

What's the question again? Power/knowledge and the question of women's pleasure in Nicaragua

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Some years ago I became interested in the subject of women's pleasure. Two events triggered my curiosity. My own experience of feeling powerful when I got rid of many taboos and moral constraints, which enhanced my own capacity to experience sexual pleasure; and the public condemnation of some feminists by a pro-government newspaper for alleged acts of sexual complacency.¹

I began research some months ago about the 'problem' of women's pleasure. I have been conducting fieldwork in Nicaragua, interviewing young and not so young women from rural and urban areas.

I see this as a 'development' issue because many social injustices are based on the negation of women's pleasure, and because of the link between pleasure and power I myself experienced. Sexual violence against women is partly based on the conception of women as sexual 'objects' and not 'subjects' of pleasure, whose sexuality can be 'used' only to procreate or to please men (see Lagarde 1990). A social order of gender-based inequalities is founded on this conception. In my own experience, I found a link between sexual pleasure and power that went far beyond my own body's satisfaction. I became much more independent, secure and assertive in my ability to say what I want. This link has been analysed by different authors (see Rubin 1984; Jolly 2010; Correa 2010; Cornwall, Correa and Jolly 2008; among others).

Thus my research is focused on sexual pleasure and empowerment. How are women in my country being 'empowered' through the work of women's organisations on sexual rights? How is this experience of 'empowerment' visible in their daily lives after they become aware of their right to sexual pleasure? I decided to answer these questions and produce knowledge that would enhance the work of development NGOs in countries like Nicaragua.

When my field work ended, I had hours of conversations with women from different contexts and with diverse life experiences, but found no answers, because I posed the wrong questions. I designed my research 'tools' to capture information about something that was related to my experience, and to the books I have read, books written by women who were not those I was interviewing. My life also was very different from theirs. Most of my interviewees wanted to tell me about their experiences of violence, and how they have learned to defend themselves and their children. They also wanted to talk about their economic autonomy, their achievements of educating their children or learning to read, their knowledge about the use of contraceptives and family planning methods, among other things. Some of them wanted to talk about sexual pleasure explicitly, and others about other ways of experiencing pleasure, for example, by participating in social movements.

I could interpret this information in many ways. I could say that young, urban and educated women are more 'aware' of their sexuality, and live it in a more integral way that includes pleasure, hence they are more 'empowered' than rural women in general. Or I could say that women in general only assign importance to sexual 'pleasure' after they escape violence and poverty, hence they must

¹ See the news in Spanish: <http://nuevaya.com.ni/noticias-portada/por-malcriadas-y-vulgares-trde-raras-amanecen-empiernadas-en-la-cel/emailform>.

tackle some priorities before addressing the ‘pleasurable’ aspects of sexuality. I am sure I can find ‘valid’ evidence for these conclusions in my field work, but they would be incomplete and biased. The problem is not only how limited or biased such conclusions would be; there is also the problem of determining what kind of social intervention should be designed, and what kind of change would be triggered when using such knowledge as a neutral and objective ‘truth’.

This relationship between power and knowledge was analysed deeply by Michele Foucault in many of his books, essays and dissertations. He argued that “[I]t is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, [and] it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power” (Foucault in Mills 2003:69). He meant that the production of knowledge is achieved through disseminated mechanisms in society that are based on power relations, which determine who produces knowledge, its subject, through which lenses, and the criteria to validate that knowledge. Through these mechanisms, knowledge is produced about politically and economically marginalised groups (Mills, 2003) by groups that have the ‘validity’ to create knowledge about them. Among other things, this contributes to maintaining the division between what is considered ‘normal’ and what is considered ‘marginal’, reinforcing power relations. To illustrate this using the example of my fieldwork, the conclusions that I have the power to produce about women’s pleasure in Nicaragua would actually reproduce many power relations, because the conclusions would emerge from my point of view, which is based in my own life experience as a woman who is white, relatively young, middle class, in a heterosexual monogamous relationship, and with access to literature that has been produced mostly by people with my characteristics.

So the categories I am using to see ‘the other’ are in fact my categories, and the conclusions I would produce about them are limited, to say the least. In this sense, I would be committing, as a researcher, what I call – echoing de Sousa Santos’s ideas – a crime of epistemic injustice.²

The production of knowledge can trigger change, but in defining the direction of that change and the mechanisms to trigger that change, a more democratic notion of knowledge has to be pursued, in order to ensure that unequal power relations based on knowledge production are not reinforced.

On the question of women’s pleasure and empowerment in Nicaragua, for example, it is necessary to redefine the questions before trying to find answers based on limited and biased assumptions and world views. A better way to begin might be to interrogate myself about my position regarding the topic in order to unveil my own biases, before posing questions to women about their experiences of pleasure.

2 See de Sousa Santos 2006 and 2007.

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