



The issues of gender and empowerment – while fading out the development agenda - are being increasingly addressed and highlighted by icons of popular culture - as pointed out in the editorial of *SID Development* Vol. 53.2 on 'Gender and empowerment'.

The phenomenon of pop culture is not new or unusual. Icons of the star system (cinema, music industry and alike) today though are increasingly making of activism and campaigns a major focus of their career. Whether the inter-linkage between pop culture and activism is positive or not, what we explore here is the way such issues are interpreted and understood within the public, especially with regards to the young generations.

It is certainly positive to raise public attention on gender equality and empowerment as key issues for transformation and development of people and societies. Nevertheless, the perception and understanding of gender can vary depending on how they are communicated and interpreted.

To this extent, the body remains central yet invisible in the discourse on gender empowerment and development. Ideally the body is a compelling issue to

address particularly as it is the place where concepts of equalities and diversities meet and contrast.

As Wendy Harcourt explains, speaking about her prize winning book *Body Politics in Development*: 'People are judged by their bodies, their strength, their beauty, the colour and the sex. Many things are ascribed and written on the body through culture and society as well as the economy. Modernity, tradition, religious all have rules around the body, often according to sex, sexual orientation, before other layers are put on to it. Despite the centrality of the body in development it is very difficult to talk about it within the international political context as a subject rather than an object of study and number crunching' 'Development displaces that reality and is instead about counting bodies, controlling bodies, ensuring the health of bodies, securing safety of bodies, providing water, food, shelter' 'I am deeply committed to challenging silences around the body, including my own, so writing the book was a way to reclaim the body as a subject of political power and contestation in development, to name it and speak of the many ways the body is inserted into development discourse and forms an integral part of it'.

The conversation below with Chloe Schwenke, Alexandru Balasescu, Hulda Ouma and Wendy Harcourt explores concepts and relations regarding body, gender and empowerment, looking at how they are understood and transmitted among cultures and generations.

Body, gender and empowerment

Conversation with **Chloe Schwenke (USA)**, **Alexandru Balasescu (Romania)**, **Hulda Ouma (Kenya)**, **Wendy Harcourt (Australia/Italy)**

Q1: The culture of the beauty, the body and sexuality are increasingly emphasized by pop culture (ex. icons such as Lady Gaga). How do such new myths contribute to gender empowerment and how much of it has to do with the sex industry and the commercialization of sexuality? How does this contribute to people finding, accepting and empowering their sexual and cultural identities?

Chloe: The question that first emerges in my mind is “empowerment to do what?” Which of the many forms of power are we discussing? Nearly all of the pop culture images are aimed at sexuality and eroticism, which are undoubtedly highly visible powerful forces within the more developed capitalist economies. Viewing the body through the lens of sexuality may even open a path towards that elusive goal of having our own sexual identity accepted and celebrated through intimacy – at whatever level that intimacy manifests itself. Empowering one’s sexual identity is fulfilling to the extent that this “identity” is an authentic expression of a person, not just a well crafted but ultimately superficial projection of persona. Finding an authentic home within one’s body, and the sexuality that we express by means of that body, may not align at all well with the pop images of what constitutes “sexy”, “alluring” or “provocative.” Pop culture’s limited menu of such a narrow range of desirable stereotypes of sexual or erotic power and allure mean that most of us – finding ourselves far removed from those stereotypes or sharing only one or two attributes of them – are likely to feel

significantly disempowered. Even if we do fit the stereotypes – i.e. very thin, over the age of 16 and under the age of 28, and whatever else fleeting fashion dictates – we are still talking about projections, not authentic expressions of a very important aspect of our authentic selves. The myths are powerful; if we don’t catch ourselves, we’ll walk away feeling disempowered, and not sexy enough (there is of course someone eager to sell you something to “correct” that “deficiency”).

By offering a narrow set of largely unattainable stereotypes, and cajoling us (subliminally) to ignore any unrehearsed but authentic expression of sexuality through feeling whole and at peace in our gender identity, we are diminished and not empowered in our concepts of sexuality and eroticism. Isolating sexuality, and making it something that is practiced, applied, or purchased, leaves us with a small palette to paint with; the human expression of femininity, masculinity, or androgyny is almost infinite in its nuances and sensibilities. As a transsexual woman, people occasionally ask what it feels like to now have more direct access to expressing my own “feminine power” or, if they are of an older generation, they’ll say my “feminine charm”. What they seem to be referring to are attributes of the highly sexualized stereotypes of women common to our commercial culture, and when I respond by saying that among the most “feminine” experiences for me is the simple act of just walking down a sidewalk on a beautiful day, feeling wholly and wonderfully female, they are left puzzled or dissatisfied! I’m sure Lady Gaga has similar moments of

unrehearsed feminine authenticity, but these forms of empowerment as “women” and as diverse, complicated human beings enjoying simple, perhaps transcendent, moments don’t sell many products.

Alexandru: First let me say that I enjoy pop-culture and I find examples from it useful for illustrating social and cultural dynamics on global and local scale. I think a sincere answer to your question is that these myths do both: they empower and they commodify sex and bodies, and a lot of it depends on where the narratives they propose are decoded. In other words, it is maybe less about how narrative travels and more about how they arrive at a destination. What I find fascinating and double edged is the way in which pop-culture is locally produced (and let me underline that all pop-culture is locally produced, be it in New York or Kuala-Lumpur) and simultaneously ends up creating norms of sexual and bodily expression on a global scale. This may be empowering – that is giving the means/instruments to engage with hegemonic discourses of domination (usually of patriarchal, hetero-normative order) – and disabling/objectifying. Surgical operations to become “less ethnically marked” are well known all over the world, and they target different body parts that are not deemed universally shaped as those of a New Yorker profile – eyelids surgery for Asian-Americans in California or “nose jobs” in Middle East are just two examples.

At the same time and with a different take, the pressure to publicly display one's sexual preferences and practices may sometimes go against the grain of

the society in which one lives and paradoxically prevents the person from continuing to enjoy those very practices. Between the principle of pleasure and the desire to change sometimes the choice is not that easy. And I think there is a danger of displacing one dominant discourse with another that may be equally power laden – for example the one of identities.

This is why probably pop-culture messages are not always as easily integrated, adopted or adapted.

Two months ago I entered a night club on two levels in Veliko Tarnovo – a Bulgarian mountain resort. At the first level none other than Lady Gaga was singing from the plasma screen, filling up the room with her liberating messages. There were only 3 people in that 300+ square meters area. The underground level however, was packed with men and women dancing to the local beat which combines oriental music with folklore – what is called “manele”, music with a machismo, patriarchal dominance in both lyrics and dancing styles.

Hulda: I guess it depends on how one defines empowerment - whether it is about appropriating the meaning of sexuality and re-claiming the discourse about body imaging- or whether it is about some women taking control of marketing/objectification of sexuality and the female body. I remember during the hey days of the Spice Girls, how they were touted (by the media) as representing ‘girl power’. Did they contribute to women’s empowerment...? I think the answer depends on what we mean. I don’t think it’s wrong to celebrate beauty, the body and sexuality in themselves, but I guess the problem for

us is that we only celebrate a particular kind of 'beauty' and 'body'. Beyond the narrow definitions celebrated by the media and pop culture, many have been made to feel less than adequate/unable to measure up and that in itself is disempowering. I don't think mainstream pop culture has been very accommodative of diverse understandings of these issues and therefore particularly empowering for the majority of women and girls. I also don't think that even with this knowledge in mind, that much has been offered in the way of alternatives to how we perceive ourselves and allow others to perceive us - even within those working on these issues.

Wendy: It is not so much what popular commercial cultures contribute to empowerment but what they reflect of how modernity is understanding gender roles. I am very conscious as a mother of two teenage daughters that popular culture is important in how you see your feminine identity and expression of self and sexuality. It seems positive that they have so many varieties of iconic images of women entertainers transgressing norms as well as conforming to the stereotypes. They have a choice in gender role models. On the other hand these are very westernized even if coming from non European sources, there is a universalizing stamp of gender and sexual expression that has a recognizable stamp of Hollywood (or at most Bollywood).

Q2: As long as the voice of pop stars is the only one, if you think of your children and/or of your nephew's generations, how do you think they understand concepts of gender and empowerment and what space still remains for intergenerational dialogue?

Chloe: If you are after a general observation, I'm not a good one to ask that question of! Just like that parent, the children of a transgender parent have no option but to reflect extensively on concepts of gender – identity, expression, variance, and significance. In my family, my wife and our two children are deeply empowered in a rather remarkable intergenerational dialogue, based on the transition journey that we all have shared and continue to share – they have found that while their parent's outward expression of gender has changed, the inner persona and identity remains largely the same. Through openness, love, and the support of friends and family, we all have moved on to a new standard of "natural" for our family, and we often discuss (sometimes with a healthy dose of humour) what it means to be ourselves, and how those selves might find expression in masculinity, femininity, or somewhere nestled in between. We also can't help but consider, across generations, how society deals quite differently with those gender identities. Transgender people are motivated by the urgent, irrepressible need to be authentic, and that's a pretty good place to nurture children as they begin framing their own gender concepts and finding their own gender based sense of empowerment.

Alexandru: I think that before having contact with pop-culture, children grow up in the structural environment of their parents/guardians. By the time they engage with pop-culture they already have something or somebody to fight against (or alongside with, in the better case scenarios). Perception of star-products can confirm, challenge or deconstruct the notions of gender the children grew up with. I think today's environment could be best described as one of competing identities that sometimes overlap, sometimes oppose each other, and young people are really able to navigate in the intersection of these structures. Intergenerational dialogue has never been easy, but it may be true that it was more normative than let us say 80 years ago. I think today, more than ever, one can find parents and their children rally to similar causes, as they are freed from traditional norms, more able to share experiences of both a political and pleasurable kind. Societies in which patriarchal traditional values are stronger or more manifest tend to have less intergenerational dialogue. In Romania for example I realized that one of the big problems for young people today is hiding their sexuality from their parents, because in fact the parents do not have the tools to enable them a dialogue on this theme. Although Lady Gaga is all over the place (including in advertising for mobile phones), "shame" is the feeling that best describes the approach to sexuality and the impossibility of verbalising the experiences, even among peers. The patriarchal tradition with religious undertones had in fact never been challenged in the modern history of Romania (and I dare say in lot of Eastern Europe). The Middle East seems different

in the sense that there is a dialogue and verbalising between parents and children of the same sex on themes of sexuality, but the public display of it is limited to strict norms.

Hulda: I wonder if they even think in those terms nowadays because it appears to be an issue that is defined by where you are located in society: by economic, social, political, religious, racial, tribal identities, one's sexuality, age, education, all of which confer upon different peoples differing challenges, privileges and opportunities, and whether, either consciously or unconsciously, these concepts mean anything to an individual. For some, these are non-issues, whereas for others, they define (consciously or unconsciously) how you interact with society, what you get from it, your ability to live to your life to your fullest potential.

On the issue of pop stars....I don't think they can be described as the *only* voice that younger generations listen to. I think we are fairly good at compartmentalising our lives - depending upon whom we are engaging with at a given time - be it our elders, our contemporaries, and whether in a traditional or non-traditional context (rural, urban, the occasion etc.). There is no doubt that pop-stars do influence younger generations (pop culture generally), but other actors can moderate such influences e.g. one's immediate or extended family, one's religious, traditional or other beliefs. I think there is still significant room for inter-generational dialogues although the term 'dialogue' may in the context in which I live, suggest more 'an exchange'. The intergenerational interaction is very strong as a function of the fact that,

though communities are not as close-knit as they once were, maintaining close links with one's larger community is still very important to this society. As such young and old still interact quite significantly (youngsters also vacillate between the traditional and the contemporary) and therefore there is room for the older group to influence the perceptions of the different sexes about what their roles are in society and responsibilities.

Wendy: I really do not think popular culture, is the only culture of young people. Again thinking of my daughters, there is so much making of cultures by young people, using free computer technologies, images, sound, song. They create as much as they listen, shaping their own sense of identity, body and self. And I see this making of cultures in other places (not just in Italy where I live), there is a mixing of old and new traditions and cultures. It is very exciting to see the flow of ideas among generations, the new found respect, for example, of health and wellbeing in food and of course in dress. I feel global communications offer huge possibilities for intergenerational exchange about diverse forms of knowledge, whether spiritual, political or economic.

Q3: The way gender equality is recognized (by institutions) or claimed (by movements) seems to build on the concept itself of gender diversity, suggesting the affirmation 'of the self' as opposite to or different from 'the other'. How can values of comprehension, dialogue, co-habitation, solidarity be reconciled and serve as the basis for gender equality in a society

that is more individualistic and consumerist?

Chloe: I think Julia Serano has it right when she advocates, in her articulate and well-informed way in her book *Whipping Girl*, for reframing societal values around gender under the "diversity" banner, and not in oppositional terms. No one wins when being feminine is seen as an attack on masculinity (or vice versa), or when a person's sex as assigned at birth entails a stringent societal prohibition from expressing any degree of the "other" gender.

Solidarity and dialogue start with a fundamental commitment to a mutual respect of basic human dignity no matter how that is "packaged". I want people to see me as a human being first, and a woman second, and – only if there is a compelling reason to do so – then as a transsexual woman. Viewing the other as a means to your own personal success and enrichment, i.e. as instrumental to your agenda may be good for your bank balance and for sales of consumer products, but treating human beings as "things" to be manipulated diminishes any prospect for solidarity. What unites us as human beings is significantly more profound than what distinguishes us at the level of gender identity and expression; we need to embrace that fundamental commonality before any real dialogue about gender equality makes sense.

Alexandru: I think the most dangerous trap to be avoided is that of ghettoization. It is true that consumerist logic is based on the creation of diverse market niches and this is reflected in various ways, including gender and sexuality. At the

same time unisex tendencies are also an expression brought about by consumer practices, with, in my opinion, influence how we perceive gender and equality. Building a tolerant public sphere is a daily challenge, and for good or bad consumerism has a defining role in it. I think constructing oneself as different from the other is good as long as the bridges of communication are kept and the role of “the other” is acknowledged as integrated as part of the self, which at its turn may be constantly questioned, deconstructed and reconstructed. The danger is the fixation of the self in rigid identities that become in-different of the other. Identities affirmed on exclusivist basis threaten to become the new fundamentalism. As a mostly heterosexual man working on fashion and the body during my PhD thesis I felt not only once questioned if not excluded from conversations because I did not fit the stereotype (I was supposed to be gay, and at times it was almost imperative).

Hulda: I am not sure I agree with this statement- I do not think the concept of ‘gender equality’ (as it is adopted by institutions, I am not sure of movements) really does take into account gender diversity... Sometimes they give lip-service to it, but more often than not, it is assumed it means the same thing to different women and girls. Where disagreements have arisen, they haven’t really been resolved in a manner that suggests the ability to accommodate diversity.

Re your question, perhaps, it begins with us being honest with ourselves- about the differences in our points of departure when talking about ‘gender equality’- and therefore the corresponding

differences between the agendas of those who broadly describe themselves as working towards the goal of ‘gender equality’. How have each one of us appropriated this goal of ‘gender equality’, what does it imply for us? What are our points of commonality and departure respectively? How can we work together, our differences notwithstanding? In Kenya we are trying to do that. Borrowing from the Tanzania Gender Festival which has been running in Tanzania quite successfully for some time, and which seeks to bring together all those working on issues of gender equality, and other related issues, to dialogue, network and learn. Following Kenya’s disputed general election in 2007, some women’s and human rights organizations came together with the idea of holding Kenya’s first Gender Festival as a way of bringing together actors working on these issues, to dialogue, to heal, and to re-build the women’s movement. The first festival which was held in July 2009, was made possible by the coordinated efforts of the organisations that agreed to come together and commit their human, technical and financial resources to this joint initiative. The process tried to bring together a diversity of actors, working at different levels on these issues; and others, who may not be familiar with these issues, but who are open to learning about them.

SID Regional Office was involved in this process and SID is also part of the steering committee for this year’s Gender Festival which is taking place during the 16 Days of Activism. It is a learning process for all of us and there are challenges which arise in the process, but we hope such initiatives will enable us to

learn from each other, to develop new relationships, to learn to better accommodate differences between ourselves, and to become a cohesive force within Kenya and beyond.

Wendy: The huge challenge of speaking about gender equality remains how to include masculinities, men and trans gender and so that gender equality is not continually reduced to women and femininity. I know that using the term feminism immediately puts off many people, who think it is only about women. But for me feminism is about justice and rights for all people. It is not about man hating about celebrating difference and pleasure as well as ending gender based violence, sexism and intolerance of others which includes all those who are abused whether women, men, girls or boys or 'in-between' sexes.

Q4: As someone working on body and or gender and development, how do you think we should cope with the double challenge of defending the body and sexuality from patriarchal powers, reactionary cultures and at the same time from the sex industry and banalization of values?

Chloe: I don't think we cope very well with that double challenge, except that we are pretty good at caring for each other in the midst of our efforts to cope. We continue to labour under definitions of femininity and masculinity imposed on us by the patriarchy, instead of finding, claiming and celebrating gender in our own terms (which includes also wading into the confusing domains of androgyny). I'd like us all to be more

assertive in expressing our common human morality – the great cosmopolitan set of principles that is slowly but steadily gathering momentum around the globe. We ought to be much more assertive, insisting that those who routinely diminish or disempower others on the basis of sex or gender (or, in my case, gender variance) must be held to account in their assumption that such a status quo is acceptable. We do ourselves and humanity a disservice by reacting to their provocations as if it were feminists – and anyone committed to universal principles of human dignity – who have the less defensible argument.

Any effective approach to coping with the challenge of the sex industry (which arguably extends from commercial exploitation of sex and gender in advertising all the way down to the seamy world of trafficking and prostitution) needs to begin by offering genuine opportunities for societal acceptance and economic survival – at a truly human level – to all who engage in sex work (at any level) out of economic necessity. That goes back to changing a basic attitude among all people – that no person should ever be treated as an object of someone else's gratification. Taking a strong moral stand may seem quaint or ineffectual to those scarred by dealing in the world defined as competing powers and interests, but I don't think there is any other place to begin. Asserting the moral principle of basic human dignity has universal appeal, but we sorely need leaders (at every level) to back that assertion up with conviction and action.

Alexandru: This is complicated. It reminds me of the reaction of a friend who was born and lived in Teheran until

she was 20 years old, after which she moved to Paris. Her rightful reaction against the displaying of women's bodies on the cover of the magazines at every other press kiosk was as strong as the one against the patriarchal domination she fled – but at which she paradoxically thought of in nostalgic terms at times. I think there is something about the way in which sexuality is defined in a hetero-normative way that keeps us stuck between this two choices. In a hetero-normative logic, a man is relegated to a realm of domination and machismo that can take many different forms but necessarily puts women in a position of serving his pleasures. Why a woman's naked body means almost invariably heterosexual men's pleasure? How come a women's pleasure is only accepted to a certain point after which it becomes threatening? Is there a real difference between the argument for why women should cover their hair and why women should undress for men's pleasure?

Wendy: There has been some very important work done by feminists (men, women, transgender) around the world that has undone some of the most oppressive silencing of gender based violence such as that around female genital mutilation and domestic violence. What needs much further work is to accept sexual pleasure as something as basic as food, water and shelter and as important as religion and health. The taboo of speaking about what would be erotic justice needs to be lifted as part of our communal well being. This is not to say I endorse all forms of sexual activity but by not speaking openly and honestly about the 'dark' side of sexuality in ways that are not sensationalist or journalistic

we are allowing it to continue in ways that can be very harmful to all of us.

Q5: Considering today's generation of teenagers, are there alternative spaces of dialogue and cohesion for those who are not attracted by the lights of the stage and the market? Are there alternative role models to the star system?

Chloe: Young people, like people of any generation, are attracted to compelling narratives. As young people age, they find comfort in constraining the "acceptable" narratives to those that affirm their crystallizing world view, which in turn may not be a world view that has been subjected to much critical self-reflection. There's an important strategic period of nurturing our young people when they are open to a much wider range of narratives – of life stories that are filled with inspiration and questioning, that offer patterns of meaning based on values that differ from their parents' or their communities. The challenge is to engage with young people, not treat them as a market. Celebrities and ephemeral fashion generate maximum revenue by rapidly changing, by being superficial and "new", and by simulating provocative but often shallow statements of independence. We have far better role models in many films and books, even if made suspect by their mass-market popularity: the *Harry Potter* series; the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy; *Billy Elliot*; *The Lion, The Witch & the Wardrobe*; *Akeelah and the Bee*; to name but a few. We have good stories and powerful narratives of people being authentic to their true selves, but such narratives ought to be the

basis for an expanded dialogue about values such as gender equality – in language appropriate to younger people. As older persons, we cannot leave the narratives to movie theatre or the DVD; there are important conversations to be had if we can but claim the space for dialogue.

Alexandru: The Pop Star system is attractive precisely because it offers the promise of the perfect body (photoshop enhanced, but still...). This body can be gendered or racialized (less often), the condition of its success is its apparent perfection. But it is the migration of all other role models into the realm of star system that best describes the current state of affairs. Since we are living in an increasingly visual world, credibility is carried by the image of the messenger. The value of the message and its chances to reach the audience is dependent on the perfection of the (bodily) image of the messenger.

In other words, right now, an alternative model in order to be effective in today's world for young people must enter the star logic system. Actors who have become presidents and governors, politicians who have fallen victims to their own image or musicians who can take political active stands precisely because "they have an image", are only a few noteworthy cases that highlight the phenomenon. Credit is effortlessly gained by stars with no apparent bodily flaws, much easier than a possible alternative role model with no body to show. George Clooney's insight on the Bush cabinet and on the negative impact of the US internal and external politics is much more persuasive than any of Noam Chomsky's analyses precisely because the message is

flawlessly embodied. In a society where visual consumerism enjoys the monopoly over political economy, the perfect image – whether it is electronically produced or not – has become a signature of much greater value than an imageless signature or even worse a signature attached to an unappealing image. Thus the young generations are probably ready to enter dialogues and follow role models other than pop-culture stars provided that those role model have a star attitude (if not a body of a star). Also, it seems that messages (other than stardom values) are easier integrated if they are endorsed by stars.

So, I would ask you a question: are we about to enter the hegemony of the perfect body? And how does this ideal body look like (in terms of gender, sexuality, race, age or any other significant marker)?

Hulda: Alternatives do exist in our families, and in our communities i.e. the people we interact with most frequently. For some the reality is that these influences (stage, market) are not an option, because they are beyond reach. This is a minority. For those who are easily accessible by pop-culture and the market, the 'pull' and influence of different actors will also vary with individuals' socio-cultural context and corresponding beliefs and/or levels, sense of self. Pop-culture is a major influence in Kenya among both young and old, yes, but we live in a society in which ostensibly conflicting value systems exist side by side and where choices of what to follow are very circumstantial.

The younger generation also influences the look of pop culture and the work of marketers. Taking the case of 'sheng,' the

preferred language of many of Kenya's youth (which is based on a mix of Kiswahili and English, but also borrows from other local languages) much of the marketing has adopted it to attract the young population; marketers are constantly working to keep up with the language's evolution. Popular music in Kenya has in turn been informed by it. The hairstyles, the jewellery and clothing worn in Kenya reflect a mix of the traditional – and the popular; and this too is evolving and these influences will vary with context.

Wendy: I recently read a book on the history of glamour by Carol Dyhouse which showed how popular culture has existed always, even if it does not take the form it takes now, popular culture always answers to desires, dreams and shapes our collective imagination. Some of the pop star compelling narratives can be supplemented by others, as people have

said, mixed in with influences from other times in history and other cultures. What is important is to ensure everyone's access and openness to new ideas and forms of learning and creating. This goes beyond the class room which people attend when young, and needs to continue right up until very old age. Old people too, when healthy, have an amazing facility and wisdom to share and contribute, even if they do not figure in glam roles. Let us not forget the third age in our eagerness to open up possibilities for youth. Especially in Europe we can learn from other cultures in respecting the wisdom of the old, especially older women who now live longer than men, and are often, sadly economically poorer. We need to counter the push to change bodies to stay forever young and talk instead of the beauty of healthy bodies and of lives that desire pleasure as well as care and nurture others.

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Conversation facilitated by Angela Zarro

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