

**"South Africa and the World
at the Dawn of 2004"
Report of a Listening Post
held in January**



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. SHARING PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES.

The evening began with a discussion about couples in therapy reporting different issues in connection with sexual practices. In the past many men wanted to have sex 5 times a week and thought women who were tired or did not want sex that frequently were abnormal. Several couples have been seen by therapists in the group who have not consummated their marriages over quite long periods of time even several years, and who do not seem concerned about the fact. Some couples had had a long term relationship before marriage and had not had sex, sometimes for religious reasons but even within marriage, when there was no apparent reason the marriage was not consummated. The couples often felt happy with heavy petting and were perhaps afraid that consummation would not be as pleasurable. Another therapist spoke about a young couple who often spent the night together in the same bed and alleged that they did not have sex. It was hard to understand how this was possible physically and what would happen if they later married? Would they have grown so accustomed to not being aroused of suppressing arousal that it would cause problems with desire or performance?

This was felt to be so paradoxical in this day and age of freedom and what is often portrayed in the media.

Another trend was that often women today were keen to have intercourse than the men who complained of fatigue and pressure and lack of desire as a result. Another unmarried couple was spoken about who had been having sex for about 4 years. They then went away together for a weekend. The woman's father asked whether they were going to have sex and this caused her to feel guilty and the sexual relationship ceased. Four years later they are still going out together. Both people in this couple seem afraid to grow up. He is studying but cannot afford to pass and qualify because then he would have to grow up. The woman lives with an aunt who is a lawyer and she wears beautiful clothes but not budget. Consummation was then equated with growing up and being an adult that was resisted.

It was also mentioned that at the Leicester Conference in April there was a relative absence of discussions around sexuality. This was understood in terms of the average age of membership and staff being in the late 40's and the pressure and demands of everyday life at least in Britain. Sex was thought to be more a functional dynamic rather than one of passion.

People were also thought to be out of touch with their bodies and how they functioned with regard to sex and sexuality. This seemed to be unusual at this time and could have been more easily understood 15 years ago. Despite the fact that sex had been demystified over time some couples seemed to prefer to be intimate in other ways. Perhaps the distancing created by no sex was easier to bear than having to face the emotions involved otherwise.

AIDS was then introduced with the thought that perhaps sex is unconsciously being equated in some way with death. At another level some people went ahead and had sex with gay abandon despite the threat of AIDS.

The discussion then moved onto betrayal and primal trust. Young people go into marriage with trust. Something happens to break the trust and this motivates couples to face their own loneliness and dependence which often increases compassion. The desire to hold onto the primal trust is a form of protection. This has biblical connotations with the initial trust in God till the apple was eaten. It was suggested that if there was no sex with a partner perhaps the person would be closer to God. It was often the man who betrayed and then became very remorseful. The woman, however, then often holds onto her anger because this keeps her in a powerful position. Often a circular pattern then develops with her asking questions till the small hours and he just wanting it all to stop.

A brief reference was also made to the role of watching pornographic material on the web especially by men and women then feeling used and uncertain about themselves and their sexuality.

The conversation moved onto cultural dynamics and that Black men often wanted dry sex and that if the woman was not dry it was thought that she had been with someone else. There are current beliefs that if a young Black woman agrees to go out with a Black man she is agreeing to have sex with him and that if he deems it fit with his friends. If she wants him to use a condom this is regarded as an insult. Some of these beliefs relate to the system of lobola where the man pays a bride price for his woman so she is objectified and seen as a possession. There are also customs still in operation where grit or objects are inserted into the vagina of the woman as sex is then said to be more pleasurable for the man.

Another story was told about a Black domestic worker, a conservative and ostensibly faithful woman who was asked an amount of money to transport some possessions. Instead of paying him she offered her body.

At the other end of the spectrum was also an emerging new generation of Black women who did not allow themselves to be dominated by the men but got on with their lives on their own. Many are doing better than men and helped on by affirmative action policies and employment equity. This then leads to the emasculation of some men.

We seem to be seeing extremes in behaviour of all or nothing. This can perhaps be seen as the swing of the pendulum from free sex of a few years ago to now no sex in some instances or strange practices associated with sex. Another example of this was the desire in 60+ year old people to continue to have sex and the emergence of Viagra.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

Sexual behaviour of couples has changed

- Often women want sex more than men and men are tired and under pressure.
- Because of AIDS sex may be equated with death
- Cult and cultural beliefs affect sexual behaviour
- Changes in women empowerment affect the sexual behaviour of couples
- More and more couples seem less interested in consummation than other forms of intimacy

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

The extremes in sexual behaviour can be understood in terms of the swing of a pendulum from the free sex to being ultra conservative and satisfied with heavy petting as a form of intimacy. This can also be understood in terms of a previous lack of responsibility that has now transformed into being so responsible that consummation is avoided altogether.

If ignorance about how the body works especially in the arena of sexuality then it is easier to abstain.

The impact of AIDS may have infiltrated the unconscious and sex is felt to be too dangerous and may end in death so penetration is avoided.

Growing up and becoming adult are resisted as is sex because this indicated taking responsibility and adulthood.

Trust issues and fear of betrayal may also support lack of consummation. In this way the parties are more equal and neither can manipulate or get the power.

Convenor and Reporter: Lorna Brown