

THE BIG QUESTION

Man vs. Woman

HOW DO SEX & SEXUALITY AFFECT AN INDIVIDUAL'S ROLE IN SOCIETY?

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FEATURING

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For as long as humankind has organized into coherent communities, sex and sexuality have played central roles in forming the nature of societies and governments. But only recently, within the past century or less, has the competition or selection of man vs. woman determined the nature of government, its citizens, and the way the two interact. We asked our panel of global experts how the interplay of gender and sexuality has affected their respective societies.

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ELEVEN IS ENOUGH JINA MOORE

Last summer, I met a tired Congolese woman. She'd just had twins—no small work—and in the shrug of her body, you could see the other births the woman had been through. Eleven children, she said, was enough. She wished she could stop. Years earlier, at a women's rights workshop in the same province, a young man with legal training—equal rights go over better when explained by men—declared that hitting women was legally and ethically wrong. "But if we can't beat our wives," asked a man sitting in, "what can we do when they won't have sex with us?" I remember these two stories together not because they are especially Congolese, but because they are universal.

To be a woman in the world is to experience, by submission or resistance, the entitlement of men to your body. It is to experience the illusion that you can opt out of misogyny—to be told that if you dress right, you won't be raped. It is to be asked to accept as equal your second-class rights—the right to education, if your parents don't marry you off as a child; to reproductive choice, if you have money to reach a state-approved provider; and to equal wages, if you've had opportunity to gain skills for formal employment.

To be a woman in this world, even today, is to be less in almost every way—except determination. In Afghanistan, Kenya, Congo, Liberia, Iraq, and beyond, women wage battles for equality in schools, jobs, and politics, and for safety in their homes and on their streets. To be a woman is to fight harder and tougher than men. As German sociologist Theodor W. Adorno wrote, "It is part of the mechanism of domination to forbid recognition of the suffering it produces." Women to-

day are challenging that domination with their voices, from maternal hospital beds to halls of power. Which means that to be a man today—a good man—is to listen.

Jina Moore is a Nairobi-based reporter who covers global women's rights and Africa for BuzzFeed.

SEX: A POWERFUL LENS SHEREEN EL FEKI

In the Arab world, sex is a powerful lens through which to view a society because what happens in intimate life is shaped by forces on a larger stage—politics, economics, religion, gender, and generations. If you really want to know a people, start by looking inside their bedrooms.

As nations across the Middle East and North Africa struggle toward more accountable, more responsible governance, the grand aspirations of freedom and justice, dignity and equality, autonomy and privacy, must be translated into sexual life if there is to be any chance of achieving them on a larger stage. In Egypt, we thank young people for leading us into uprising against dictatorship, yet those in power—from presidents to parents—do not trust their children enough to provide sexual and reproductive education in schools, so that their sons and daughters can have a measure of control over that most intimate aspect of their lives. There is so much talk about empowering women as participants in political, economic, and social life, but equality in the boardroom will be hard to achieve without equality in the bedroom, when women are held to double standards of virginity before marriage and chastity ever after, when their bodies and their sexuality are a family affair, not a private concern, and when violations

against these are hushed in the name of collective male honor.

Sex, wrapped in religion, is as powerful a tool of control for the father of the nation as it is for dear old dad. Sexual rights should not be a sideshow to the main event of political change in the Middle East. Sexuality is a mirror of the forces which have led to our current uprisings, and it will be a measure of badly-needed reforms in the years to come.

Shereen El Feki is an Arab-British journalist and author of the book Sex and the Citadel: Intimate Life in a Changing Arab World.

REACHING FOR EQUALITY ANDREW REDING

An overarching lesson from the past century of revolutionary social change is that sex and sexuality should be irrelevant to an individual's role in society. Particularly in more prosperous democratic societies, women and sexual minorities have achieved near equality and have increasingly taken on leadership roles. Women not only vote, they now govern worldwide—in Germany, Denmark, Norway, Slovenia, Lithuania, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Bangladesh, Thailand, South Korea, Liberia, Malawi, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago. Iceland elected a lesbian prime minister in 2009, and Ontario a lesbian premier in 2013. The current prime ministers of Belgium and Luxembourg are openly gay.

A century ago, neither women nor homosexuals were deemed capable of leadership. Today, in the countries that have experienced such leadership, the controversy is history. It was long thought the military must remain a preserve of heterosexual men. Yet today, women serve with distinction in a number of the world's

armed forces. Homosexuals openly serve in the militaries of almost all countries of South America, in the armed forces of the United States, Canada, Russia, Israel, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and all European countries except Belarus. In most countries, women now take part in the workforce on increasingly equal terms. Marriage, once an extension of patriarchy, has itself been democratized in most democracies, giving women equal authority in the family unit. Predictions that its extension to homosexuals would bring the demise of the family have likewise proven false. If anything, it has renewed interest in an institution centered on loving commitment to others.

Ultimately, humans are distinguished in their contributions to society by character, ability, and motivation, and there is no meaningful correlation between those traits and sex and sexuality, whatever the preexisting prejudices of traditional societies.

Andrew Reding, a senior fellow of World Policy Institute, is an expert researcher on human rights for the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

NO LONGER “UN-AFRICAN” KATE KRAFT

In most African societies today, sexuality does not merely affect an individual's role—it defines it. Laws across the continent are less tolerant: Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan recently signed a law criminalizing not only homosexuality, but also membership in or encouragement of gay-rights organizations. In Uganda, a law commonly known as the “Kill the Gays” bill, makes even discussing homosexuality without condemning it an imprisonable offense. The cultural taboos around sexu-

ality are intensified by the criminalization of homosexuality in over 25 African countries—a situation that has driven gay people, as well as their straight allies, deep into the closet.

These increasingly restrictive laws force many gay people to stay quiet or marry the opposite sex. Within this culture of secrecy and shame, it becomes impossible for homosexuals to play a normal role in society. Without the steady normalization that breeds familiarity and acceptance, as has happened in much of the western world, the queer individual's role in many African societies is dangerous. Homosexuals who are unwilling or unable to stay hidden have their roles in society defined for them, with their “deviant” sexuality becoming their primary—and often only—identity. They are consigned to being activists, battling their often ignorant and antagonistic critics, many calling homosexuality “un-African.” Indeed, many anti-homosexual laws and cultural beliefs were introduced to Africa by European colonizers, so it is homophobia that is really “un-African.”

For there to be any progress toward acceptance of diverse sexual orientations in Africa, heterosexual Africans need to fight against the oppression of their queer brothers and sisters just as passionately, if not more, than those communities themselves.

Kate Kraft teaches African Politics & Governance at African Leadership Academy in Johannesburg. She runs a sexuality discussion group with youth from 30 African countries.

PIECES IN BLUE SIDDHARTH DUBE

Since India's collision with imperial Britain, the joyless Victorian strictures against sex have found receptive ground

among Brahmin elites obsessed with caste-fuelled notions of pollution and purity, forever transforming the land of the Kama Sutra. Mahatma Gandhi personified this destructive mix, with his life-long, anguished struggle to purge himself of sexual desires.

Though the chaotic, contradictory billion-plus India of today bears little resemblance to its colonial ancestor, sex and sexuality continue to be fault lines. And because a puritanical sexual morality has been embraced by the Bharatiya Janata Party and other right-wing political parties, the future does not bode well. Women continue to pay the highest price—many trapped from birth to death in the roles of virgin bride, chaste wife, and sexless mother. The slightest transgression of these roles—let alone any assertion of autonomous sexuality—sees them treated as whores. Vigilante morality police, with ties to the Hindu right, have thrashed women for wearing jeans or strolling in public at night. Honor killings are commonplace in northern India. Medieval-minded police and judges treat even egregious offenses against women with complicit leniency.

The other main victims of this intolerance are sexual and gender minorities, particularly gay men and male-to-female transgenders. With utter disregard for historical truth, India's Supreme Court recently upheld the 150-year-old sodomy law—a “colonial-era monstrosity,” as Indian Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen has evocatively described it—on the grounds that it was a quintessentially Indian law, rather than a colonial legacy.

In terms of sex and sexuality, India remains an un-modern and un-free society. Sexual choices of consenting adults should be a personal matter, but are instead of

obsessive, intrusive concern to everyone—from neighbors and local moral brigades to the police, judiciary, and politicians.

Siddharth Dube is a senior fellow at the World Policy Institute based in India. His forthcoming book is a personal history of outlawed love, focusing on gay and sex work issues.

DEBATE IN VIETNAM TAM NGUYEN

Sexual minorities, who have been historically silenced and rendered invisible, are now leading challenges to conventional notions of gender and heterosexuality. Changes are coming not only from legal reforms, most notably same-sex marriage legislation, but also from increasing social tolerance, respect for diversity, and personal empowerment—especially in Vietnam.

And yet, in 2013, the debate about same-sex marriage in Vietnam was finalized in the National Assembly. The clause, “marriage between two people of the same sex is illegal” was replaced by “marriage between two people of the same sex is not legally recognized,” citing the importance of Vietnamese culture and the Vietnamese traditional family model. Such grounds not only justify the continuation of discrimination against lesbians, gays, bisexual, and transgenders in Vietnamese society, but also reflect the standpoint of a majority of Vietnamese lawmakers.

The same-sex marriage debate in the Vietnamese National Assembly and its conclusion is less an effort by the government to be inclusive of different and diverse groups in society. Instead, it subjects a minority to the standards of the majority. When lawmakers choose to adhere to the concept of marriage as a union between man and woman for procreation, a loving and committed same-sex rela-

tionship will never fit in. And that makes some sexualities more equal than others.

Tam Nguyen, project director of LGBT Pride in Vietnam, is a Fulbright scholar at Pennsylvania State University's Community Psychology & Social Change program.

TOWARD EQUAL MARRIAGE CORAL HERRERA GÓMEZ

Sexuality is a cultural construct and a device of social control. Our desires and affections are determined by the culture where we grow up, and we inherit this hegemonic ideology across multiple facets of our audiovisual culture. We suffer if our desires do not follow society's rules. We are not always free to love or have sexual relations, and this affects our identities and our ways of socioeconomic organization. In many societies, our sexuality is the product of a moral Catholicism—determined by such concepts as guilt and sin. The Catholic Church has taught us that sex should be only for reproduction, and all of our desires should be heterosexual. All who deviate from this monogamous model are punished.

Throughout history, people have been killed, tortured, imprisoned, and exiled because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. In some countries, however, homosexual relations are recognized and legalized. Equal marriage is an important step in achieving human rights. We need a world where love and sexual diversity are not reasons to discriminate against people, but rather social values that enrich our society. Promoting diversity is the only way to make a better society, with multicultural differences and without hierarchies. To go beyond labels it is necessary to free sex and sexuality from capitalism, Catholicism, and patriarchal ideology. We would suffer

less and build more beautiful relations if we were free to experiment with new ways of love, and to create networks of affection based on values of solidarity and mutual aid.

Coral Herrera Gómez is a Costa Rican-based gender communications consultant.

SELLING SEX **HANS BILLIMORIA**

Have you ever visited a person who sells sex? Have you ever thought about what it would be like to have sex with a beautiful stranger, and then pay for it? Have you ever wondered if you could ever sell your body, your genitals, your caresses, your moans? Our inability to discuss sex and sexuality openly and accurately underpins why shame and prejudice remain closely associated with people who sell sex, especially in a South Asian context.

Over the last decade, the lack of accurate information has fueled stigma and discrimination against the groups the HIV industry calls key populations—men who have sex with men, those who identify as transgender, people who use

drugs, and of course sex workers. The International Labor Organization may recognize sex work as work, yet selling sex in South Asia remains criminalized.

The anti-trafficking lobby is at loggerheads with the sex worker rights lobby. Politicians call for red light districts with little thought of regulation. Religious groups re-victimize the whores of Babylon; and men (well, mainly men) continue to visit those who sell sex. Judgmental attitudes are deeply ingrained in the South Asian psyche.

Despite rich and colorful traditions of selling sex, Victorian Christian ideals prevail. Human dignity is forgotten. We need to demystify sex and sexuality. We need to stop playing catch up with adults. We need accurate and comprehensive age appropriate sexuality education in schools. Then, perhaps one day, sex work will indeed be a legitimate choice.

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