BOOK REVIEW

Women, Sexuality and the Political Power of Pleasure: Sex, Gender and Empowerment

Susie Jolly, Andrea Cornwall, Kate Hawkins (eds). London, UK: Zed Books, 2013. ISBN-13: 978-1-780-32571-2. Price: £18.99. Pages: 224 (paperback)

When, a few years ago, I was invited to re-edit the 1972 manual, *The Joy of Sex*, I expected to be reporting good news. Given increased societal tolerance, more effective contraception, better health care and more stringent definitions of abuse, I hoped to announce that the world was a far more positive place to be sexual than when *Joy* was first published.

Not so. On the contrary, particularly for women and particularly in developing countries, sexuality now seems endlessly problematic. On one side there is disease, sexual violence, exploitation, abuse and the demonisation of female libido. On the other side there are

oppressive demands that women be not only physically attractive but also erotically receptive, responsive and proactive. The idea of taking simple pleasure in sex is all too often buried between these two opposite but equally brutal extremes.

So it is with relief as well as appreciation that I welcome this book, which not only reaffirms women's right to have pleasure but also shows how pleasurable sexuality can empower women both in their individual lives and in the political arena.

The 14 articles, brought together by Professor Andrea Cornwall (University of Sussex, UK), take a global development perspective. They describe initiatives from such diverse locations as Uganda, Malawi, Turkey, India and Nigeria. They cover issues such as pornography, sex work, HIV, the rights of the disabled and – a wonderful touch – laughter. The approaches and styles vary, but are always thought-provoking. This is front-line coverage at its best.

The common theme is that sexual pleasure should be seen not as trivial, optional and secondary to the serious issues of disease, abuse and violence. Pleasure should instead be a starting point, at the heart of every attempt to

empower women, personally and politically, against these negativities.

What makes the book especially strong is that these ideas are genuinely new. New, the idea that if women realise their right to sexual gratification and their ability to claim that right, they will become more effective politically. New, the idea that therefore those committed to global development should actively work to support female sexual fulfilment. New – and revolutionary – the idea of focusing initiatives not just on preventing pain but on actively promoting pleasure.

Granted, the book's academic approach doesn't make for the lightest of reads. But that's unimportant set against the fact that it achieves what most books about sex never do: make us see sex differently and give sex a new and inspiring role.

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