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Ida Susser

AIDS, Sex and Culture: Global Politics and Survival in South Africa.

Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, 276p.

Paperback: 978-1-4051-5587-8.

This wide-ranging and important book examines the dialectic of structure and agency in shaping how poor African women have responded to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in southern Africa, focusing on South Africa, with brief reference to Namibia and Botswana. Based on the assumption that women's sexual subordination is a key driver of HIV transmission in sub-Saharan Africa, the book provides a compelling account of the structural forces that enable or (more often) limit women's ability to exercise autonomy and agency in their relationships with men.

Susser, a social anthropologist and ethnographer, uses an 'extended case study' approach, drawing on multiple data sources to illustrate ways in which interacting micro-local, national and global contexts drive the personal and social devastation that the epidemic wreaks in the lives of poor South Africans. Whilst this work falls squarely within the field of anthropology, it will be of particular interest to health and social psychologists interested in understanding the wider social contexts that enable or limit health-enhancing behaviours in the context of the HIV epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa. It will also be of interest to those concerned with the potential role of critical thinking and collective action by grassroots 'organic intellectuals' in challenging the gender and economic inequalities that fuel the epidemic.

Women are most vulnerable to HIV infection, comprising 60% of the infected, with those in their early teens five times as likely to be infected as young men of the same age. Poor women and rural women are least able to access effective care and treatment once infected. Women also carry most of the emotionally and economically crippling burden of care for the sick and dying in AIDS-affected communities. In unravelling the strands of the mutually reinforcing economic, historical, political and cultural factors which feed the gender inequalities that limit women's agency, Susser is at pains to avoid the

common tendency to represent African women as passive victims of inexorable social forces, seeking to highlight what she calls 'spaces of hope' – illustrating the ingenuity, courage and creativity of particular women who have challenged their extreme oppression in varying degrees of success or failure.

Susser's interest in depicting women as highly competent social actors and agents of social transformation is motivated by her critique of the invisibility of African women in current international AIDS discourse. Women are represented as statistics, members of 'risk groups', 'targets' for 'intervention' – in public health plans that emphasise technical interventions to HIV/AIDS – health education, condom distribution, circumcision, VCT. Susser's material provides a convincing explanation of why such technical interventions have had so little success in turning around the epidemic. They fail to take account of the social, sexual and gender relations that shape the types of choices women are able to make about their sexuality. They also limit the extent to which they are able to make optimal use of technically driven AIDS prevention, care and treatment services, where these exist.

Susser's book draws attention to many neglected dimensions of the social context of the epidemic in South Africa. Thus, for example, she argues that in pre-colonial times, women had a degree of flexibility and autonomy in their relations with men. This was undermined by colonial authorities, who privileged men through their interpretation and codification of customary law in ways that excluded women from decision-making councils and from the inheritance of land. She provides a fascinating account of the gradual erosion of progressive and forward-looking national AIDS policies formulated in the early post-apartheid era in the early 1990's. She examines this erosion in the light of the country's growing commitment to neo-liberal economic policies, as well as the use of so-called 'traditional (patriarchal) African values' by both President Mbeki and the incoming President Zuma as political weapons to advance their power bases in various ways.

She traces the way in which the economic policies, such as the country's 1996 Growth, Employment and Redistribution policy (GEAR), focused on

developing the formal economy in ways that excluded women, children, the elderly and the disabled. She highlights the negative social impacts of the focus on market competition over collective and public endeavours, with its parallel lack of investment in building the capacities of women, the young and the poor to improve their lives. This, together with the lack of investment in smaller manufacturing and social services (arenas in which women find work and seek assistance), has dramatically increased women's economic dependence on men. Survival sex by women has effectively been underwritten by economic policy – with women being forced to use sexual leverage to extract economic resources from men, and men using their wage earning power to command the sexual and domestic services of women.

Whilst women have always had limited access to paid work, there has been growing unemployment amongst men. This situation has increased the rage of many men no longer able to fulfil the role of masculine breadwinner. This has led to an increase in private violence against women, as well as pushing women into seeking multiple partners when a single partner might not be able to give them the degree of economic support they need.

Economic policy has not only decreased women's ability to protect their sexual health. It has also hampered them in nursing those sick and dying of AIDS, in contexts where under-resourced and swamped medical services are unable to offer much assistance. Thus for example the government has invested heavily in large scale highways and bridges, without parallel investment in affordable public transport. In a context where transport constitutes 40% of the costs of caring for someone with AIDS, this situation has exacerbated the suffering of people with AIDS and their (mostly female) carers, particularly in rural areas. The growing move towards privatising clean water is also a particularly severe blow for many rural carers.

In a vitally important chapter, Susser charts the way in which women's ability to protect their health has been systematically and purposefully limited through the regulating of AIDS funding, particularly from the US. In 2008, PEPFAR (the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief) contributed

the largest proportion of money globally for treatment and prevention of the epidemic. PEPFAR policies have been strongly infused with the moralistic attitudes of the religious right in the US, with its emphasis on sin, morality and gender subordination. Thus, for example, PEPFAR refused to fund any programme that did not advocate sexual abstinence outside of marriage – despite the fact that in many African settings, HIV rates are often highest amongst monogamous married women. It also refused to fund any programme that offered any kind of prevention or support to commercial sex workers, again in the face of large amounts of research highlighting the way in which transactional sex was the only route to survival for many women.

Susser concludes that preventing the further spread of AIDS will require energetic investment in human resources, including education, housing, work for women and men, as well as reductions in income inequalities between men and women. She also argues convincingly for the need for a broad coalition between AIDS activists and agencies in South Africa and globally, and to link struggles to attain treatment access for all, as well as women's empowerment to the urgent need for increased government investment in basic needs of women, the poor.

In the face of all her evidence for the way in which the epidemic is driven by widespread 'structural violence' against women, Susser provides an upbeat and optimistic account of the role that global and national AIDS movements have played in challenging unjust practices by pharmaceutical companies, forcing them to permit lower drug pricing for poor countries. She cites this as evidence of companies being forced to take account the needs of the poor in unprecedented. The positive achievements of the South African Treatment Action Campaign – drawing the bulk of its membership from younger grassroots women – features heavily in her account of this process. Furthermore, she draws on various ethnographic studies to provide examples of women asserting their rights to sexual health in small-scale settings. Using Gramsci's theory of social change, she argues that these women qualify as 'organic intellectuals' capable of developing analyses of the social relations that disempower them, which constitute a necessary precondition for

collective action for social change. In the light of this material, her concluding chapter argues that the findings of her book are ultimately hopeful for women.

This claim elicits the first of two critical comments. The first queries the extent to which the material in this book can indeed be said to justify Susser's optimism. She certainly illustrates numerous instances of African women speaking assertively about their sexual rights in women-only action research settings, as well as documenting examples of e.g. women in Namibia successfully demanding access to female condoms. However, her illustrations of such isolated examples of women's agency and courage in very specific situations pale into insignificance in the face of her compelling evidence for the inexorable structural forces that stand in the way of women's advancement.

The book suffers from an uneasy tension between Susser's clearly stated determination to view women as competent and effective social actors on the one hand, and the evidence that she provides for the global, local and historical forces stacked against them on the other. Few could disagree that the creativity and courage of African women lies at the heart of the survival of many marginalised communities challenged by structural violence and global inequalities. However, in relation to the HIV/AIDS struggle, and women's ability to protect their sexual health, Susser's optimism and hopefulness about women sit uneasily with the fact that millions of African women continue to be infected in large numbers. They also sit uneasily with the power of her evidence for the relentless way in which neo-liberal economic policies, together with western symbolic and material exploitation of Africa, reinforce the local cultural and historical forces that undermine women's possibilities for sexual health at every turn.

The second critical comment relates to Susser's 'scatter-gun' style of drawing inter-changeably on a loose and highly selective array of sources in constructing her wide-ranging argument. These include the her own personal experiences – as American daughter of exiled South African political activists, herself an academic and activist; a searing first-hand account of the personal

experiences of Sbongile Mkhize, a research associate whose family has been devastated by the AIDS deaths of her siblings; a selective review of various relevant historical and anthropological writers on topics ranging from colonial history to masculinity, culture, social development and kinship; as well as various original ethnographic studies in various southern African contexts.

Whilst Susser's opening preface emphasises that her personal history and experience have shaped her selection of material, this is not followed up in later chapters. It would have been useful to have a more explicit discussion of ways in which her personal positioning led her to choose and emphasise particular sources of information and not others.

Furthermore, some readers might have hoped for a more systematic discussion of the book's underlying methodological rationale in combining so many diverse sources of information. Others might have hoped for a more explicit theorisation of the multiple and shifting contexts and spaces that shape the gender relations that she speaks of. However such an expectation might be unrealistic for such a wide-ranging book, and one that seeks to integrate so many levels of analysis. The very strength of the book may in fact lie in the author's ambitious aim to map out 'the big picture' of AIDS and globalisation in broad brush strokes. There is no doubt that much work remains to be done in substantiating and elaborating on many of the important and novel ideas she raises. Nevertheless, the book constitutes a valuable and innovative contribution to our understandings of the impact of the local-global interface on the complex interactions of sex, gender and culture that drive the AIDS epidemic in Sub-Saharan Africa.

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