

Executive summary of public forum on gender and sex

October 27, 2009, Southern Sun Elangeni Hotel, in Durban

Presenter: Dr. Antje Schuhman

The discussion explored how Caster Semenya's sex testing saga speaks to societal understandings of gender and sex, and the opportunities that it present for reflecting on societal perceptions of masculinity and femininity.

Dr. Schuhman's presentation deconstructed the essentialist/naturalistic view of gender and sex that is based on a dichotomy or binary between two sexes, and explored the possible political implications of questioning/challenging the "two-sex system". She indicated that classifications are seen as relatively natural either by sex (e.g. he/she) or race (e.g. black/white). These classifications have been developed and learned as a skill from childhood onwards, such as race – we are born into hierarchically structured racial categories. Meanwhile, organisations or groups are wittingly or unwittingly complicit in the oppression and discrimination of others by privileging certain identities over others, i.e. black over white, male over female, heterosexuality over homosexuality, etc.

She noted that Christianity as a way of relating to the world is very much base on the idea of binaries or dualism, i.e. good and evil. Binaries are contradictory and at the same time mutually constitutive, i.e. nature versus culture, black versus white, male versus female, emotions versus rationalism. However, non-Christian cultures have traditionally much more complex ways of dealing with issues of social relations by covering the subtleties of interlinked dynamics between different identities.

She observed that, in the West, women struggles for legal rights were achieved in the early 20th century. Shortly thereafter, in the 1940s, Simone De Beauvoir's famous line '*one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one*', in her book *The Second Sex*, inspired a second wave of feminist struggles in which women realised that, although, they've achieved legal rights they still suffer domestic violence and discrimination in the private and public domains. The slogan during this time was that "the personal is political". And so the idea of a single identity perpetrator of discrimination, based on the "two sex system" became increasingly challenged. For example, a woman will say I'm not part of this struggle, because lesbians are not allowed in the movement or the class interests of poor black women are not adequately covered.

Regarding the political implications of public support for Caster Semenya, Dr. Schuhman contended that Caster had to be normalised not because she's not normal, but because her looks do not conform to stereotypical understandings of gender. This was done on a linguistic level, i.e. 'she's the first lady of sport', 'I bathed with her', 'she is our girl', etc. Thus, Caster received

widespread support not because she chose her own gender identification, but because of how society perceives her, reflecting the price for her support. She noted that Caster Semenya has been supported by the South African government yet specific members of Parliament are part of the new interfaith leaderships who are actively campaigning for legislation that enact abortion and same-sex marriages to be rescinded.

Dr. Schuhman indicated that, globally, women who do not conform to how a “proper” woman is supposed to look like is very often harassed and violated. It doesn’t matter whether she is a woman who wears a mini-skirt or pants which are considered at odds with culture or a black lesbian who occupy public spaces at night that she’s being prohibited from, like a tavern. In South Africa, there are currently at least 20 reported homophobic-related murders of individuals who were identified by their perpetrators as not proper women. She asserted that the transgression of boundaries is perceived a threat in society. All women who do not conform to gender binaries have their right to dignity and right to privacy challenged in one way or another. Meanwhile, an emerging scholarship is looking at how class and neo-liberalism is playing into the hands of those who are threatened by the transgression of boundaries.

The presentation generated an animated discussion. One participant wanted to know about the suitability of the term “hermaphrodite”. Dr. Schuhman indicated that intersex is a more preferred term, as it allows for thinking about a variety of sexes in-between the conventional two sex poles. Some intersex persons might need medical treatment, but others are perfectly healthy. She mentioned that the biggest problem for intersex persons is not their body, but society that subjects them to gender binaries and stereotypical notions of sex. This is not a black or South African specific problem, but a feature of all patriarchal societies. Another participant said that body parts and looks do matter, i.e. a man doesn’t have a vagina or doesn’t where dresses. Dr. Schuhman’s response was that the main challenge is to overcome binary identification in order to undo its marginalised / oppressive effects. It means challenging the idea of the body as a natural fact.

One of the participants observed that categories are not a problem, as long as we don’t make value judgments on them. Dr. Schuhman didn’t agree. She indicated that categories are historically organised in hierarchical ways, privileging and valuing some over others. For example, the idea behind sex testing is to save and protect female athletes from any unfair participation of men disguised as women, based on the idea that women are naturally less physical than men. Here, fairness is tied to sex, and not class, for example. Why is it not considered unfair for a relatively underprivileged female runner, like Caster Semenya, to be expected to run against an athlete with access to state of the art sporting equipment and nourishment? And so it is clear that certain categories of identification are being valued more, and that the idea of neutral categories is an ideal that will be hard to achieve.

It was argued by another participant that Caster has become a symbol of the gender problem, and that she’s been reduced to a performer, reinforcing the stereotype that performing is a women’s

role. They are expected to behave and think in particular ways in their public and private lives. Dr. Schuhman felt that the focus should not be on Caster as a private person, but what she stands for in terms of how body politics in contemporary South Africa operate, meaning, how they are gendered and racialised. She indicated that representation is one of the biggest dilemmas of the capitalist order, as people are being considered as commodities. For example, Caster is not only seen as an athlete or an individual, but a commodity. Some refer to her as a brand, and in order for her to be marketable she needs to conform to certain stereotypes, i.e. 'she's not a lesbian'. So, she has to be feminised in order to stave off practices that are seen at odds with societal norms. She mentioned that South Africa is missing a real opportunity to push for a broader understanding of gender and sex that allows confusion to exist.

The main message emanating from the discussion is that we should not be fearful of boundary transgressions. In stead, we should be vigilant of imposing identifications on people and discriminating against identifications that people choose for themselves.