

## FEMINIST RESPONSES TO THE HISTORICAL AND CURRENT INFLUENCE OF BELIEF ON SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

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### *Abstract*

This study focuses on the important issue of young adult female sexuality in an age of HIV/AIDS and looks at the influence of the parental home, the church and young black women's own belief about their sexual behaviour. Sexuality is influenced by societal voices (shaped by history) that override religious and parental voices. Parents are hesitant to speak out, the church is burdened with an antiquated and unworkable sexual ethics and the young women's belief is overpowered by social discourses. Male domination and infidelity exacerbate female vulnerability and contribute to the powerlessness of young women in sexual relationships. Feminist theology puts forward a comprehensive theology that demands integrated embodiment and full humanity for women, serving as a corrective for historical and societal voices. This can be achieved when relationships are mutual, reciprocal and empowering. This study proposes an accountable, sexual ethics that will renew and recreate the lives and relationships of young people in a confusing and perilous environment.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

The advent of HIV/AIDS in 1981 has changed the face of Africa in many ways. It has managed to make sexual behaviour visible. This disease has now been around for more than twenty years, although it is only during the last decade that it has spread so rapidly in Southern Africa. Educational programmes at schools and colleges

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have ensured that young people in the age group discussed in this study are generally well informed about HIV/AIDS. Regardless of this fact, behavioural patterns do not tend to change. HIV/AIDS is generally not seen as something to be afraid of and it is certainly not changing behaviour into responsible sexual practices.

This study hopes to contribute to the process of moral development of young females where sexuality is regarded as mutuality, an accountable sexual behaviour and a regard for “their sexual partner as one to be loved and cherished” (Ruether 2000:52).

This essay will be presented in four parts. In the first part a historical overview of Christian views on sexuality will be given; the second part deals with sexuality and women in African cultures; in the third part the findings of research into the contemporary sexual behaviour of young adult black women are given; the fourth part contains a feminist response to sexuality and belief from the perspective of Body Theology.

## **2 A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF WOMEN=S SEXUALITY IN CHRISTIANITY**

Lisa Isherwood (1998:19) indicates that it is very problematical to try and indicate the influence of patriarchy on Christianity and vice versa, but there is a definite interplay visible: “What we are able to say is that our culture holds patriarchal views of the body and our church reflects all these negative traits. Christianity and patriarchy are highly compatible bed-fellows.” It follows therefore that any study of sexuality in Christianity will focus on the patriarchal interplay present in society. Michel Foucault has shown distinctly that sexuality is formed by society. Sex can therefore not be separated from society and culture. The social construction of women=s bodies serves as a powerful tool for control and dominance. The social construction of bodies was facilitated by the views of the church fathers about sexuality, which became a resounding discourse that influenced societies through centuries up to the present. Voices proclaiming a healthy sexuality were constantly drowned by the pervasiveness of the discourse that sex is defiling, perverse and animalistic. According

to Heyward (1994:16), “we who are Christian are heirs to a body-despising, women-fearing, sexually repressive religious tradition”. According to the earliest written legal codes, the law defined women’s bodies as male property. The secondary status of women is highlighted in Old Testament texts, where they are listed as male property (Ex 20:17 and Deut 5:21). These laws clearly give ownership to the male and place women under the control of men. A virgin daughter was an economic asset to a father (Deut 20:28-29) owing to patriarchal rights over a daughter’s sexuality.

The treatment of women as property and the exclusion of women from those who may come directly before Yahwe in public religious rituals rest on the unexamined presuppositions of patriarchy assumed to reflect God’s will. Women are objects of the law, not its creators. In these male-defined laws, men and their perspectives on reality are at the centre, women and their perspectives are on the margins (Clifford 2001:73).

During his ministry, Jesus encountered women as a marginalised group in society. He broke the social and cultural taboos of the time and accepted the full humanity of both female and male. Jesus had a band of women followers and He gave some of His most important teachings to women. He taught the outcast Samaritan woman in public (Jn 4:1-38), He welcomed the company of women and was friendly with Mary and Martha of Bethany. He healed the woman with a haemorrhage (Mk 5:25-34), exorcised women (Lk 8:32) and healed their children (Mk 7:25-26). Women were courageous witnesses of the crucifixion and Mary Magdalene was the first witness to the empty tomb and to the risen Jesus. The acts and teachings of Jesus concerning women were both liberating and emancipatory, but this state of affairs did not last long.

Patriarchy came into play again very soon in the Christian movement. The hierarchical model of wives, children and slaves submitting to the rule of the fathers is already apparent in New Testament texts. The church fathers relegated women to subordination, subjected to the authority of husband and church, while their sexual and reproductive roles were correlated with sin and death. They saw sex as degrading and disgusting, associated with lust. The dualism of the physical and

spiritual also came into play here. Men, as representatives of the spiritual, have to subdue and dominate women, the physical. With every act of intercourse the physical entrapped the spiritual. Women were viewed as insatiable and innate temptresses who subjugated men to lose their rationality, masculinity and spirituality (Isherwood & Stuart 1998:18).

Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE) exerted a tremendous influence on the sexual construction of bodies over the last centuries. His theological anthropology is filled with contradictions, eschewed in the notion of a radical dualism polarising spirit and flesh, male and female, and good and evil. Augustine regarded virginity as a higher state than marriage. Marriage is infused with three positive elements, namely progeny, fidelity and sacrament (Ruether 2000a:41), symbolising the union of Christ and church and the sacramental bond of the Christian community. Yet Augustine regarded marital sex with suspicion, regarding it as tainted with concupiscence and bordering on sinfulness (Cahill 1985:114). Engaging in the marital sexual act for the purposes of reproduction and fidelity is a sin that will be forgiven, but “any sexual act, even in marriage, undertaken only for pleasure, impeding procreation, is wholly sinful and equivalent to fornication” (Ruether 1998:76).

The negative views on sexuality as expounded by the church fathers continued during the Middle Ages. The spread of Christianity also encouraged the expansion of misogyny and the hatred of the sexual. During the Middle Ages prohibitions and taboos came into being. Sex was regulated and controlled, as it “stood outside the idea of Christian holiness and the Christian life” (Armstrong 1986:36). Medieval Christians were taught to see only shame in their sexual coupling, separating them from God (Ruether 2000a:44).

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 CE) was the greatest scholastic theologian of the Middle Ages and a most articulate exponent of natural law. He viewed male primacy as natural and women=s bodies and intellect therefore as lesser than those of a man. He taught that females are misbegotten males. The woman is the man’s helper; her tasks being procreation and the ancillary and secondary tasks of establishing a family and a household. Sex in marriage is justified

because of procreation. Marital sex is sinful without the express intention of procreating, and sex outside of marriage is a far greater sin. The sin of marital sex, accompanied by passion and worldliness, will be forgiven if the couple beget children and remain faithful to each other.

The Reformation deposed the system of male celibate clericalism, but only revised the Augustinian teachings on sex, sin and gender. Women were still viewed as subordinate to men and “have incurred the greater sin through their priority in disobedience that caused the Fall” (Ruether 2000a:45). Armstrong (1986) feels that the regulation of sexuality according to Christian ideals was effectively handled by Protestantism and Puritanism. Protestantism reverted to the teachings of Augustine and Puritanism managed to enforce its rigidity and inflexibility on people. The concept of sex and body as evil persisted and compounded the negative attitudes about sex.

Reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546 CE) posited that marriage is a vocation to which all humans are called by God. All should marry in order to obey God’s command in creation and to avoid the greater evil of fornication (Ruether 2000a: 45). Male and female partnership and complementarity are mandated at creation. Luther sees procreation as a blessing, but paradoxically views sexual passion as sullied by lust. Many occurrences of the Augustinian negativity towards sexual activity are noticeable in Luther’s sexual teaching.

These ideas were carried further in Victorian England where the hate and fear of sex became a powerful underground force. The idea that sex equated man with animals pervaded and it became imperative for people to shun their lower animal, sensual natures and strive for spiritual perfection. During this era sex became linked with illness and was invested with a terrifying power of life and death.

Contemporary societies are still inundated with the ideas about sex and sexuality noted above and these beliefs and attitudes prompted twentieth century theologian Karl Barth to proclaim: “Women are ontologically inferior to men” (Collins: [www.nathanielturner.com](http://www.nathanielturner.com)). Post-modern and post-Christian societies are still affected by the Christian views and patterns of thought on sexuality.

### 3 SEXUALITY AND WOMEN IN AFRICAN CULTURES

African women theologians are very outspoken about the treatment African women receive at the hands of men. They critique a whole range of activities in which women are subjugated to the power, will and often violence of the men of Africa. They speak about the lack of fidelity in relationships; the fact that a women's children do not belong to her, but to her husband; bride price; prostitution; violence in relationships; sexual and other demands on their time and bodies; HIV infection; the AIDS pandemic; the treatment and humiliation of widows and unmarried females; the fact that women have no right to say 'No'; the shame of childlessness; the idea of having sex with virgins to cure AIDS; and so forth. African women theologians focus very strongly on the locales of marriage, family life and children and critique the treatment that women and children receive in these contexts.

Fanusie (1992:135) describes the rejoicing that the birth of a child brings, yet also bemoans the fact that various biases and determining factors come into play from the moment of birth of every infant. The psychosocial experience of male-female relationships is reflected in the religious and spiritual spheres of life, which reflect the male dominance in society and church. Women live with contradictions all the time. She illustrates how antiquity still influences perceptions today:

A study of ancient religion gives the general impression that women were originally exalted, uplifted, and glorified. There is also evidence of feelings of ambivalence towards women, making them pure and virtuous on one hand, and on the other hand regarding them as polluted, unclean, and contagious". (Fanusie 1992:137)

African women live under a strict control system. They are relegated to being mere property, belonging to their fathers, brothers, husbands and sons. "It is our experience that the ancient myths of Africa, and the Jewish and Christian myths have contributed immensely to the

plight of women in Africa” (Fanusie 1992:138). Ancient myths were reassigned to real life and led to the incalculable suffering of women. These myths position woman in two categories according to her docility or assertiveness:

If passive, she is noble, saintly and pure, and inspires man. If assertive, then she is evil, distracting man from his religious and worldly pursuits; she is a witch, a temptress, or a prostitute; and some myths even present her as a demon and symbol of sensual lust, a being whom man must fear. (Fanusie 1992:138)

Madiba (1996:275) also points to the specific roles that women are assigned in church and society. “Women have been labelled as sinners, temptresses, childbearers, servants and subordinates” and have been relegated to performing a certain role in society and church. Society and church have also laid down specific codes of conduct about women’s morality, to keep them submissive, docile and obedient. The bad woman is usually one that is free with her sexuality, while the good woman is chaste, virginal and asexual.

Fanusie laments the dualism in the religious experience of the women of Africa. Although the Christian and Islamic religions have significantly influenced African communities, the still extensive adherence to traditional religious beliefs and practices places a double burden on the women of Africa. African women always belong to someone and are more often than not “blamed for many sexual inconsistencies in the human experience” (Fanusie 1992:141). African women carry a double burden: the sexist elements of Western culture penetrated and promoted the cultural sexism of traditional African society, compounding the marginalisation and domination of the African female.

A recurring theme in African woman theological writings is the lack of male responsibility concerning women, sex and commitment. Fanusie (1992:149-150) raises some very pertinent questions about virginity and fidelity in marriage. The men of Africa place a very high premium on the virginity of women at marriage. Virginity at marriage is regarded as the ideal. She then asks: “Should not men, too, be

subjected to the demands of virginity and fidelity in marriage?” and again: “At the onset of marriage, females face pressure as males stress the importance of virginity. Why only the female? Should not the male be virtuous?” Male promiscuity before and after marriage, is acceptable and actually endorsed by societal values.

Men and women are both initiated with one overarching aim in mind: the union of the sexes. Females are expected to come into marriage untouched and pure, in affective, relational and sexual terms. In traditional societies initiations were a prerequisite for marriage and remaining unmarried brought shame and humiliation on the woman and her family. A young woman who is no longer a virgin, cannot marry with honour and transgressions of sexual morality codes are often severely punished. Marriage is regarded as the ultimate purpose of women’s existence and is the sovereign social regulation of sexuality (Fanusie 1992:158). In marriage, the purpose of which is mainly procreation, the woman plays a passive role. The display of sensuality would indicate a proclivity towards sexual misconduct and adultery. Motherhood gives a woman social standing in society and demonstrates her sexual equilibrium and fulfilment.

Josephine Gitome (1996) raises concerns about the fact that young girls mature socially before they mature biologically. She feels that sexuality is an indispensable part of a woman’s life, and that it should be guided, protected and appreciated. The physical changes during puberty and adolescence have an effect on a young girl’s spirituality. The fact that the church is silent about sexuality can alienate young women from the church, yet the church could guide young women through the turbulent emotions associated with the transition between childhood and adulthood.

Another concern of African women theologians is the spread and impact of HIV/AIDS. In Africa this pandemic has the impact of a social upheaval and communal breakdown. It is both remarkable and a dichotomy that this pandemic has spread so rapidly on a continent where religion plays a great part in the lives of people. Both the Christian and Islamic religions prevalent in Africa prohibit pre-marital and extra-marital sex, yet the number of AIDS sufferers continues to increase enormously. Rakoczy (2004:125) expresses the pain of

Africa as follows: "The Body of Christ is now HIV positive: all are either infected or affected."

HIV/AIDS is the inequality of sexes and the subordination of women in Africa made visible. Isabel Phiri (2003:8) quotes Philippe Denis on this issue as saying: "HIV/AIDS is ultimately a gender issue." In Africa women are particularly at risk of becoming infected with the HI Virus. In Africa 55 percent of infected adults are women (Phiri 2003:8), while the percentage is indicated as 70 percent in South Africa (Pick 2002:42). In Africa AIDS has a female face.

The power relations between men and women can be seen as a contributing and an exacerbating factor in the greater susceptibility of women to the HI-Virus. Apart from a greater physiological vulnerability to the virus, women=s social standing leaves them more defenceless and powerless to protect themselves against the virus. Marriage is the centre of African community life, but in the marriage the man determines the woman=s identity. The woman=s body and her sexuality belong to the man, whereas the man=s sexuality can be shared. Heterosexual encounters are male dominated and this domination leaves the responsibility up to the woman to negotiate safe sex. Sex is conceptualised as the husband=s right in exchange for financial support. This reduces the autonomy and decision-making power of women. Masenya (2003:116) agrees with Nicolson who claims that

AIDS has spread in sub-Saharan Africa because of cultural beliefs, and in particular the belief that men need, and are entitled to, frequent sex with a variety of partners. Even if we can immunise against AIDS, even if we find a cure for AIDS, issues such as the commercialisation of sex, the expectation among men that women have a duty to provide them with casual sexual gratification, the belief among young women that their worth is determined primarily by satisfying the demands of their partners, remain.

Phiri (2003:12) also blames the African culture for encouraging African men to continue having sex with other partners apart from

their partners to whom they are officially married. Heterosexual marriages in Africa are therefore an extremely dangerous context for women in Africa. Such cultural beliefs and practices contribute towards making women extremely vulnerable to the HI Virus. Women cannot remove themselves from the social construction of heteropatriarchy and the cultural context of their sexuality. They therefore keep on having sex with their HIV infected husbands and partners even though they are fully aware of the precarious positions they place themselves in.

Sexual violence against women adds fuel to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Rape makes women extremely vulnerable to HIV infection. The estimated number of women being raped in South Africa annually is approximately one million, which leaves them to deal with the issue of rape as well as with potentially being infected by the HI Virus. Rape is an act of power perpetrated against women and children. The liability for the rape traditionally falls back on the woman, blaming her dress and behaviour as causing the man to lose control and having to rape her. The victims of sexual abuse also report that most men fail to show remorse, indicating that this level of violence is acceptable in society (Phiri 2003:287).

#### **4 RESEARCH FINDINGS: CONTEMPORARY SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR OF YOUNG ADULT BLACK WOMEN**

##### **4.1 Biographical data of research group**

This article is based on a study on contemporary sexual behaviour involving 42 black Christian students between the ages of eighteen and twenty four. They all reside in Soweto and 93% describe themselves as world-wise city women. The average age of the respondents is twenty one. None of the respondents is married. On the question of virginity, 79% of the respondents replied that they are no longer virgins, while 21% are. Serial monogamy is practised by 96% of young women in relationships. The average age of losing their virginity is eighteen years. The respondents fall into two groups, namely virgins and non-virgins, and I shall divide my analysis accordingly.

## 4.2 Practising virginity in the current society

Nine out of the 42 respondents, who took part in this study, choose to remain virgins until they get married. They respond strongly to the issue of virginity. Sex should happen for the right reasons and not because of pressure. Respect is a big issue between partners in relationships for these young women. They feel that peer pressure causes teenagers and young women to feel as if something is wrong with them if they are not having sex. Young women have lost the regard they previously had for the high price of virginity. They also feel that boyfriends pressurise young women into having sex. Unless the woman has sex with him, the boyfriend will leave her for someone else.

Parents in this study generally regard virginity as an ideal until marriage. The parents are proud of their daughters and of their decision to remain virgins until they get married. An openness and frankness between parent and child exist about their sexual lives and decisions, because the young women have nothing to hide. The respondents who are still virgins are adamant that they will not change their behaviour. The majority of respondents who are still virgins experience a loving home environment where love, respect for each other and caring abound. They experience their home as a place where happiness, trust, security and concern are found. All respondents feel that parents still have the responsibility of guiding and teaching their children. The young women want and need advice. Parents believe their daughters should marry and then have children only once they are married and can afford to have them. The parents take their parental responsibilities seriously and some young women respond by explaining how they live according to their parents' examples. The parents of these young adult women play a significant role in their lives and life decisions. The parents generally discuss sexual matters openly and advise their daughters to use condoms should they enter into sexual relationships.

The church is an important aspect in the lives of the young adult women in this group. They are proud of the fact that they live according to the teaching of the church. The pastors do not condone the use of condoms, feeling that the use of condoms encourages

people to engage in sexual relationships. I find these replies very interesting, because some of the non-virgins actually reply here that their pastors encourage young people to use condoms to prevent HIV infection. This shows that the young women's lifestyles and decisions colour their perceptions about what the church prescribes or that some pastors actually do promote safe sex. The young women find their pastors sympathetic and compassionate towards people with AIDS. Their pastors regularly warn young people about the risks of sleeping together before marriage and of the devastating effects of HIV/AIDS. They state unequivocally and unambiguously that sex before marriage is a sin. They therefore think in no uncertain terms that pregnancy and pre-marital sex are wrong.

The women who choose to remain virgins until they get married generally display a strong belief and determination to adhere to their values and belief system. Belief means commitment and trusting God. It also means applying in everyday life what is taught in church. God is an omnipotent, all-encompassing presence in their lives. God gives them guidance to make the right decisions. The only way that change can take place is by growing spiritually and accepting responsibility for reckless behaviour.

#### **4.3 Experiencing pre-marital sex in the current society**

Almost 80% of the respondents in this study engage in pre-marital sexual relations. Most of these young women believe they are in monogamous relationships and they talk openly about the love and sharing that they experience in these relationships. Many of these relationships are open and honest, where the partners talk to each other openly and candidly. They indicate that their sexual relations are not characterised by force and intimidation but by mutual benefit and fulfilment. Sex is not the ultimate goal for these young women. They react to the emotional sharing, the friendship and the closeness they experience in their relationships. Unfortunately not all relationships are healthy and stable. Some have doubts and point out that unfaithfulness is a problem in relationships. Other factors that make them unhappy include situations when they are coerced or forced to have sex, when their partners lie to them or when there are fights and arguments. They do not like issues that make them feel

uncomfortable and unhappy. Most of these young women feel that engaging in a sexual relationship is acceptable if one is not pressurised into having sex. Having pre-marital sex is the norm rather than the exception. Pre-marital sex is also beneficial for the self-image of young women; it makes you feel proud and fills you with self-confidence. This is an interesting phenomenon in a society where women generally suffer from a lack of self-esteem.

These young adult women feel very strongly about using condoms when having sex. Condom use is important because it prevents sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS and unwanted pregnancies. Many young women feel that the use of a condom can show a lack of trust between partners, but they still use condoms. They all agree that AIDS is a killer disease, and that they need to act responsibly to safeguard themselves. They are all very well informed about the disease. HIV/AIDS is a reality that is never very far from their minds.

Sex before marriage is definitely something that parents do not condone. Either they tell their daughters to abstain from pre-marital sex or they simply do not know that their daughters are already in sexual relationships. Where parents do raise the issue of pre-marital sex, it is frequently to warn their daughters about the risks of pre-marital sex, the devastating results of HIV infection and other sexually transmitted infections. Many parents plead with their daughters to be responsible and careful. The young women are not inclined to change their sexual behaviour even if their parents disapprove. Most of them indicate that they will simply hide their sexual activities better. Sexual behaviour is private and does not concern anybody: they believe that their behaviour is responsible and that they will not change it. In general the family relationships are happy, caring and loving. There seems to be a lot of respect for parents and parents are ostensibly involved in their children's lives, except that most parents do not seem to know that their daughters have a secret sexual life! This group do not want to be told what to do, but they do appreciate encouragement, open-mindedness about sexual issues and guidance about life in general.

Of the young adult women in this study sixty-two percent belong to a mainline church, with the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican

Church being the predominant churches. The majority of the respondents indicate that the church and their pastors play a significant role in their lives. A third of the respondents go to church regularly, a third go to church often while another third seldom go to church. For the young women who go to church regularly, it is a spiritual experience. The church is seen as a place where they worship, pray and praise the Lord. Many mention that they go to church to ask forgiveness for their sins. They also go to church to hear what the Bible teaches. Others do not go to church anymore; some because they feel that the church judges them and their behaviour. Seventy-six percent of the respondents indicate that their pastors discuss sexual issues in church, while ninety percent indicate that their pastors talk about HIV/AIDS in church. Eighty-six percent feel that their pastors clearly outline what is right and wrong behaviour. Most respondents also feel that the pastors know very well how young adults behave. The respondents all agree that the church is opposed to sexual relations outside marriage and that sexual immorality is a sin.

Pastors certainly have a lot to say about HIV/AIDS. I see a picture of a very compassionate and caring clergy when I read what the young women have to say. In general the pastors pray a lot for people infected with the disease, but their compassion is accompanied by serious warnings to young people about sex. Almost all the pastors take an ethical stance and do their best to curb this threat to the community. Pre-marital sex is something that actually seems to be addressed in church. The pastors have the same standpoint about pregnancy. They feel that having a baby before marriage is irresponsible and sinful. The young women generally regard the guidance they receive in church very highly. They also report that the pastors feel that even grown children can benefit from the guidance of parents. It is clear that the young women are influenced by what they hear in church.

Seventy-six percent of the respondents who are no longer virgins nevertheless describe themselves as 'spiritual'. They describe their spirituality as belief, as trust and as honesty. The young adult women also believe that their Christianity overrides their culture - they cannot escape their culture and cultural practices but Christ comes first. I

find a very strong belief in God and a great love for God in the group which engages in pre-marital sex. God is everywhere in their lives, protecting and guiding them. I also come across a very strong belief in the forgiveness of God. Many young adult women suffer from guilt feelings about their sexual behaviour. They clearly indicate that they are sinning, but they forget about God while having sex. Whereas some young women do not experience guilt towards their parents about their sexual relationships, they certainly do experience self-reproach and shame when they describe their feelings towards the church and God. Some young women separate their church from the decisions they make in their sexual relationships.

For many young women the sexual act precludes any thoughts of God. Some young adult women land in a never-ending circle of sexual acts and begging for forgiveness. It is clear that young women are influenced by a myriad of things in their decision making. On the one hand they are influenced by the feelings they have for their partners. On the other hand they are directed by moral values, friends, family and religious values.

More than two thirds of the respondents specify that at times they feel dominated and overwhelmed when they make decisions pertaining to their sexual relationships. A few young women periodically have regrets about not abstaining from sex for longer and regret the decisions that they have made. Some decisions also make their parents unhappy and disappointed. Many young non-virgins indicate that they have to put their spiritual and moral values aside in order to enjoy their sexual relationships. Their sexual behaviour is seen as something apart from their values, their mores and their upbringing. It is seen as an individual decision which must be kept from their parents, their church and as something not really influenced by what they know, but rather by what they feel.

#### **4.4 Identifying the main discourses about young female adults' sexual behaviour**

The following main discourses about young female sexual behaviour are identified:

- Parents view pre-marital sex as forbidden.
- While young adults are engaging in sex, the parents plead for safe sex.
- The church views pre-marital sex as sinful and against the will of God.
- The church is frank and sincere about warning young adults about the risks of pre-marital sex.
- Young adult women engage in sexual relations because everybody is doing it.
- Sex is given for mutual enjoyment.
- Young women engage in sex for the sake of womanhood.

## **5 FEMINIST RESPONSES TO THE PROBLEM OF SEX**

### **5.1 Introduction**

Feminists take seriously the question of sexuality. They also take seriously the social construction of women's bodies and how these constructions are used to control women's lives. Sexuality is a major issue because for many feminists it is at the heart of male domination of women and becomes a regulatory norm "which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility" (Butler 1997:246). Feminists therefore challenge the traditional assumptions about sexuality, deconstruct sexual myths and beliefs and propose new and unique ways of understanding sexuality. Overcoming the Christian heritage still prevalent in much of the constructed reality is a task which feminist theologians take to heart. Isherwood (2000:21) sees the reconstruction of religion as a circle that needs to be broken to re-establish religions as "powerful forces in freeing us from the bodily constraints that they largely helped to construct and have continued unquestioningly to believe".

### **5.2 Dealing with sexual shame**

Sexual shame manifests itself as a deep sense of unworthiness and disembodiment. The church perpetuates sexual shame by vague and subtle messages. The silence of the church on sexual matters has contributed to the societal crisis over sexuality. People are in dire

need of guidance on sexual matters and a comprehensive sexual ethics, but the church still clings to an obsolete and unworkable sexual ethics. According to Karen McClintock (2001) biblical texts, traditional beliefs and practices, moral superiority, teaching and preaching about immorality are used to keep traditional sexual values intact. James Nelson (1994:11) states that young people are no longer willing to leave their sexuality behind when they enter the church. Young people experience a disembodied spirituality when they are already sexually active and the church refuses to discuss sexuality and spirituality in the context of faith. They experience this omission as hypocrisy and insincerity. Young people also leave the church in the fear of being shamed by the church for being sexually active. The church suffers from a severe lack of open and honest discussion about sexuality. Although sexuality is very private in nature, the prevailing thoughts in society and culture influence what happens in that private space. The church is alienated in modern society because of its antiquated views on sexuality. The church is still rigidly bound to the idea that sex is only to be tolerated with procreation in mind, while sexual encounters take place for a variety of reasons like the desire for intimate connection and simply for the pleasure involved. The church is neither proactive nor prepared at all to address contemporary sexual experiences. This attitude has left the church isolated and archaic in a world where people are desperately looking for moral guidance and guidelines about sexuality.

McClintock (2001) notes the contribution of the church to the unhealthy sexual attitudes in society. The linking of sexual activity to original sin epitomises a shaming theology. This theology has led to millennia of sexual brokenness and constrictive sexual prescriptions. Carey Walsh (2000:49) verbalises the problem as Christian theology's devaluation and problematisation of sexuality, desire and the body as a threat to spirituality. The task of the church is to rid people of the constraints of patriarchal views on sexuality and to address "sexuality from a perspective of healthy and value-centred love" (McClintock 2001:62). The church finds itself in an ethical dilemma about the issue of sex and cannot satisfy society's need for a comprehensive sexual ethics with simplistic solutions, a fear of moving away from the confines of the Christian sexual tradition and

the perpetuation of excessive hypocrisy on sexual matters. The view that HIV/AIDS is a curse from God is still prevalent in many churches, forcing victims into silence and shame. The polarisation of gender and male domination forces many women into disempowered relationships, with the result that women suffer sexual submission, abuse and violence - all in the name of God.

McClintock (2001:50) sees sexual intimacy as “shared power, playfulness, love, and risk-taking”. Mutuality is a defining factor in healthy sexual relations. Sexuality should be addressed in a shame-free context, where the narrow, exclusivist definition of sex as genital stimulation and release should be rejected. Talk about sexuality should focus on good sex; sex that is “communication, affection, forgiveness, honesty, vulnerability, dependability, and a sense of humour” (McClintock 2001:54). Sex also asks for love and commitment to produce “a sense of being one with self, the other, and with God” (McClintock 2001:55). She calls the church to speak up and become compassionate about sexual issues; breaking the denial, silence and shame about sexuality. Christine Gudorf (1994) finds the answer to the alienation of church and society concerning sexual issues in a regrounding of spirituality in embodiment. She finds a challenge in the construction of “a Christian spirituality which can both do justice to the Incarnation and draw on human sexuality for the energy and vision to create and support just and loving communities” (Gudorf 1994:210).

### **5.3 Body theology: Affirming embodiment**

Body theology is a development aimed at addressing and deconstructing the imprisonment of the body under oppressive systems as well as the devastating confinements of patriarchy. Body theology epistemologically centres embodied subjectivity and undermines rationality, which is the patriarchal norm.

Body theology takes seriously the concept of women’s bodies as a site for resistance. Body theology resists the male bias in religion and reacts to human embodiment as definitive expression in the bodies of men (Ross 2002:233). Throughout the ages, the Christian denial of bodies was an attempt to reach spiritual perfection. Body theology

places bodies at the centre of theological reflection. This reflection starts in reality and experience, where the body becomes a site of revelation. A theology of eternal absolutes is totally alienated from a praxis that is continually fluid and expansive. Body theology must therefore liberate the changing, submissive bodies that patriarchy juxtaposed with the static eternal truths and an unchangeable god of law (Isherwood & Stuart 1998:81). Body theology develops the deconstruction of a patriarchal society and a patriarchal God. Feminists work through the body, think through the body and heal through the body. Body theology attempts to liberate and integrate bodies and strives to “develop a sexual ethic that takes seriously the desire of all and integrates it into a mutual and freeing celebration of embodiment” (Isherwood & Stuart 1998:32). Body theology posits that only when the body is freed from patriarchal restrictions, can creation understand the liberating power of incarnation.

#### **5.4 Towards a sexuality of accountability and integratedness**

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 & Stuart 1998:42) and any ethics needs to address the gradual alienation between church and society and children and their parents. My attempt to make suggestions 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.

## 5.5 The matter of 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 to realise 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 experimentation (Greathead, Devenish & Funnell 1998:102) 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 (Greathead, Devenish & Funnell 1998:101). 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 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.

## 5.6 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 givens, 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 talking 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 1999:162). I therefore assert that the issue of sexuality must be addressed holistically by all the stakeholders in the wellbeing of the community.

### **5.7 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. Eighty-six percent 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.

### **5.8 The parents**

The research makes it clear that parents want 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 towards instilling beneficial feelings about sexuality in their children, which will contribute to a truly accountable sexuality.

## 5.9 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.

Instead of focusing 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.

## 5.10 Reimagining young adult relationships

- *5.10.1 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 2000b: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 Ruether speaks of covenant relations (Ruether 2000b: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 so that these eventually develop into a mature love of sharing and self-giving.

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.

#### 5.10.2 *Developing a new ars erotica*

According to Ruether (2000a: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” (Ruether 2000a: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. (Ruether 2000a: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 2000b: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. A 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@ (Ruether 2000b: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.

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.

- *5.10.3 Challenging the church*

“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 almost a third 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.

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 out compassionately 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.

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. 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. 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” (Masenya 2003:126).

- *5.10.4 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 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 (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.

Ellison (1994:240) 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 non-judgemental 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.

Johnson and Van Vonderen (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 wellbeing 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 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 helping young people subsist wholesomely in an age of turmoil and confusion.

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**ENDNOTE**

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- 1 This article is based on a MTh dissertation completed by M M Pieterse in 2004 on 'The role of the parental home, church and belief in the sexual relationships of young black women' (University of South Africa). Prof C Landman was the supervisor.