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# ***'Log' KyaKahenGey?! (What will 'people' say?!): Complicating Sexuality and Empowerment with Community Development Workers in Pakistan***

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Key Words: Sexuality; Empowerment; Community Development Workers; Pakistan

**Abstract :** Situated in the postcolonial modernizing discourse of development, empowerment narratives tend to present sexuality as a secondary issue and a private affair one in which 'development should keep an appropriate distance' with the exception of helping to reduce unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. This work is presented as a series of journal entries. Through the use of prose and creative writing my participants and I begin to complicate our own understandings of sexuality and empowerment in context. I conclude that the insistence to complicate and situate such messy understandings in specific contexts is important for adult educators to move discussions around empowerment and sexuality forward.

In development discourse links between sexual liberation and women's empowerment have been extensively explored on a theoretical level, and in some regions women's movements have taken up sexuality as a central issue (Jolly, 2006). However, the links remain unexplored in relation to development work in practice (Jolly, 2006). Situated in the post colonial modernizing discourse of development, empowerment narratives<sup>1</sup> tend to present sexuality as a secondary issue and a private affair one in which 'development should keep an appropriate distance' with the exception of helping to reduce unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. It has therefore been ignored in development discourse and treated as a secondary issue. The only exception seems to appear in dialogues on HIV/AIDS where the AIDS Pandemic has provided some openings to extend conversations (Armas, 2006). However these discourses have primarily been negative and normative. Lack of critical systematic reflection about dominant conceptions of sexuality, gender and heteronormativity according to Jolly (2006) explain silences and resistances observed in the development field. As a result sexuality is primarily viewed as a health issue, regarded as a source of danger, violence, harm and disease; as a problem which needs to be contained rather than as holistic and integral part of human experience (Andrea Cornwall, 2006). Empowerment consequently has been framed in AIDS issues as relating to information around 'risk factors' and health choices for population well-being. Such a limited view disregards the relationship of sexuality with employment, livelihoods, security, housing, education, governance and social protection. As a result according to Cornwall (2006) "Sex has been treated as a problem, rather than as a source of happiness, intimacy, fulfillment and pleasure" (p. 275).

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<sup>1</sup>By empowerment narratives, I refer to stories or texts currently in circulation which propose and reaffirm theories of empowerment. These are stories we are complicit in constructing that tell us about what empowerment is, the process of how empowerment takes place, who needs to be empowered and how people can individually and collectively be mobilized in order to be empowered.

Cornwall, Correa, and Jolly (2008) suggest that sexuality needs to be understood in the context of social rules, economic structures, political battles and religious ideologies that surround physical expressions of intimacy and the relationships within which intimacy takes place. In the context of the 'Islamic Republic' of Pakistan sexuality is a highly contested area and considered taboo to discuss explicitly in public. Control of women's sexuality through the discourse of 'culture and religion' became a predominant trope in the establishment of state identity and legitimacy of rule, and continues as a strategy to date (Khan, 2007) Sexuality is a contested area. It is part of everyone's life yet it is considered taboo to openly discuss. With the process of Islamist reforms imposed under the rule of Martial Law by General Zia ulHaq constitutional amendments resulted in women's rights being severely curtailed under the Hudood Ordinances. Control of women's sexuality became a predominant trope in the establishment of state identity and legitimacy of rule and adultery became a crime against the state punishable by stoning to death. The contemporary international political contexts such as the US led 'War on Terror' and acceleration in the rise of politico Islamist movements further complicated conversations around development aid, gender and sexuality presenting the work of NGOs as a 'western evil'. Over the last decade community development workers in Pakistan have been caught between (but generally excluded from) global and local debates guiding visions of 'empowerment' and 'sexuality'. Provided with implementation guidelines based on project objectives and lists of deliverables, these grassroots fieldworkers generally live with expectations of how best to 'translate/transform' these concepts without the space to critically reflect on their own beliefs and ideas that drive their practice (Dossa, 2004).

In order to illustrate this process and to complicate it, this paper explores how workers/mobilizers located in the urban metropolis of Karachi, embedded in a web of multiple intersecting structures of oppression and power relations; 'encounter' (Ahmed 2000), theorize, strategize and act upon understanding of sexuality within the context of empowerment work through an arts-informed cooperative inquiry. By using the word complicate here I refer to the process of being 'thoughtful' about "constructions of truth, power, knowledge, the self and language" (Gore, 1992, p. 54), and being aware of the complex, interconnected modes of being, thinking and acting.

Based on an ethical imperative for disrupting the 'terms' hegemonic encounters, I chose to conduct an arts informed cooperative inquiry with a group of twenty community development workers in Karachi, Pakistan. Arts-informed Research is a mode/form of qualitative research where the arts broadly conceived, serve as a framework for research inspiration conceptualization, process and representation (Cole & Knowles, 2008). Co-operative inquiry is seen as a way of working with other people who have similar concerns and interests, in order to understand, make sense and develop new and creative ways of looking at things. It is aimed to facilitate a learning process in order to "act to change things you may want to change and find out how to do things better." (Heron & Reason 2001, p.179). I saw the combination of the two through individual in-depth interviews and interactive arts workshops as a flexible and non-hierarchical approach, which facilitated creating alternative spaces for participant reflection and exploration; legitimating their knowledge and its representation

My fieldwork revealed that HIV/AIDs and reproductive health related projects funded by international development agencies are some of the largest employers of community development workers. Neoliberal conditions have forced many women and men to perform tasks they consider taboo and would never have previously contemplated doing. These projects require fieldworkers to confidently talk and facilitate discussions around menstruation; reproduction;

promoting the use of contraception; showing ‘clients’ how to use contraceptives. They also require their employees to associate with pimps, sex workers; transsexuals; and *hijras*. This study attempts to unravel the dynamics of sexuality, its interconnectedness and situatedness in empowerment narratives and everyday life experiences of community development workers. It demonstrates the messiness of struggles around community development work and personal relationships raising questions around the permeable boundaries of the public and private for sex; sex work; agency; empowerment; feminist essentialism; heteronormativity and the political economy of development within the context of Pakistan. It provides insight into the economy of empowerment narratives and the potential they have to mediate ‘encounters’ shaping understandings of gender, sexuality and empowerment. Through the use of prose, creative writing, short stories, theatre, artwork and interactive discussions my participants and I begin to complicate our own understandings of sexuality and empowerment in context. As a result empowerment narratives begin to appear as colliding discourses, multi-layered complex constructs, which may form unpredictable, messy and contradictory assemblages; as opposed to linear, universal, inevitable and easily understood outcomes and processes. I conclude that the insistence to complicate and situate such messy understandings in specific contexts is important for adult educators to move discussions around empowerment and sexuality forward.

*‘Log KyaKahenGey?!(What will People Say?!)* is a fictional account of a lower middleclass woman in urban Karachi coming to terms with her understanding of sexuality and empowerment through her lived experience. The story emerged as an amalgam of personal experiences and discussions around sexuality and empowerment shared by my participants. As I reviewed transcripts from in-depth interviews, videos of group discussions and artwork, sexuality emerged as a prominent theme in the data. I highlighted statements; put boxes around stories and pulled all the material together. The results were unexpected and fascinating. I began to see connections between the private, the personal and the professional. The connections were tentative and appeared in the making, ambiguous and conflicting. Fiction allowed me to bring these complexities together. It also opens a space to question assumptions around masculinities and heteronormativity.

This text is constructed as a series of fictitious journal entries by Saima an NGO community mobilizer. Saima is single and is in a relationship with Agha another NGO worker, who also sees himself as a theatre activist. Due to neoliberal economic reasons and her desire for unrestricted mobility Saima finds herself employed in a HIV/AIDS project which works with ‘vulnerable’ groups – sex workers. Fingers pointing at her, condemning her, follow her wherever goes. She lies to protect herself and her family name. She is conscious of the risk she is taking and keeps hearing her mother’s reaction “*Log KyaKahenGey!?*” “What will people say!?” A young unmarried girl in a clandestine relationship ...what will people say?!

#### **A question, a fear, a statement, a condemnation.**

This fictional narrative attempts to unravel the dynamics of sexuality, its interconnectedness and situatedness. Choosing to present the text as a series of journal entries is a conscious decision influenced by the silences, secrecy and taboos associated with sexuality. Saima is unable to share many of her fears and doubts with those around her as she is always in fear of what ‘log’ ‘people’ will think of her. Hence the journal is a place where she can be open about her experiences, questions and doubts. For those familiar with Lollywood and Bollywood

cinema or Indian soap operas you will be able to pick up on how they intrude and are significant in Saima's life as she draws on images of fear and strength from them.

Excerpts from Saima's Journal

### August 25th 2009

He was late again today. I waited for him outside the side exit of the hotel on Shara-e-Faisal where I was attending a workshop. The doorman kept giving me inquisitive looks but I pretended to ignore him. I had walked up and down the lobby for over an hour and felt like a complete fool. I tried calling his mobile phone but there was no answer. I was about to give up when I heard the distinct sound of his motorbike exhaust. He was wearing a navy blue *shalwarkameez* and a black helmet. He took off his helmet and my heart as usual started beating faster. It always happens when I see him ...

I still remember the first time I was introduced to him. I was assisting my coordinator in organizing an International Women's Day event at the time I was working for a Women's NGO. He was acting in a play highlighting incidents of violence against women in Pakistan. I watched the performance vicariously wishing I could be up there performing and singing instead of standing at the side lines.

At the end of the event the performers and organizers were invited for *chai*. I was standing and talking to my friend Karim, a *samosa* in hand, when he walked up to us, his long curly hair flying (I know this sounds dramatic but that is how I picture it – call it recall bias). He had a beard then, a full bushy beard and stage makeup on. He totally looked like a *gunda*, a thug (a man my parents would never approve of); but as they say you have no choice when it comes to who you fall in love with... perhaps it was my own rebellion... anyway it is too late to look back now... I made a choice.

Karim introduced us, 'Saima meet Agha the star of the play and the molester of women!' They had been in collage together and we made small talk and identified common friends. I asked 'you don't really molest women in real life do you? It seemed so real!' He laughed and on stage roaring laugh 'What do you think?' he asked, his voice was gentle ...

Things seemed to happen too fast after that, it's almost a blur. He texted Karim asking if he could have my number. I was thrilled and I recklessly agreed. He texted me, and I texted back...he texted me and called...I texted back...he asked me to meet him but I was reluctant...he persisted, we met...and then...that was two years ago.

But coming back to today, I was so angry, I felt humiliated to be waiting outside and being ogled at by the hotel guard. I was all ready to start berating him for being so inconsiderate...he has no appreciation for the risks I take being a woman in this country! But somehow his smile was so genuinely apologetic that I just couldn't... He just said "*chalo chalo* you can get mad at me later" So I shook my head and got onto the back of the bike positioning myself sideways my arm on his shoulder for safety. And we rode off.

Seeing women sitting behind men on their bikes may seem so normal to people who live in Karachi, but to me it is almost sensual...erotic. I wait for these moments. The closeness, the public private touch, a sense of ownership... his sweat drenched kurta between my fingers, a

flimsy barrier between his naked back and my touch. My nails dig into his skin and I can smell his smell and feel him. This is as close to each other as we can be under the circumstances. I press closer to him and it is not from my fear of falling off.

We stop at our regular *ice-creamwala* and he orders my favourite tuti fruity ice cream with dried fruit and nuts. We look at each other I spoon ice-cream into my mouth and he smokes a cigarette.

My mobile phone rings, its Amma asking where I am, I mumble “am on my way home, the training went on till late, taking rickshaw home in twenty minutes”. It is odd how easy the lies come to my tongue now and how good I am at it. Deception facilitated by technology. Ahmed pays for the ice cream and then hails a rickshaw for me. I climb in and tell the rickshawala to head towards NIPA.

I keep thinking I am bad, I am a horrible daughter, how can I keep seeing a man like this. I cannot keep going this way...but this contact it's like an addiction, the conversations, the ability to be whomever I want to be with him...he understands me....I just cannot give it up...even when my *Izzat*, my honour, and my family's *Izzat* is at stake. *Log KyaKahainGey?* What will people say?

I feel like I take too many risks I feel reckless...as if I can do anything, each clandestine meeting is exhilarating. I am sure people at work are beginning to notice.

### **August 30th 2009**

We are getting funding from an international agency to work with ‘vulnerable groups’ to prevent HIV/AIDS (this is the Project I am being adjusted to). This means I have to move from the main office to the field office which is situated in another part of Karachi at our field site. I have no experience working in this area. I have been told that I will have to talk to ‘sex workers’. The coordinator used the term FSW and MSW this means Female Sex Workers and Male Sex Workers. The English word sounds so much better, more civilized, as compared to the Urdu ‘*randiyan*’. I can't even open my mouth to say the word it keeps rolling around in my head. ‘*Randiyan*’ a word that should never be uttered by respectable middle class girls. I need the job, quitting would mean losing my freedom to move around the city on my own. What will my parents say when I tell them I have to work with these ‘*randiyan*’! I don't think I can tell them. Not yet anyway.

### **September 2nd 2009**

*Khudaya!* I met a real life ‘*Aunty*’ today for the first time. Abida the project coordinator and I were in the project office when Hasina knocked on the door. She was in her late forties dressed in a sleeveless yellow *shalwarkameez* with a green net *duppata* jauntily wrapped around her neck. She hugged Abida and sat down on the chair closest to her and immediately asked for an introduction. I noticed she wore a lot of makeup and smelt like Pond's talcum powder which she had liberally dusted over herself as I could still see white patches around her plunging neck line.

I told Abida about my fear of people knowing who I am working with. She laughed “who would have ever thought that I would be so nonchalant about talking about Aunties and this industry a year ago! Its normal to be apprehensive! I have two daughters. I would always keep thinking ‘*Ya Allah meriizzatbachana!* Oh God have my Honour! I am doing this work for my children for their education. Please keep my Izzat, I have daughters and they need to be married off’. But now I don’t worry, I am different. If someone looks at me or one of the men in the bazaar stare at me I stare right back. I did that just the other day!’ She giggled. ‘ I was waiting for my husband in Bohri Bazaar and this man kept looking at me and so I went right up to him and asked him ‘*Kyadekhraheyho?! What are you looking at?!*’ He panicked and ran!’ She laughed so much when she was telling me this tears poured out. She kept exclaiming ‘Me! Can you believe it! Me telling off a strange man in public!’”

### September 24th 2009

I attended a group discussion with FSWs today and I think that it is time for me to find a new job. The discussion took place in our project office I sat at the back taking notes trembling inside. I could feel my heart racing (and not in a good way). The women were all dressed in such revealing clothing, and their gestures and the way they sat – legs wide apart in public... not worried about covering their chest, bras straps showing. The *galigaloch*, the abusive language! It was just indecent and wrong! And then Abida introduced me to them as her assistant. They looked me up and down and started evaluating me. One of them leaned over and said ‘*Shakal to thorasanwlahai, lekin body fit hai, mameybarey honey chahye ...* She seems pretty, her color is a little dark, but her body looks fit although her breasts could be a little bigger...

I felt humiliated at being assessed and evaluated this way. They had no right to talk about my body or my virginity or my lack of experience. Abida tried to explain “This was their humour, they were only joking it was their way of appraising you. You know you are young and pretty – competition”. “Competition!” I exclaimed “This is an insult. I don’t want to be competition! I don’t want to be associated with any of this. How can these women do what they do?”

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