

Conference Voices:

My Body Is My Own: Conversations about bodily autonomy, shame, and pleasure

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Introduction

This series of mini briefings lifts up the voices and perspectives from workshops, plenaries, and breakout sessions at the 10th Africa Conference on Sexual Health and Rights (ACSHR). You can access the full set of briefings and framing reflections [on the ACSHR website](#).

We cannot talk about eliminating sexual and gender based violence without first talking about bodily autonomy. Bodily autonomy speaks to the choices we get to make about our bodies, and the choices which are made for us or taken away from us entirely. Power to determine what we may do with our bodies and how we understand them is in the wrong hands. This power should be held by us, and us alone. We should be able to make our own decisions about and form our own understandings of our bodies. Our bodies are our homes, our places of safety, our shelters, our life-force. We know our bodies best.

Terrifyingly pervasive, sexual and gender based violence is a global crisis of bodily autonomy. The fact that so many of us are unable to access safe abortions is another stark example of the ways in which our bodily autonomy is compromised. The violence is different, but in both cases, we are placed in danger because the right to decide what happens to our bodies is taken from us. We need an urgent overhaul of these life-threatening conditions, and in their place, affirmation of our bodily autonomy.

Beyond the violence and control, we know our bodies can be places of peace and pleasure. Feminists across the African Continent are disrupting the stigma around

sex and pleasure. They are prioritising comprehensive sexuality education so that young people can access accurate information about their bodies and sex. Shame and lack of information must no longer be patriarchal barriers to pleasure. The power to pursue our own safety, health, pleasure, dignity, information, and autonomy must rest with each of us. 'A luta continua' - the struggle continues.

Safe Abortion: 'Not everyone can speak up and survive...Those of us who can speak must speak loudly.'

As we prepared for the 10th ACSHR, abortion rights came under renewed attack in the United States with the reversal of Roe v. Wade, a landmark decision that protected the right to safe abortion. The 50-year-old ruling has been used by activists globally to push for similar progressive legislation.

In response, Tshogofatso Senne, Josephine Kamara, and Rosa Bransky of Purposeful, with Giselle Carino and Fadekemi Akinfaderin of Fòs Feminista wrote:

"As abortion rights come under renewed attack in the United States, spaces for transnational organising are more critical than ever. Feminist movements need to organise urgently across borders as if our lives depend on it, because they do!"

Read more on [this Purposeful page on the Medium website](#).

Throughout different sessions, panelists and session participants shared the social and legal realities that prohibit access to abortion. Despite coming from different

parts of the Continent, their stories, including those from the audience, were very similar. From Mali, Zimbabwe, Egypt, Nigeria, Kenya and Uganda we heard:

- Working on abortion rights in a criminalised context is challenging. Many voices are silenced by the potential legal consequences for activists, organisations and the individuals they support and stigma from our communities. Therefore, most collectives/organisations must mobilise, advocate, and resist silently.
- Laws against abortion across African states are restrictive and tied to the Continent's colonial legacy. The exceptions in restrictive legislation which support women's access to safe abortion create an entry point for our activism. Because exceptions are often linked to health reasons, we widen the conversation by asking: Shouldn't women's mental health and not just physical health be considered a health concern? Who can determine that there is indeed a health risk and how long would it take to diagnose this? For girls under the age of consent, sex with someone above a certain age is rape. Why do we not allow them to have the choice to terminate the pregnancy in contexts where abortion is allowed in instances of rape?

Where is Africa's Green Wave for Abortion Access? session

Despite restrictive contexts, African organisations across the Continent are resisting in different ways. Fòs Feminista partners spoke about their work at the *Where is Africa's Green Wave for Abortion Access?* session. The panel featured:

- Moderator Kemi Akinfaderin, Fòs Feminista, Nigeria/Zambia
- Giselle Carino, Fòs Feminista, Argentina/US
- Sybil Nmezi, GIWYN, Nigeria

- Elizabeth Okumu, TICAH, Kenya
- Monica Oguttu, KMET, Kenya
- Charmaine Picardo, SAfAIDS
- Nakibukka Musisi, CEHURD, Uganda

African Organisations

Generation Initiative for Women and Youth Network (GIWYN)

A non-profit organisation in Nigeria. Their work is centred on the principle that every woman and young person has the right to the highest standard of living, safe reproductive choices, high quality health care and an enabling environment that promotes their fundamental human, reproductive and sexual health rights.

Trust for Indigenous Culture and Health (TICAH)

An organisation in Kenya that provides young people, women and girls with accurate information on Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR) and referrals to safe and reliable services, because they know that information is power. They advocate for the enactment and implementation of SRHR policies that ensure young people, women and girls access safe and reliable information and services to enable them to make informed choices and decisions.

Kisumu Medical and Education Trust (KMET)

An indigenous Kisumu (Kenya) based non governmental organisation that operates in 35 of the 47 counties in Kenya as well as regionally in East and Central Africa.

KMET was established to promote quality in health and education services across Kenya. It champions for access to quality and comprehensive reproductive, maternal, neonatal, child and adolescent health among underserved communities.

Southern Africa AIDS Dissemination Service (SAfAIDS)

A Zimbabwean based organisation that operates across the SADC Region and focuses on advancing SRHR through promoting Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) and resilience building. They promote effective and ethical development responses to SRHR, HIV (including PMTCT) and TB through advocacy, communication, and social mobilisation.

Centre for Health, Human Rights and Development (CEHURD)

In Uganda, CEHURD focuses its efforts on critical issues of human rights and health systems in East Africa such as sexual and reproductive health rights, trade and health, and medical ethics which affect the vulnerable and less-advantaged populations such as women, children, orphans, sexual minorities, people living with HIV/AIDS, persons with disabilities, internally displaced persons, refugee populations and victims of violence, torture, disasters and conflict.

The call across various sessions from these organisations committed to the liberation of girls and women across Africa, and indeed from movements across the world, remains the same - that in order to secure the bodily autonomy of all persons, the following is needed:

- ***Invest time and resources in consciousness raising in order to remove the stigma against abortion, and in turn, advance abortion rights.***
- ***Remove all legal restrictions to abortion services***
- ***Provide access to self-managed abortions***
- ***Provide access to reproductive health services, without discrimination***

Read more about the Joint civil society statement on Abortion at the 51st session of the Human Rights Council [on this Sexual Rights Initiative page](#).

Across conversations, from *Bodily Autonomy, Reproductive Justice & Violence Against Women and Girls*, to *Decolonising Sexual Health, Rights and Contraception*, many participants were united in this call. What is needed has been clear for a very long time. So we focused on how to attain it, given the regressive regimes and fundamentalist belief systems that shape our contexts.

Our Bodies, Our Choice session

In the session on *Our Bodies, Our Choice*, participants were asked to share their reflection on how we can ensure that every girl and woman has autonomy over their body. Here are some of the responses:

- Our schools aren't doing comprehensive sexual education, so our collectives and organisations should do so.
- Elect women into government positions so that we have allies who can influence policy and legislation.

- At an individual level, break the silence. Speak about feminism, bodily autonomy, abortion, the many ways in which girls' lives are limited.
- Be persistent and hold space and ground for women like you. Social change is not immediate. But when it happens it will influence generations.
- Engage your community, support them to unlearn all of the harmful norms and beliefs that lead to different forms of violence. This includes engaging men directly.
- Support young people to be leaders; create spaces for young people to come together to find solutions and resource these solutions.
- Government bodies at local and national levels should do their part in reviving dormant laws.
- Funders should allocate resources to locally led organisations that understand the socio-economic context, cultural dynamics and therefore relevant (most impactful) solutions. Fund these organisations well!
- Raising awareness - make sure girls know their rights, that they have a voice, and that they are powerful!

It is clear that we each have our role - be it individual or organisational, big or small. We must work collectively and consistently to ensure that each and every one of us has absolute bodily autonomy by having access to safe abortion services, sexual and reproduction health education and a world free of sexual and gender based violence. Speak up, stand up, resist, lean on one another, support and protect each other, march, fund, volunteer, join us - we cannot fight this fight alone.

Announcement on the Safe Motherhood Bill

The conference culminated with an announcement by the President of Sierra Leone of the cabinet's approval of the Safe Motherhood Bill, which would guarantee access to reproductive health and rights including safe abortion. This announcement was published and celebrated by various institutions across the world. Read more on [the Guardian website](#) and [the Fòs Feminista website](#). There is widespread optimism that this bill will be passed.

“At a time when sexual and reproductive health rights for women are either being overturned or threatened, we are proud that Sierra Leone can once again lead with progressive reforms. My Government has unanimously approved a Safe Motherhood bill that will include a range of critical provisions to ensure health and dignity of all girls and women of reproductive age in this country.”

- His Excellency Julius Maada Bio, The President of Sierra Leone

This bill is a milestone for the People's Alliance for Reproductive Health Advocacy, a coalition of more than 20 women's rights organisations in Sierra Leone, including Purposeful, and feminist movements who have for years championed reproductive rights and called for an end to the colonial-era abortion ban. Much work remains to destigmatise abortion and ensure it is accessible to everyone who needs one. Yet, we celebrate this landmark on the road to a future where everyone enjoys bodily autonomy. As Josephine Kamara, a feminist activist with Purposeful, stated:

“Let this generation be the last to experience the horrors of what happens when women's most basic reproductive health needs are pushed underground.”

Sex, Pleasure and Shame

Reframing common and harmful narratives surrounding sex and pleasure - especially for women, but for men as well - is a necessary part of tackling rape culture and disrupting patriarchal notions of who should experience pleasure and how. It was important for us to hold a safe, non-judgemental space for this conversation to shift feelings of shame that often accompany discussions surrounding sex and pleasure.

Here are some quotes describing what pleasure and sex mean to participants:

“Every woman in the world should know about pleasure, how to be happy, and how to please herself!”

“For me, sex is the exploration of pleasure. Whether you do it with yourself, with someone, with multiple people... it’s about connection, and it feels good.”

- @ramatuforgirls

Quoting an excerpt from a poem performed for us by Ebunoluwa Tengbeh, the mood for the discussion was set:

“...Orgasms are easy for me.

Because my down there was all out there

Whether it was self or partnered

It wasn’t hard to find your way around there

My out-there down-there started to feel like an advantage

It’s like having all the answers right in front of you

And then getting to score bonus points....”

At the backbone of all the conversations on pleasure and sex was shame. One of the panelists, Eylul, explained how sex is not a conversation entertained in the Middle East:

“In the Middle East, it’s very hard and shameful to talk about sex, and we don’t actually have sex education. I didn’t know anything about sex before three years ago when I first masturbated. At that moment, I learned there’s a lot to learn.”

Eylul’s experience opened a broader conversation about self-pleasure and shame, especially internalised shame. Participants spoke about how they overcame internalised shame in masturbation and instances where they felt ashamed for demanding pleasurable sex, or sex from their partners. Here are some quotes from the discussion:

“When I began having sex, I began faking orgasms to please men and to feed their egos. These were the cues that were given to me. So much shame prevented me from enjoying sex.”

“It’s also important to have a conversation with ourselves. #Shame can be external, but it can be easily internalised. You learn so much when you get to know yourself by touching yourself. It’s important to touch yourself everywhere.”

Participants also discussed the impact of shame on men. While the brunt of pleasure-related shame is aimed at women, men also suffer from shame as a patriarchal tool that stops them from adequately expressing their needs.

“Shame is a tool of the patriarchy! Just because men have a lot of sex doesn’t mean they’re having great sex.”

- @ramatuforgirls

Another panel opened up an intergenerational dialogue on sex and pleasure. Panelists explored how different generations talk about sex and pleasure, the conversations we had or did not have with our mothers about sex and pleasure and how that, in turn, affected our conversations with the younger generation. Many people agreed that sex and pleasure were not discussed in most homes. In homes where sex was discussed, in most instances, it was to instill fear of having sex instead of sex education.

“Growing up, sex was a taboo to talk about. When you talk about sex, you’ll be flogged by your parents because they believe you should not have sex until you’re married. This has affected our ability to communicate about sex.”

“Growing up in South Africa, my knowledge about sex was about H.I.V and centred on fear. Now I understand how sex is used as a tool of oppression for women.”

- @mbongomuffin

Participants identified a pattern - the lack of open discussion with children about sex and pleasure adversely affects them as adults. To give children more knowledge, control, and agency over their bodies, participants discussed the importance of comprehensive sexuality education, which also requires that adults overcome their own shame.

“Sex education is so important. When people have access to non-judgmental education, they end up prolonging their sexual debut because they know what their choices are and they can communicate to their partners.”

- @Sistergurlsexpert

The conversations brought to light our individual and collective journeys of discovering pleasure, the progress made by feminists in changing narratives of sex, pleasure and shame, and the recognition that these conversations are always intergenerational without us making an effort. It provided a space to acknowledge how we have been socialised to internalise and externalise shame, and how shame is used as a tool to control us. We were given a space to sow in the minds of all present the radical notion that pursuing, talking and recognising the things that give us pleasure is not taboo.

Towards Bodily Autonomy: Crossing Borders and Bridging

Generations

Bodily autonomy – the concept that each person has a right to govern their own body – is painfully out of reach for girls, women, and all those impacted by patriarchal

violence. At the 10th ACSHR, we affirmed that we each have a role to play in ending sexual and gender based violence, expanding access to safe abortions, uprooting shame around sex, destigmatising pleasure and promoting accurate, non-judgemental sexuality education. We learned we are stronger when we strategise across national borders and share our experiences across generations. While we face backlash, we celebrate progress in the form of introduction of the Safe Motherhood Bill in Sierra Leone. The struggle to reclaim control over our own bodies is urgent, and it is life-affirming. Despite the headwinds, we are claiming our rights to safety, health, information, pleasure and dignity.

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