relationships of young black women?* I endeavoured to answer this question by analysing the
limited and inadequate role played by parents, church and belief, by addressing the context and discourses in the lives of young adult females and by creating an ethics of integratedness and accountability that can address and assuage the issues that young women face in today’s society.

7.8 REFLECTION ON THE STUDY IN A BIGGER CONTEXT AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

During the study, I often became aware of the almost insurmountable and overwhelming challenges facing society, where moral issues have become life and death issues. I also realised that the challenges facing feminist theologians and African women theologians are enormous.

The embodiment of women in the context of a patriarchal society is rife with ambiguities and dichotomies. The Judeo-Christian tradition configured sexuality to the narrow concept of reproductivity and moreover embedded the idea that gender connection can only take place through sex. African culture is also a male dominated culture where women are treated as property and where violent sex and rape is rampant. Male centring of penetrative sex, as an imperative male right, leaves women disconnected and alienated. The male belief that they have the right to frequent sex with multiple partners, has left women vulnerable and at risk. Men are not left untouched by the discourses in society. Men are also disembodied because the discourse dictates that men must be separated from their feelings. Male happiness is ultimately dependent on the fulfilment they experience in their relationships. Shere Hite (1993: 146 – 147) indicates in *The Hite Report on Men* that the happiest men are those with the closest, most well functioning relationships with women. Behavioural change should therefore not be an unreachable dream, but it is imperative for the happiness and human fulfilment of both sexes.

Feminist theologians have an enormous task ahead of them. Women generally manage to integrate sexuality with their emotions, but stereotyping debases female emotions. Women are looking for spiritual and emotional wholeness in relationships and many men need to be sensitised to honour their
partners and change their irresponsible attitudes and behaviour to serial and multiple sex partnerships. Women alone cannot change society; men must be encouraged to play a transformative role as well. Africa is fast becoming the locus of a new theological reflection and African women theologians are playing a major role in the deconstruction of the underpinning of negative beliefs and attitudes against women in society. The challenge to empower women and restore them to full humanity continues.

The success rate of lowering the AIDS-infection rate in Uganda is well documented. The focus in Uganda was not on condom use, but rather on the propagation of abstinence and faithfulness. “A recent Harvard study revealed a drastic reduction in multiple sexual partnering, from a reported rate of 18% in 1989, down to 8% in 1995, descending to around 2% this year. As unlikely as it may sound, Uganda’s experiences suggest that the promotion of abstinence before marriage and mutual faithfulness in relationships may be the keys to halting the spread of AIDS in Africa”¹. It can be done! The propagation of sexual responsibility may be an unpopular notion but various approaches to this issue may be explored. Accountable sexual practice involves more than moral choices, because it has everything to do with survival. A comprehensive approach to sexuality may just save uncountable lives.

We must never stop trying and hoping.

¹ Leclerc-Madlala, S. Mail and Guardian. 4 October 2004.