



# Population, Pleasure and Sexuality

A content analysis of norms and assumptions in Cairo's Programme of  
Action

Annabel Merkel

Human Rights Studies  
Department of History  
Course Code: MRSK60  
Spring 2013

Advisors: Anna Bruce & Lena Halldenius  
14882 words



# Abstract

This essay aims to discuss the feminist vision that is said to be embedded in modern population politics. The starting point for this work is the Programme of Action, created at the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994. This document has been praised for its women-centred approach and focus on sexual and reproductive health and rights, but is it truly feminist? Internationally recognised human rights were also said to be the ideological basis for the conference, but whose sexuality is described as most “real”? By analysing the document using theoretical concepts like “the pleasure deficit” this essay will attempt to shed light on to how women’s sexuality and their right to sexual pleasure is seen as a lower priority than men’s – even in norm-creating, international documents like the Programme of Action. Ruth Dixon-Mueller’s “the sexuality connection” will be used to examine what assumptions regarding sexuality, family constellations and relationships are embedded within the field of population and development – and what consequences these notions have when it comes to including or excluding groups that fall outside the hetero norm. This essay will argue that the Programme of Action fails to live up to the feminist praise it has been given when it describes women in a way that suggests they are victims of men’s sexuality, rather than sexual agents themselves. It will also argue that the document fails to reflect upon contemporary forms of family, sexual identities and the ways in which categories of gender, sexualities and relationships can entail different things depending on the context.

Denna uppsats syftar till att diskutera den feministiska vision som sägs genomsyra modern befolkningspolitik. Startpunkten för detta arbete är “Programme of Action”, dvs. den handlingsplan som togs fram vid FN:s internationella konferens om befolkning och utveckling i Kairo 1994. Detta dokument har hyllats för sitt fokus på kvinnors välbefinnande samt sexuella och reproduktiva rättigheter, men är det verkligen feministiskt? Internationellt erkända mänskliga rättigheter sägs

också ha varit en ideologisk bas för konferensen, men vems sexualitet betraktas som mest "riktig" enligt Programme of Action? Genom att analysera dokumentet med hjälp av teoretiska begrepp som "the pleasure deficit" syftar denna uppsats till att belysa hur kvinnors sexualitet och deras rätt till sexuell njutning ses som en lägre prioritet än mäns – även i internationella, normskapande dokument som denna handlingsplan. Ruth Dixon-Muellers begrepp "the sexuality connection" används för att undersöka vilka antaganden om sexualitet, familjekonstellationer och förhållanden som finns inbäddade i befolknings- och utvecklingsfältet – samt vilka konsekvenser dessa antaganden får när det gäller inkludering och exkludering av grupper och individer som faller utanför heteronormen. Denna uppsats kommer argumentera för att Programme of Action inte lever upp till den positiva feministiska kritik som riktats mot det, när det beskriver kvinnor på ett sätt som framställer dem som offer för mäns sexualitet snarare än sexuella varelser i sig själva. Uppsatsen kommer också argumentera för att detta dokument misslyckas med att reflektera över moderna familjekonstellationer, sexuella identiteter samt begrepp som genus, sexualitet och förhållanden och hur de kan tillskrivas olika betydelser beroende på kontext.

*Keywords: International Conference on Population and Development, Cairo, Programme of Action, the Pleasure Deficit, the Sexuality Connection, Sexual Pleasure, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, Population Control, Population Politics, Feminism, Human Rights.*

## Table of Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>List of abbreviations.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>5</b>
2.1	Purpose of Study .....	6
2.2	Material .....	7
2.2.1	Primary material .....	7
2.2.2	Secondary material .....	8
2.2.3	My own position .....	10
2.3	Delimitations .....	10
<b>3</b>	<b>Background.....</b>	<b>12</b>
3.1	Is population a problem? .....	12
3.1.1	The population movement and women’s sexual and reproductive health and rights .....	13
3.1.2	International conferences on population and development .....	15
3.2	The Feminist Revolution in Cairo .....	16
3.2.1	Why feminism became integrated into the ICPD .....	16
3.3	What Cairo Failed to Accomplish .....	18
3.3.1	Resolving the abortion issue .....	19
3.3.2	Addressing the West and “the Rest” .....	20
<b>4</b>	<b>Theory and Method.....</b>	<b>24</b>
4.1	Theory .....	24
4.1.1	Social Construction Theory .....	24
4.1.2	The Pleasure Deficit.....	26
4.1.3	The Sexuality Connection .....	28
4.2	Method .....	31
<b>5</b>	<b>Analysing the Programme of Action .....</b>	<b>33</b>
5.1	The ideological base .....	33
5.2	The Pleasure Deficit in the Programme of Action .....	36
5.2.1	Whose pleasure is most important?.....	38
5.3	The Sexuality Connection in the Programme of Action .....	41
5.4	Conclusions .....	44
<b>6</b>	<b>Discussion.....</b>	<b>47</b>
6.1	Conclusions from a Social Construction Perspective.....	47
6.1.1	The limits of Social Construction Theory .....	49
6.2	The Future: is the world ready for a new document?.....	50
	<b>References.....</b>	<b>52</b>
	Literature & Articles.....	52
	Sources published by the United Nations: .....	53

# 1 List of abbreviations

ICPD - International Conference on Population and Development

MDG - Millennium Development Goals

NGO - Non-governmental Organisation

SRHR - Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

UDHR - Universal Declaration of Human Rights

UN - United Nations

UNFPA – United Nations Population Fund

## 2 Introduction

There is reason to believe that there are underlying moralities and assumptions about sex and reproduction that shape the way the issue of population control is handled.<sup>1</sup> The steering document for the work currently being carried out in this field is the Programme of Action, created at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo, in 1994.<sup>2</sup> A review of the literature in this field has shown, however, that little research has been done on moral values, norms and assumptions with this particularly influential document as a subject of analysis. Neither have there been any studies conducted on the role of sexual pleasure and descriptions of women's sexuality in the Programme of Action. Most evaluations and criticisms have been directed towards the issue of implementation of the programme, but the lack of criticism regarding the norm-creating contents of the document provides a risk that this aspect remains unchallenged by the international community. Because of the feminist praise that this document has received, there is also a danger that the current feminist vision fails to be challenged and further developed, and that the way women's sexuality is addressed is bypassed as a topic of discussion.

The reason why these missing perspectives and criticisms of the Programme of Action are especially pressing is because the current document comes to an end in 2014. The next initiative by the United Nations is called ICPD Beyond 2014<sup>3</sup> and the mandate of the ICPD Beyond 2014 appears to be focused on evaluating and improving the implementation strategies of the Programme of Action from 1994. According to resolution 65/234, which was adopted in 2011, the General

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank my advisors Anna Bruce and Lena Halldenius for their help and guidance throughout the process of writing this thesis. I also want to thank my fellow students Emelie Svensson, Julia Sällström, Dijamanta Islami and Marie Felix for their valuable comments and support.

<sup>2</sup> Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, adopted at the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, 5-13 September 1994, A/CONF.171.13 [hereinafter referred to as the Programme of Action].

<sup>3</sup> ICPD Beyond 2014's official website, see: <http://www.icpdbeyond2014.org>.

Assembly notes that “*the Programme of Action is due to formally come to an end in 2014 but that its goals and objectives remain valid beyond 2014.*”<sup>4</sup> In paragraph 2 it is stated that the General Assembly “*decides to extend the Programme of Action and the key actions for its further implementation beyond 2014 and ensure its follow-up in order to fully meet its goals and objectives*”.<sup>5</sup> Hence, the UN appears to be set on reaffirming and recommitting themselves to the current Programme of Action rather than creating a new one. The ICPD Beyond 2014’s official website explains that information on obstacles and successes regarding the implementation of the current programme is being collected from governments and organisations – but nowhere is it said that the content of the Programme of Action needs to be challenged or changed. This thesis will argue that it does.

## 2.1 Purpose of Study

The purpose of this thesis is to analyse the Programme of Action, from the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994, by using the theoretical concepts “the pleasure deficit” and “the sexuality connection”. These concepts will help uncover how compatible the Programme of Action is with a feminist vision when it comes to addressing sexuality. They will also serve to uncover and challenge the notions of sexuality, family constellations and relationships that are embedded within the document, in order to reach a conclusion as to who is recognised as a sexual being according to the participants at this ICPD. For this purpose I have chosen two questions that will help me in the research process.

The first question this work attempts to answer is: is there a pleasure deficit in the Programme of Action and, if so, does this affect the way women’s sexuality is addressed and portrayed?

---

<sup>4</sup> Resolution 65/234, adopted by the United Nations’ General Assembly at the Follow-up to the International Conference on Population and Development beyond 2014, in April 2011, p. 1 [hereinafter referred to as Resolution 65/234].

<sup>5</sup> Resolution 65/234, paragraph 2.

The second question is: What notion of sexuality, family and relationships is the Programme of Action based on? The sexuality connection will be used in order to uncover which definitions of sexualities, families and relationships are addressed, which ones are neglected and what assumptions regarding them are embedded within the document.

After answering both these research questions I hope to reach a conclusion as to who is perceived as and presumed to be a sexual being according to the contents and formulations of the Programme of Action.

## 2.2 Material

This chapter will present the material that is used in this thesis. The Programme of Action is used as the primary material and the subject of analysis, whilst the work of a number of different scholars is used to present a relevant background to the field of population and development.

### 2.2.1 Primary material

My primary material is the Programme of Action, which is the official document from the International Conference on Population and Development that was held in Cairo in 1994. This document will be the subject of my analysis in chapter 5.

The Programme of Action is not legally binding, but as the Cairo conference was coordinated by the United Nations and created at a an international conference – where the majority of the world’s states as well as specialised agencies, representatives from United Nations bodies, regional commissions, intergovernmental organisations and nongovernmental organisations were present<sup>6</sup> – it is arguably an influential, norm-creating document. The programme was developed to

---

<sup>6</sup> Programme of Action, p. 117-120.

chart and handle the world's population growth for the next 20 years, and it has also become a steering document for the United Nations Population Fund.<sup>7</sup> This means that the way in which the Programme of Action is written and designed is highly important, because its values create a basis from which other population and family planning programmes and projects are developed. The chapters address a broad range of topics associated with population; everything from environmental issues to gender equality, technology and international cooperation. As will be further explained in chapter 2.3, this thesis will be limited to the chapters focusing on issues like gender equality, family, reproductive health and rights, population growth and health and mortality.

### 2.2.2 Secondary material

The secondary material that is used in this study serves to give a background of the population field and, in particular, the conference in Cairo. A number of scholars will be referred to in chapter 3 to give an overview of why population is perceived as a problem and how international conferences have shaped the way this issue has been handled by the international community. It is important to note that most of these writers have a feminist perspective, or at least an interest in addressing women's rights within the population and development field. For someone interested in examining the Cairo conference from a different perspective – say, an environmental or economic one – these scholars would not all be relevant. The feminist perspective on this field serves to give a background to one part of this thesis' purpose of study, which is to analyse the way women's sexuality is addressed and described in the Programme of Action. A shorter introduction to the problem of how assumptions and missing perspectives create norms within the field of population and development will be presented in chapter 3.3.2. Here,

---

<sup>7</sup>The United Nations Population Fund's website, *About UNFPA*. See: <<http://www.unfpa.org/public/home/about>> Last accessed on the 30th of May 2013.

the work carried out by Vincanne Adams and Stacey Pigg<sup>8</sup> will be the starting point for this discussion.

The theoretical perspectives used in this thesis will be further described in chapter 4. Basically, the two operational theories will be Jenny Higgins' and Jennifer Hirsch's concept "the pleasure deficit"<sup>9</sup> and Ruth Dixon-Mueller's "the sexuality connection".<sup>10</sup> It may be important to note that Higgins, Hirsch and Dixon-Mueller have not created the pleasure deficit or the sexuality connection as concepts primarily intended to be applied to documents like the Programme of Action. Dixon-Mueller did address the population and development field, but she wrote her article in 1993 – which was a year before the ICPD in Cairo. Higgins and Hirsch work within a public health context but, in this thesis, the pleasure deficit will be tried in a population, development and human rights field. Both the pleasure deficit and the sexuality connection are presented, by the original authors, as crucial ingredients for the successful *implementation* of population, disease prevention and family planning programmes. This thesis, however, will add another dimension to these theoretical concepts by arguing that, if they are not taken into consideration, the programmes will be norm-creating in a way that excludes certain groups and individuals from being viewed as sexual agents. Depending on how this is done, it can lead to the status of certain sexualities, sexual preferences and life choices regarding family and relationships being lowered and/or stigmatised. This means that the definition of the concept may be slightly altered in order for it to be applicable, but the purpose of using it is to bring in a perspective that appears to be missing from the international area of population and development.

---

<sup>8</sup> Adams, V. & Pigg, S: "Introduction: The Moral Object of Sex", in: Adams, V. & Pigg, S. (eds.), *Sex in Development: Science, Sexuality and Morality in Global Perspective*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Higgins, J. & Hirsch, J. (2007): "The Pleasure Deficit: Revisiting the "Sexuality Connection" in Reproductive Health", *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, 39:4, p. 240-247.

<sup>10</sup> Dixon-Mueller, R. (1993): "The Sexuality Connection in Reproductive Health", *Studies in Family Planning*, 24:5, p. 269-82.

### 2.2.3 My own position

Where notions of body, self and emotion are at issue, the task of thinking outside of one's own cultural common sense can be extraordinary challenging.<sup>11</sup>

When writing and reading about the subject of sexuality, reproduction, norms and sexual politics it is inevitably difficult to be completely isolated from one's own social and cultural background. From an ethical research perspective I believe it to be of immense importance to be aware of the way my own upbringing and experiences have given me perspectives that are difficult to consciously step away from. In order to minimize the risk of being ethnocentric in my analysis, I have consciously used Carole Vance's description of social construction theory<sup>12</sup> as a starting point, to remind myself of the endless possibilities of sexual meanings embedded in the concepts, categories and practices that I will come across in the Programme of Action. I have chosen to do this in order push myself to step outside my own cultural framework. There are, of course, ethnocentric and normative elements within the core ideas of the pleasure deficit and the sexuality connection – which my analysis and many of my conclusions will be based on – but I will attempt to complete the circle by discussing my analytical findings from a social construction perspective towards the end of this study.

## 2.3 Delimitations

This thesis will only focus on chapter I-VIII in what is called the “Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development”.<sup>13</sup> These

---

<sup>11</sup> Adams & Pigg 2005, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> Vance, C. (1991) “Anthropology Rediscovered Sexuality: a Theoretical Comment”, *Social Science and Medicine* 33:8, p. 875-884.

<sup>13</sup> Programme of Action, p. 6-59.

are the chapters that address gender equality and the empowerment of women, the family and its rights, population growth and structure, reproductive health and rights and health, morbidity and mortality. The remaining chapters are about international migration, technology, development and international and national action and cooperation – which are less relevant when looking for the ways in which subjects like gender roles, sexuality, family forms and relationships are discussed.

This thesis will not examine the additional statements, reservations and comments made by the participating actors. Neither will it go in to details on the practical implementation of the Programme of Action.

One of the core ideas in this study is that the field of sexuality and sexual practices is perceived in different ways depending on context. Due to the limited space in this thesis, there is not enough room to go into specific detail about what these perceptions imply or how they affect the field of population and development. I hope to be able to explore this aspect more in future research.

This thesis is limited to discussing and problematizing sexual pleasure and categories of sexuality, family and relationships. There is still one major and important category that this thesis does not challenge – gender identity. This thesis will mainly refer to the categories “men” and “women”, simply because these two categories are the only ones mentioned in the Programme of Action. Because of the limited space in this study, these are the two words that will be used in order to make my analysis as focused as possible. I want to point out, however, that addressing additional gender identities, such as transgender and intersex, would be a highly relevant perspective to apply to the Programme of Action. I hope that there will be future research carried out, by me or by somebody else, with this issue in mind.

I want to highlight problematic aspects within the existing Programme of Action, with my purpose of study and theoretical concepts in mind. I will shed light on this issue from my position and perspective and it is far from the only way to analyse this document. I think of my own work as one of many possible contributions to this field.

## 3 Background

This chapter will provide an introduction to the roots of the population issue and also account for the most recent history of attempts to control and solve it. Information will be presented regarding the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo and its successes and failures will be accounted for.

### 3.1 Is population a problem?

The world's growing population has been discussed as an international problem for the last couple of centuries. The British scientist Robert Malthus was one of the most famous people to draw attention to the issue of the world becoming overpopulated in the late 18th century. Malthus' theory – Malthusianism – is built upon the concern of the world's population increasing at a rate that makes it impossible for our resources to keep up.<sup>14</sup> In short, Malthusianism has become a base for the development of family planning programmes and population policies. But is there a population crisis? The world population is currently over 7 billion and that number is expected to rise to 9 billion by 2050.<sup>15</sup> Considering how many people are starving and how the earth is becoming more and more polluted, one may argue that there is, in fact, a problem and that it is getting worse every day. On the other hand someone else could say that it is not the population that is the problem, but rather the world's uneven distribution of resources and power. Either way it is clear that the population issue is complex and can be interpreted and tar-

---

<sup>14</sup> Lee, J. & Feng, W. (1999), "Malthusian Models and Chinese Realities: the Chinese Demographic System 1700-2000", *Population and Development Review*, 25:1, p. 33-65.

<sup>15</sup> Greene, M., Joshi, S. & Robles, O., *State of World Population 2012. By Choice, Not by Chance: Family Planning, Human Rights and Development*, United Nations Populations Fund, 2012, page 17.

geted in many different ways depending on one's perspective and agenda. What this chapter will focus on is the feminist concerns with population control and how they have played out and shaped population politics over the last few decades.

### 3.1.1 The population movement and women's sexual and reproductive health and rights

When attempting to control or slow the population growth it is ultimately women and their bodies that have been targeted. The development of the contraceptive industry made this easier, and there was a time during the 1960's and the 1970's when the population movement and the feminist movement seemed to be compatible with one another. Jane Jaquette and Kathleen Staudt explain that many feminists believed that increased access to contraceptive methods brought on by the population movement would increase women's reproductive choices, free them of men's control and empower them. However, the two movements went in very different directions once it became clear that many population programmes were coercive and designed to meet scientists' and politicians' interests rather than empowering women.<sup>16</sup> Jaquette and Staudt point out that women are defined as reproducers within population politics, and that this makes them the targets rather than authors of population policies.<sup>17</sup>

The issue raised by Jaquette and Staudt, that international and national interests are incompatible with women's rights to their own bodies, is a reoccurring concern amongst feminists, scholars and activists working with a human rights perspective. One of the biggest problems throughout history has been the lack of a clear definition of reproductive rights. The United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) does not explicitly mention any rights tied to sexual

---

<sup>16</sup> Jaquette, J. & Staudt, K. (1988): "Population and Gender: a feminist analysis of US population policy in the Third World", in K. B. Jones & A. Jonasdottir (eds): *The Political Interests of Gender*, Sage, London, p. 214-216.

<sup>17</sup> Jaquette & Staudt 1988, p. 230.

practice or reproduction. With the population movement and the infringements on women's lives that it brought on, however, it soon became clear to many that there was a pressing need for discussing these issues on an international level. The first time reproductive rights were actually addressed as a legal concern was at an international human rights conference in Teheran, in 1968. Lynn Freedman and Stephen Isaacs explain that in the protocol after the conference, it was stated that "every parent has the right to freely and responsibly decide on the number and spacing of their children...". Since then, this type of language has been used in almost every international document on this subject.<sup>18</sup> This is a problem, since interpretations of what "freely and responsibly" actually means can vary a great deal depending on the situation and the interests involved.

Reproductive rights are difficult to define on an international level, and the same goes for agreeing on when a reproductive right has been violated. Freedman and Isaacs point out that most people will agree that forced sterilizations are an abuse of reproductive rights, but what about China's one child policy? Some situations can appear to be more complicated than others precisely because there are no internationally agreed-upon principles of what characterises an abuse of reproductive rights.<sup>19</sup> The authors deepen the discussion by explaining how states often use incentives and disincentives to encourage or discourage certain reproductive choices. Examples of how this can be done include different types of payments or benefits to individuals and couples (for not reproducing or for having only one child) and doctors and health personnel (for spreading certain information, performing sterilizations, distributing a certain amount of contraceptives etc.). Some can also be punished in different ways for having more children than desired by the state or for failing to perform a certain number of sterilizations on patients.<sup>20</sup> Freedman and Isaacs' conclusion is that reproductive rights need to be sharply defined if they are to have any impact at all, and this is a concern that has been voiced by many during the last number of decades.

---

<sup>18</sup> Freedman, L. & Isaacs, S. (1993): "Human Rights and Reproductive Choice", *Studies in Family Planning*, 24:1, p. 20-21.

<sup>19</sup> Freedman & Isaacs 1993, p. 20-21.

<sup>20</sup> Freedman & Isaacs 1993, p. 24-25.

### 3.1.2 International conferences on population and development

The first international conference on world population was held by the United Nations in Bucharest, Romania, in 1974 and then ten years later in Mexico City.<sup>21</sup> Even though reproductive rights were being discussed as a more established concept during both these conferences, there was still a focus on the demographic rationale of population politics. The conference in Mexico City also illustrated how the ideology and political interests of one powerful state can have great influence on the outcomes and consequences for the international community. In this case the American anti-choice movement was strong and the Reagan administration decided to cut all aid to organizations working with the right to abortions, both inside and outside of the US.<sup>22</sup> This has of course been regarded by feminists – and others – as a backlash for women’s reproductive health and rights, but Jaquette and Staudt claim that there were both positive and negative aspects of the US withdrawing its support for population programmes. They argue that it gave women a “*breathing space*” where they did not have to fear coercive population control strategies funded by US money. Still, they also acknowledge that women have a common interest in having the right to reproductive choice, which can be more extensively provided by a stronger population movement.<sup>23</sup>

Despite one’s perception and interpretation of the results in Mexico City, what was discussed there had a strong impact on the next conference – the ICPD in Cairo in 1994. At this conference a more obvious paradigm shift took place that changed the focus of population politics from demographics to sexual and reproductive health and rights.

---

<sup>21</sup> Freedman & Isaacs 1993, p. 21-22.

<sup>22</sup> Freedman & Isaacs, 1993, p. 22.

<sup>23</sup> Jaquette & Staudt 1988, p. 226-227.

## 3.2 The Feminist Revolution in Cairo

The ICPD in Cairo was held by the United Nations with the purpose of addressing major issues related to population and development. Alison McIntosh and Jason Finkle explain that this conference has been viewed as a great success by many parties – both world leaders and feminists. The official document to come out of the meeting was the Programme of Action, which is a plan developed to chart population for the upcoming 20 years. McIntosh and Finkle argue that the most unexpected feature of the Programme of Action was the major shift from the demographic rationale of population policy to a focus on reproductive health and rights and women's empowerment.<sup>24</sup> Rosalind Petchesky agrees that the ICPD captured an almost feminist vision. She sums up its successes by highlighting that it changed the population field's focus from the preventive model of population control, defeated the conservatism brought in by participants like the Vatican and promoted a language of sexual and reproductive health and rights.

### 3.2.1 Why feminism became integrated into the ICPD

Many agree that Cairo symbolized a paradigm shift for the population movement by its strong focus on sexual and reproductive health and rights. But how did this happen? Both Petchesky and Hartmann argue that women's rights organizations should take the most credit for the positive outcomes of Cairo.<sup>25</sup> There was a strong coalition of non-governmental organisations with feminist agendas present at the ICPD, which overshadowed many other interests and ultimately made all

---

<sup>24</sup> McIntosh, A. & Finkle, J. (1995): "The Cairo Conference on Population and Development: a new Paradigm?" *Population and Development Review*, 21:2, p. 223-225.

<sup>25</sup> Petchesky, R (1995): "From Population Control to Reproductive Rights: Feminist Fault Lines", *Reproductive Health Matters*, 3:6, p. 155., Hartmann, B., *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs: the Global Politics of population Control*, Rev. ed., South End Press, Boston , Mass., 1995, p. 151.

parties adopt a women's rights discourse.<sup>26</sup> Hartmann explains that the pressure put on the conference by these feminists resulted in a discourse built on women's rights and SRHR, which was so including that "...*only so-called extremists would opt to stay out.*"<sup>27</sup> She also points out that, according to demographic research, improving women's status would lead to fertility decline in the long run. This was something that many people were willing to listen to and believe.<sup>28</sup> Because of this, education, equality and women's empowerment were promoted as more important and effective methods than strict family planning programmes with coercive elements.<sup>29</sup>

McIntosh and Finkle explain that during the ICPD there was a lot of critique against the racist undertones of population planning targeted at women in the developing world. They argue that attention being brought to this matter also contributed to the women's rights-centred approach of the conference. They also point towards President Clinton's more liberal stance towards abortion, compared to the Reagan and Bush administrations,<sup>30</sup> and the fact that NGOs were invited and able to influence the contents of the Programme of Action<sup>31</sup>. These are two crucial factors that were able to contribute to the positive outcome of the conference.

It is fairly easy to argue that Cairo was a landmark for the international status of women's sexual and reproductive health and rights, but it is important to remember that this did not just happen by accident, pure luck or because all parties had women's interests at heart from the beginning. As previously mentioned, women's rights organizations worked very hard to ensure that the international community would safeguard their interests. NGOs managed to maintain a strong presence in Cairo but they are not guaranteed the same level of influence in other contexts. This explains why the Programme of Action encounters many obstacles when it is to be implemented out in the real world – because feminists are not as present in all decision-making processes outside of the ICPD.

---

<sup>26</sup> Petchesky 1995, p. 152-153.

<sup>27</sup> Hartmann 1995, p. 131.

<sup>28</sup> Hartmann 1995, p. 133.

<sup>29</sup> McIntosh & Finkle 1995, p. 227.

<sup>30</sup> McIntosh & Finkle 1995, p. 236, 244.

<sup>31</sup> McIntosh & Finkle 1995, p. 223.

### 3.3 What Cairo Failed to Accomplish

Although many use a positive tone to describe the ICPD in Cairo there are, of course, also negative aspects of it. One of the most obvious ones is that the Programme of Action and its recommendations are non-binding. However, they are important statements that could become international norms if reaffirmed on a regular basis.<sup>32</sup>

In contrast to the darker history of population control, the Programme of Action clearly states that coercion is not an accepted part of family planning and population policies.<sup>33</sup> The discourse is vague, however, in the sense that it only states that governments are not encouraged to use incentives and disincentives to influence people's reproductive choices. There are no suggestions for how sanctions could be imposed on governments who fail to comply with the Programme of Action.<sup>34</sup> Considering the programme's non-binding status it may not seem strange that it lacks suggestions of legal actions, but many perceive this as a great weakness of the document because of the sensitive issues that it addresses.

Petchesky is one of those who argue that there was not enough focus on development in a wider sense during the conference. There was no recognition of the local impact of structural adjustment programmes, or the importance of poverty reduction in improving sexual and reproductive health. The Programme of Action also bypasses the divisions of race, ethnicity, class and age amongst the women it serves to empower.<sup>35</sup> Betsy Hartmann argues that speaking rhetorically about empowering women as a group made it easier to ignore the diversities of ethnicity, class, culture and other intersections. Women may have some common interests – like ending domestic violence – but they are separated by cultural and political differences, which also affect their perspectives on population politics.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> McIntosh & Finkle 1995, p. 226.

<sup>33</sup> Hartmann 1995, p. 153. Programme of Action, paragraph 7.3.

<sup>34</sup> Hartmann 1995, p. 153.

<sup>35</sup> Petchesky 1995, p. 156-158.

<sup>36</sup> Hartmann 1995, p. 134-135

### 3.3.1 Resolving the abortion issue

One of the most discussed flaws of the ICPD in Cairo is the way the issue of abortion was handled. Many were disappointed by the outcome whilst some, like McIntosh and Finkle, argue that many were in fact relieved due to the question of abortion being “resolved” at the conference.<sup>37</sup> What this entails, exactly, would depend on one’s expectations and definition of the word “resolved”. It was dealt with in the sense that the abortion issue could be discussed without conservative parties like the Vatican putting a stop to it. Hartmann argues that the Vatican and, what she calls, “*conservative Islamic forces*” weakened the Programme of Action’s language on sexual and reproductive rights and that the question of abortion overshadowed much of the conference.<sup>38</sup>

The Programme of Action’s final messages regarding abortion are mixed. Paragraph 7.3 states that reproductive rights “*rest on the recognition of the basic right of all couples to decide freely and responsibly of the number, spacing and timing of their children and to have the information and means to do so.*”<sup>39</sup> As previously mentioned, the words “freely and responsibly” have been a reoccurring part of all documents on this matter since the conference in Teheran in 1968. Because the meanings of these words are so vague, they open up for a variety of interpretations in different cultures and contexts. The Programme of Action also clearly states that national law regarding abortion determines whether it should be permitted or not. This is illustrated by one of the objectives, which is to enable people to use: “*methods of their choice for regulation of fertility which are not against the law*”.<sup>40</sup> Nowhere in the programme are governments encouraged to legalize abortion.

Despite the vague formulations, there are paragraphs in the Programme of Action where a more negative attitude towards abortion shines through. Paragraph 7.24 is one of those: “*Governments should take appropriate steps to help women avoid abortion, which in no case should be promoted as a method of family plan-*

---

<sup>37</sup> McIntosh & Finkle 1995, p. 224.

<sup>38</sup> Hartmann 1995, p. 151.

<sup>39</sup> Programme of Action, paragraph 7.3.

<sup>40</sup> Programme of Action, paragraph 7.5 (b). Also see paragraph 7.16 for a similar statement.

ning”.<sup>41</sup> Further on in the paragraph it says; “...and in all cases provide for the humane treatment and counselling of women who have had to recourse to abortion.”<sup>42</sup> The fact that it is pointed out that treatment has to be “humane” shows that the underlying moral is that women who go through with abortions have done something wrong.

Lastly, paragraph 8.19 accounts for the current legal status of abortion by stating; “at present, approximately 90 per cent of the countries of the world, representing 96 per cent of the world population, have policies that permit abortion under varying legal conditions to save the life of a woman.” However, this paragraph fails to mention that not all these laws are easily implemented – which means that access to abortion is a more controversial and serious problem than this document suggests.

Despite the focus on women’s rights and empowerment, the Programme of Action ultimately failed to include the right to safe and legal abortions. As this section shows this is one of the major criticisms that the ICPD has received – both at the time of the conference and throughout the years after.

### 3.3.2 Addressing the West and “the Rest”

Wendy Harcourt suggests that western cultural norms set the basis for the discussions in Cairo.<sup>43</sup> In many parts of the world, political uncertainty and fundamentalism create environments where it is not safe for women to discuss their sexual and reproductive rights publicly. Harcourt points out that Cairo failed to address local contexts and different ways in which safe spaces need to be created in order to enable women to continue these discussions.<sup>44</sup>

Vincanne Adams and Stacey Pigg have written articles about the problem of development workers designing programmes, projects and documents about popu-

---

<sup>41</sup> Programme of Action, paragraph 7.24.

<sup>42</sup> Programme of Action, paragraph 7.24.

<sup>43</sup> Harcourt, W: Body Politics: “Revisiting the Population Question”, in Saunders, K. (ed.): *Feminist Post-Development Thought*, Zed, London, 2002, p. 285.

<sup>44</sup> Harcourt 2002, p. 287.

lation and family planning whilst perceiving them as “universal”. Adams and Pigg challenge the perception of sex and reproduction as a domain of medical science and argue that both science and development programmes are based on norms and assumptions about what sexual practice is supposed to entail. Sexual and reproductive health has been brought into the medical field over time, which means that uncovering the moralities and biases that constitute science is of great importance when discussing issues like population control and HIV/AIDS prevention.<sup>45</sup> Adams and Pigg associate this to the lack of attention paid to local contexts, and point out that policies and programmes related to population control are based on the assumption that sex is the same thing in all the targeted locations. They argue that it is difficult to “*contrast local cultural frameworks to a contemporary scientific understanding of sex and gender*”, as the issue is complex. There are also major linguistic differences in how concepts related to sexual practices are defined in different cultures compared to how they are defined in medical science, which may create problems when developing health and population programmes. Sexual identities, homosexuality, heterosexuality, prostitution and marriage – these are all concepts that can mean different things depending on context.<sup>46</sup>

The Programme of Action does include paragraphs that mention the importance of taking local, cultural and religious contexts into consideration. One of the principles, in Chapter II, is described in the following way:

The implementation of the recommendations contained in the Programme of Action is the sovereign right of each country, consistent with national laws and development priorities, with full respect for the various religious and ethical values and cultural backgrounds of its people, and in conformity with universally recognized human rights.<sup>47</sup>

Paragraph 1.11 reaffirms a similar approach:

The recommendations for action are made in a spirit of consensus and international cooperation, recognizing that the formulation and implementation of popula-

---

<sup>45</sup> Adams & Pigg 2005, p. 15.

<sup>46</sup> Adams & Pigg 2005, p. 17.

<sup>47</sup> Programme of Action, Chapter II principles.

tion-related policies is the responsibility of each country and should take into account the economic, social and environmental diversity of conditions in each country, with full respect for the various religious and ethical values, cultural backgrounds and philosophical convictions of its people, as well as the shared but differentiated responsibilities of all the world's people for a common future.<sup>48</sup>

Statements like the passages quoted above suggest that full attention is paid to local and cultural diversities – but most of the actions and objectives in the remaining document are written in a way that suggests they are universally applicable. It is as though the document springs from an idea of universality and then adds certain paragraphs and principles, like the ones mentioned above, to avoid criticisms like the ones voiced by Harcourt, Adams and Pigg. Pigg explains that this is a reoccurring part of international work in this field:

The international templates always include a statement about adapting materials to local cultural circumstances. This injunction, however, conveys the neutrality – and hence natural universality – of the frameworks and the information they contain by relegating cultural difference to a problem of fine-tuning information delivery.<sup>49</sup>

Adams' and Pigg's conclusion is that science, in the field of sex and reproduction, is not universal and objective – even though many perceive it this way. Sex is a subject that is sensitive or taboo in many contexts and they argue that science cannot be disentangled from assumptions and cultural generalisations in this field. Moralities are always involved and although science does not have to be wrong, it needs more social and cultural perspectives and it needs to be a subject of critical reflection.<sup>50</sup> Even though Adams and Pigg do not apply their theories directly to the Programme of Action – they discuss population and health programmes more generally – their thoughts, combined with the criticisms brought forward by Har-

---

<sup>48</sup> Programme of Action, paragraph 1.11.

<sup>49</sup> Pigg, Stacy., "Globalizing the facts of life", in: Adams, Vincanne. & Pigg, Stacy Leigh. (eds.), *Sex in Development: Science, Sexuality and Morality in Global Perspective*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2005, p. 47.

<sup>50</sup> Adams & Pigg 2005, p. 20-23.

court, Hartmann and Petchesky, provide good reason to examine what assumptions and moralities lie behind the creation of the Programme of Action.

# 4 Theory and Method

This chapter will start by presenting the theoretical base which this study rests upon and the two theoretical concepts that will be used as operational tools when analysing the Programme of Action. Further on, the method used when conducting this study will be accounted for in chapter 4.2.

## 4.1 Theory

I aim to use the theoretical concepts below in order to achieve my purpose of study. “The pleasure deficit” and “the sexuality connection” will be my two operational theoretical perspectives that will be actively applied as analytical tools when examining the Programme of Action. This theoretical starting point of this thesis is inspired by social construction theory, which will be accounted for in the following section.

### 4.1.1 Social Construction Theory

First of all, social construction theory is a large and complex area that this thesis cannot cover completely. This chapter will focus on giving a brief insight into how sexuality can be addressed by social construction theorists, based on an article written by Carole Vance in 1991. There are many different branches within social construction theory and this is a conscious attempt to use Vance’s basic overview as an inspiration, on which I will base this thesis’ theoretical starting

point in the idea that everything within the field of human sexuality carries the possibility of being socially, rather than biologically, constructed.

Carole Vance provides an insight into how social construction theory has shaped different approaches to studying sexuality. It springs from a combination of different disciplines; such as “...*social interactionism, labelling theory, and deviance in sociology social history, labour studies, women’s history, Marxist history and (...) cross-cultural work on sexuality and gender studies in anthropology*” – to name a few. Vance explains that social construction theory has been created by theorists from a number of fields, many of them responding to questions regarding gender and identity.<sup>51</sup> Scholars in this field differ in their opinion on what is constructed, regarding sexuality. Some argue that everything – “*sexual acts, sexual identities, sexual communities, the direction of erotic interest (object choice), and sexual desire itself*” – is socially constructed, whilst others only focus on a few of these factors. Identical, physical sexual acts can have varying social significance and be understood in different ways depending on time, place and cultural context. Still, what all scholars working with this discipline have in common is the understanding that the field of human sexuality needs to be problematized. Vance writes; “*because a sexual act does not carry with it a universal social meaning, it follows that the relationship between sexual acts and sexual meanings is not fixed, and it is projected from the observer’s time and place at great peril.*”<sup>52</sup>

Vance contrasts social construction theory with an anthropological approach – the “cultural influence model” – where sexuality is seen as something naturally existing but shaped by the culture within which it exists. According to the cultural influence model, sexuality itself is “*a naturalized category which remains closed to investigation and analysis.*” Sexual expression is shaped by culture but the nature of sexuality – often referred to as “sex drive” – is seen as universal, and different to men and women. Heterosexual, reproductive sex is seen as “real sex” or what Vance calls “*the meat and potatoes in the sexual menu*”.<sup>53</sup> Gender and sexuality are also interwoven in this model and anthropologists with this approach

---

<sup>51</sup> Vance 1991, p. 876.

<sup>52</sup> Vance 1991, p. 877-878.

<sup>53</sup> Vance 1991, p. 878.

accept concepts like male, female, heterosexual and homosexual, sexuality and sex drive without questioning their existence or definition.<sup>54</sup> The reason why Vance describes this model – and why it is explained in this chapter – is because the cultural influence model differs in many ways from social construction theory, where concepts within the field of human sexuality are assumed to mean different things depending on the time and place of the observer. The notion of sexuality (or sex drive) being a universal force is challenged in the same way. The problem, according to Vance, is that the cultural influence model is often found in the medical field that addresses sexuality and reproduction. Here, men, women, hetero- and homosexuals are treated as unproblematic categories and this is dangerous, according to Vance, because of the respect given medicine and “*the widespread public belief that science contains no values.*”<sup>55</sup>

Even though social construction theorists have differing approaches towards the extent to which human sexuality is socially constructed, the core idea that will be embraced in this thesis is the importance of reflecting upon and challenging the different aspects of sexuality that this study will come across. This perspective will not be used as an operational tool throughout the analysis, but in chapter 6 my conclusions will be discussed from a social construction perspective.

#### 4.1.2 The Pleasure Deficit

In an article from 2007, Jenny Higgins and Jennifer Hirsch argue that the public health field has failed to recognize women’s sexual pleasure-seeking as a contributing factor in shaping their sexual behaviour and decision-making.<sup>56</sup> Many studies have been conducted on how men’s desire for sexual pleasure affects their risk-taking behaviour (such as the eroticization of “barebacking”<sup>57</sup> or documentation of heterosexual men’s lack of interest in condoms during vaginal intercourse,

---

<sup>54</sup> Vance 1991, p. 879.

<sup>55</sup> Vance, p. 880.

<sup>56</sup> Higgins & Hirsch 2007, p. 240.

<sup>57</sup> Barebacking is a word often used to describe deliberate, unprotected anal intercourse amongst men who have sex with other men.

due to reduced physical sensation), but there has not been nearly as much research carried out on women. Higgins and Hirsch summarise that “*desire for pleasure motivates men to take sexual risks*”, but that there is what they call a “pleasure deficit” in research regarding women’s sexual and reproductive health.<sup>58</sup>

The literature in the field of public health and family planning recognises certain structures and factors that may put women’s sexual and reproductive health at risk – such as power dynamics in heterosexual relationships that can make it difficult for women to negotiate condom use. Gender-based violence is also commonly understood as an issue that makes women more vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases and unintended pregnancies. All over the world there are social structures that reduce women’s sexual autonomy. Poverty in combination with gender inequalities can make women dependent on men and lead them towards prostitution – exchanging sex for money, clothes, food or other things. This may also put them at risk of unplanned pregnancies and HIV infection.<sup>59</sup> All these issues are important to acknowledge and prevent, but Higgins and Hirsch point out that they have contributed to creating a widespread assumption that women want to use condoms while men do not. The pleasure deficit in these cases is illustrated by the fact that many studies fail to reflect on the fact that women may actually choose not to use condoms because it reduces *their own* sexual pleasure. Higgins and Hirsch have carried out a study in the US that shows that more women than men dislike condoms and the way they make sex feel. They also suggest that social constructions of sex and condom use make many women view condoms as incompatible with sex that is intimate, monogamous and associated with love.<sup>60</sup> Higgins and Hirsch emphasise the first argument, that many women care about sexual pleasure as least as much as men do, but the social construction of condom use is an interesting contribution to the argument that women can choose not to use contraceptives for their own sake and not just because they are subordinated by men.

Men’s pleasure is often taken into account during the process of developing male condoms and in studies of contraceptive pills for men. Women’s pleasure is

---

<sup>58</sup> Higgins & Hirsch 2007, p. 240-241.

<sup>59</sup> Higgins & Hirsch 2007, p. 240.

<sup>60</sup> Higgins & Hirsch 2007, p. 241.

not recognized as an important factor in the same way.<sup>61</sup> Higgins and Hirsch argue that the way in which a contraceptive method decreases or enhances women's libido, pleasure and desire is highly relevant in shaping their choice of method<sup>62</sup>. This has yet to be understood by the contraceptive industry and family planners – something that becomes especially clear when looking at the way contraceptives are marketed. Advertisements for condoms and methods to solve erectile dysfunctions are eroticized while contraceptive pills for women are not. Instead, these advertisements show independent women, working, shopping or exercising. Some pills have additional effects and are marketed by slogans like; “*the pill that clears your skin*”.<sup>63</sup> Failing to take women's sexual pleasure into account makes strategies within public health and family planning incomplete, as Higgins and Hirsch argue that it is in fact of great importance to many women. Researchers within this field have yet to suggest that unprotected sex may actually feel better to women and that the risk of pregnancy or contracting HIV may in fact heighten the sexual experience.<sup>64</sup> The assumption that the sexual aspects of family planning are not important to women needs to be challenged and Higgins and Hirsch conclude; “*...recognizing and addressing this aspect of women's lives will positively influence sexual risk behaviours – and more broadly, their sexual health and well-being.*”<sup>65</sup>

### 4.1.3 The Sexuality Connection

Ruth Dixon-Mueller wrote the article *The Sexuality Connection in Reproductive Health* in 1993, as a response to researchers within the demographic family planning field whose main focus was concentrated on the risk of pregnancy and disease prevention.<sup>66</sup> Higgins and Hirsch have been inspired by Dixon-Mueller in

---

<sup>61</sup> Higgins & Hirsch 2007, p. 241.

<sup>62</sup> Higgins & Hirsch 2007, p. 242.

<sup>63</sup> Higgins & Hirsch 2007, p. 243.

<sup>64</sup> Higgins & Hirsch 2007, p. 242.

<sup>65</sup> Higgins & Hirsch 2007, p. 244.

<sup>66</sup> Dixon-Mueller 1993, p. 269.

their creation of the pleasure deficit, as she wrote about the link between sexual attitudes and contraceptive choice 15 years before them. Her main focus, however, is to highlight the many diverse ways in which people's sexualities are constructed, how they express themselves sexually and how this ought to be taken into consideration by family planners and public health workers.

One of Dixon-Mueller's most prominent critiques directed at the family planning field is that the act of sex and reproduction is neutralized in family planning and demographic literature. She writes; "*a visitor from another planet would be mystified about sexual behaviour if he/she/it were to depend on demographic and family planning journals for information*", and refers to the focus on unplanned pregnancies, disease prevention and contraceptive use that is the main concentration of the literature in this field. There is little attention being paid to how sexual identities, preferences and sexual pleasure shape people's sexual and reproductive behaviours. This literature is also often based on assumptions of the sexual acts taking place between a heterosexual, monogamous couple. Because the risk of pregnancy is an integral part of the family planning field, it is also only reproductive sex (heterosexual vaginal intercourse with fertile women) that is considered.<sup>67</sup> Dixon-Mueller points out that, by assuming that sexual practice entails "*voluntary heterosexual intercourse with vaginal penetration and ejaculation*", many demographers and family planners miss the bigger picture where other styles of sex are practiced. Some of these acts require disease prevention but not contraception, whilst others need both. Family planners also need to consider the fact that people who are in opposite-sex relationships or marriages may still have sexual encounters with individuals of the same sex.<sup>68</sup> Failing to acknowledge this may have consequences for the effectiveness of disease prevention strategies.

Other biases and assumptions that make research on sex and reproduction incomplete include the issue of men's sexuality being taken more seriously than women's. Like Higgins and Hirsch, Dixon-Mueller accounts for how studies of contraceptives designed for men take their sexual pleasure into consideration, and how studies on contraceptive methods for women fail to do this to the same ex-

---

<sup>67</sup> Dixon-Mueller 1993, p. 270.

<sup>68</sup> Dixon-Mueller 1993, p. 274.

tent.<sup>69</sup> Regarding power divisions in sexual relationships she points out that they often include differences of age, gender, class, race and so on, which creates an imbalance in who determines the conditions of the sexual encounters. This has consequences for individuals' sexual and reproductive health,<sup>70</sup> and even though gender inequalities are widely recognized as an important factor affecting the use of contraceptives, categories like race, class and age are not reflected upon as often. Expressions and meanings of sexuality change throughout a person's life cycle. Dixon-Mueller explains; "*clients of a certain age or status may be reluctant to admit certain sexual activities to a provider, for example, while providers, acting on their own assumptions, may not even think to ask about them.*"<sup>71</sup>

Dixon-Mueller also argues that biases need to be uncovered and eliminated regarding the question of responsibility for high-risk sexual and reproductive behaviour. For example, she refers to discourse that blames prostitutes for the spread of HIV, or how girls are taught to say "no" more often than boys are made aware of the importance of respect. These habits need to be discussed and then eliminated.<sup>72</sup> To summarize, she writes:

Interpersonal sexual scripts are played out in the context of hierarchal social structures in which some people have the power to determine the sexual and reproductive lives of others. Policymakers, researchers, and providers could make these inequalities more explicit in order to address their underlying causes. Family planning programs are based on assumptions about sexuality and gender that must be identified and challenged.<sup>73</sup>

As seen, the sexuality connection opens up the family planning and public health field in many ways. What it is about is basically taking the social construction of people's sexuality into account in programmes and projects, to challenge the assumptions and biases regarding sexual practice and reproduction that often are embedded within them. A common idea is that contraceptives help women be-

---

<sup>69</sup> Dixon-Mueller 1993, p. 271.

<sup>70</sup> Dixon-Mueller 1993, p. 269-270.

<sup>71</sup> Dixon-Mueller, p. 275.

<sup>72</sup> Dixon-Mueller, p. 279.

<sup>73</sup> Dixon-Mueller, p. 279.

come more independent, but Dixon-Mueller argues that there are several problems that may occur instead. Apart from studies on improvements and degradations of women's sex lives associated with the use of contraceptives, there are those showing that some women have negative experiences because eliminating the risk of pregnancy led to an increase in their husbands' demands for sex.<sup>74</sup> Considering this information in combination with possible unequal power relations – where the man has “access” to the woman's body and not the other way around – it is easy to imagine how access to contraceptives could fail to benefit women, their sexual enjoyment and perhaps even their safety.

In order to integrate the sexuality connection into family planning, public health and the development field Dixon-Mueller suggests that health workers need to use innovative approaches and methods in order to gain information from different subgroups and to acquire an understanding of the complex construction of sexuality.<sup>75</sup> Family planning programmes and development projects should also be focused on eliminating inequalities and promote a broad definition of sexual and reproductive health and rights, that include the right to sexual choice and pleasure.<sup>76</sup>

## 4.2 Method

The method used in this study is a theory-driven, qualitative content analysis of the Programme of Action. The content analysis serves to uncover what topics and issues are included in the document, in what way they are addressed and what subjects are left unmentioned. This will be done in the light of the theoretical concepts accounted for in chapter 4.1. I will describe the contents of the Programme of Action in a systematic way, through my theoretical lens that is built up of the

---

<sup>74</sup> Dixon-Mueller 1993, p. 270.

<sup>75</sup> Dixon-Mueller 1993, p. 278.

<sup>76</sup> Dixon-Mueller, p. 279.

pleasure deficit and the sexuality connection and search for signs of these concepts embedded within the document.

Even though social construction theory is used as a theoretical starting point for the analysis, I will conduct this study arguing that some aspects of sexuality are set. Because this thesis is written with a human rights and equality perspective I will argue that sexual pleasure can be important both for women and men and that both sexes are capable of having a sex drive. This does not mean that all individuals feel the same way about sexual pleasure and their existing or non-existing sex drive, but as the purpose of this study is to examine inequalities regarding which sexualities are prioritised by the Programme of Action I will assume that all individuals are capable of experiencing sexual pleasure and possessing a sex drive, for the sake of the analysis.

# 5      Analysing the Programme of Action

This chapter will present the analysis of the Programme of Action, using the theoretical concepts “the pleasure deficit” and “the sexuality connection”. The conclusions will be presented in chapter 5.4.

## 5.1      The ideological base

In order to fully understand the ideological base upon which the Programme of Action was created, it is important to examine how the document positions itself when it comes to equality and women’s current status in the world. As previously mentioned, this conference has been praised for its women-centred approach and feminist vision – but how exactly are these values expressed in the document itself?

First of all, chapter II explains that the Programme of Action is developed “*in conformity with universally recognized international human rights.*” Principle 1 refers to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, without any distinction of any kind such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of the person.<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup> Programme of Action, Principle 1.

Women are, of course, a natural part of human rights, but the Programme of Action specifies that women's rights need more efforts in order to be secured. Paragraph 1.7 states that the conference is one of a number of international events that will promote "*a new action agenda for the empowerment of women to ensure their full participation at all levels in the social, economic and political lives of their communities.*"<sup>78</sup> This illustrates one of the main, official purposes of the conference – where a focus on women's empowerment stands out in contrast to the history of more coercive population control strategies. Principle number 4 makes this paradigm shift even clearer, by further explaining how women's empowerment is viewed as an integral part of the population field;

Advancing gender equality and equity and the empowerment of women, and the elimination of all kinds of violence against women, and ensuring women's ability to control their own fertility, are cornerstones of population- and development related programmes. The human rights of women and the girl child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of human rights.<sup>79</sup>

Paragraph 4.1 further states that in order to achieve sustainable development, women and men must have;

...shared responsibilities for the care and nurturing of children and maintenance of the household. In all parts of the world, women are facing threats to their lives, health and well-being as a result of being overburdened with work and of their lack of power and influence.<sup>80</sup>

Statements like the ones quoted above illustrate that the Programme of Action builds upon the recognition of a patriarchal world system where women are subordinated and where their rights are not secured. This is an insight worth bearing in mind when reviewing the rest of the document. As seen in chapter 2, many researchers describe the conference in Cairo and the Programme of Action as part of a paradigm shift, changing the way women are viewed and treated within the

---

<sup>78</sup> Programme of Action, paragraph 1.7.

<sup>79</sup> Programme of Action, principle 4.

<sup>80</sup> Programme of Action, paragraph 4.1.

population field. A few of the paragraphs in the Programme of Action show signs of consciousness regarding this. Paragraph 1.8 states the following;

The world as a whole has changed in ways that create important new opportunities for addressing population and development issues. Among the most significant are the major shifts in attitude among the world's people and their leaders in regard to reproductive health, family planning and population growth, resulting, inter alia, in the new comprehensive concept of reproductive health, including family planning and sexual health...<sup>81</sup>

This shows that there is a common recognition of new attitudes and approaches to issues related to sexual health and reproduction – but does this attitude shift mean that women will benefit from strategies developed with these new values in mind? Researchers have praised the Cairo conference for integrating sexual and reproductive health and rights into the population field,<sup>82</sup> but when examining the Programme of Action more thoroughly it becomes clear that no new human rights were actually defined or created in Cairo. Instead, the document affirms the already recognized human rights as a moral basis for future population programmes.<sup>83</sup> The Programme of Action, because of its international status, is a norm-creating document so the way it describes and addresses sexuality, gender roles, relationships and reproduction has implications for women, men and future politics all over the world. Paragraph 7.13 states that; *“family planning programmes work best (...) when women are fully involved in the design, provision, management and evaluation of services”*<sup>84</sup>, which also confirms the new acknowledgement of the importance of women's participation. The fact that women are recognised as important actors in developing the family planning and population field is of course compatible with a feminist vision – but does the Programme of Action communicate a vision that women and men are (or should be) equally influential in *all* spheres of life? The next chapter will examine equality within the field of sexual pleasure.

---

<sup>81</sup> Programme of Action, paragraph 1.8.

<sup>82</sup> See chapter 3.2 in this thesis.

<sup>83</sup> Programme of Action, paragraph 1.15.

<sup>84</sup> Programme of Action, paragraph 7.13.

## 5.2 The Pleasure Deficit in the Programme of Action

Not once in the Programme of Action is sexual pleasure explicitly addressed, even though there are a number of paragraphs where it would be relevant to include it. The closest this document comes to mentioning pleasure is in paragraph 7.2, which states that; *“reproductive health (...) implies that people are able to have a satisfying and safe sex life”*. This can be interpreted as including sexual pleasure, but the formulation is very vague and this is the only time the word “satisfying” is used in this context. As previously mentioned, Higgins’ and Hirsch’s theory of the pleasure deficit builds upon a criticism of public health failing to recognise that the way sex feels actually matters to women. They argue that pleasure is a high priority for many women, and that this in turn shapes their sexual behaviour and choice of contraceptives.<sup>85</sup> One of the actions determined in the Programme of Action states that all family-planning organizations should seek to expand information and services in order to *“increase the ability of couples and individuals to make free and informed decisions about the number, spacing and timing of births and protect themselves from sexually transmitted diseases.”*<sup>86</sup> This shows the narrow focus on reproduction and disease prevention that is embedded in this document. Further examples of this attitude can be found in paragraph 7.23 (a), which affirms that family-planning programmes should *“recognize that appropriate methods for couples and individuals vary according to their age, parity, family-size preference and other factors”*.<sup>87</sup> There is no mention of sexual preferences, the desire for sexual pleasure or side-effects of contraceptives that may improve or worsen people’s sex lives. This suggests that pleasure is not, or should not be, viewed as a high priority by family planners and individuals. Furthermore, it is apparent that the aspect of pleasure is not taken into account as something that may affect people’s sexual and reproductive behaviour. Paragraph 7.23 (b) explains that family-planning programmes should also *“provide accessible, com-*

---

<sup>85</sup> Higgins and Hirsch 2007, p. 244.

<sup>86</sup> Programme of Action, paragraph 7.19.

<sup>87</sup> Programme of Action, paragraph 7.23 (a).

*plete and accurate information about various family-planning methods, including their health risks and benefits, possible side-effects and their effectiveness in the prevention of the spread of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.”* This is another interesting example of where disease prevention overshadows the individual’s right to pleasure and sexual well-being. In this case, side-effects are mentioned but not in a context that associates them with their effect on sexual pleasure. If pleasure was highlighted as an important factor here, then women’s right to sexual pleasure and satisfaction would gain a stronger status. This would be an important norm to set, because of the widespread problem of men’s sexual pleasure being viewed as a higher priority in public health<sup>88</sup> and the fact that many women use contraceptives and endure side-effects that have a negative impact on their sex lives.

Further examples of the pleasure deficit in sexual and family planning education can be found in paragraph 7.45, 7.47 and 6.15. All three sections address what information is necessary for adolescents, and this is said to include; *“appropriate services and the information that they need, including on sexually transmitted diseases and sexual abuse”*<sup>89</sup>, *“education and counselling of adolescents in the areas of gender relations and equality, violence against adolescents, responsible sexual behaviour, responsible family-planning practice, family life, reproductive health, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV infection and AIDS prevention”*<sup>90</sup> and lastly, *“information (...) concerning reproductive and sexual health, including the prevention of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases”*.<sup>91</sup> According to the Programme of Action, adequate education should only address medical issues, violence and gender relations and not take pleasure into account as a factor that may shape these areas. This confirms that there is a pleasure deficit in this field, and not only does the pleasure deficit make strategies of population control and disease prevention incomplete, it also weakens the status of sexual pleasure as something that is important to individuals. Because of the patriarchal world

---

<sup>88</sup> Higgins & Hirsch 2007, p. 240-241.

<sup>89</sup> Programme of Action, paragraph 7.45.

<sup>90</sup> Programme of Action, paragraph 7.47.

<sup>91</sup> Programme of Action, paragraph 6.15.

system, which the Programme of Action also recognizes, it is foreseeable that it is women's sexual pleasure that becomes the most controversial and neglected.

### 5.2.1 Whose pleasure is most important?

At the core of the theoretical concept of the pleasure deficit are gender roles and stereotypes that make people who work in public health and the population field assume that pleasure matters more to men than women, and that women want to use protection while men are more reluctant to do so.<sup>92</sup> This assumption may be born out of gender roles and structures where power divisions and gender-based violence make it more difficult for women to negotiate safe sex, but Higgins' and Hirsch's study show that women in the US dislike condoms more than men do, because using them weakens their experience of sexual pleasure. This is, of course, only a study of one context and it may not be applicable everywhere, but it does challenge the assumption that the way sex feels matters more to men than to women. There are several examples in the Programme of Action where men are explicitly encouraged to take a greater responsibility for sexual protection. Paragraph 8.27 states that all countries need; "*strategies to ensure that men share responsibility for sexual and reproductive health*".<sup>93</sup> Paragraph 7.28 explains that; "*the social and economic disadvantages that women face make them especially vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections (...) by their exposure to the high-risk sexual behaviour of their partners*".<sup>94</sup> and that "*many women are powerless to take steps to protect themselves.*"<sup>95</sup> The fact that women have less power to negotiate the use and method of protection is true in many cases, but the paragraphs above clearly illustrate the pleasure deficit and the way it is tied to assumptions of stereotypical gender roles. The way in which these paragraphs are written suggest that men are inclined to engage in irresponsible sexual and reproductive behav-

---

<sup>92</sup> Higgins, J. (2007), "Sexy Feminisms & Sexual Health: Theorizing Heterosex, Pleasure, and Constraint in Public Health Research", *Atlantis*, 31(2), p. 73.

<sup>93</sup> Programme of Action, paragraph 8.27.

<sup>94</sup> Programme of Action, paragraph 7.28.

<sup>95</sup> Programme of Action, paragraph 7.28.

our. Nowhere is it suggested that women may choose not to use protection because the physical sensation and/or the risk of becoming pregnant, or contracting a disease, may enhance their sexual pleasure. International statements that acknowledge the unequal power division between men and women are important from a feminist perspective, but they also carry a risk of reaffirming patriarchal gender roles. These roles need to be challenged in order to avoid cementing women in a victimised position.

An objective, expressed in paragraph 4.25 is; *“to promote gender equality in all spheres in life (...) and to encourage and enable men to take responsibility for their sexual and reproductive behaviour”*. A sentence like this assumes that women and men have different sexual and reproductive behaviours and needs. The fact that an objective of the Programme of Action is to “enable” men to take responsibility for their sexual behaviour suggests that men find it difficult to control their sexuality. There are, of course, structural problems of men’s sexual violence against women, but this international UN document addresses men’s sex drive and portrays it as something destructive, while it fails to include a single paragraph that even touches upon the subject of women’s sexuality. This results in a norm-creating affirmation of patriarchal gender roles that a supposedly feminist document would want to step away from. Paragraph 4.27 has a similar tone, and includes more guidelines on men’s responsibility:

Special efforts should be made to emphasize men’s shared responsibility and promote their active involvement in responsible parenthood, sexual and reproductive behaviour, including family planning; pre-natal, maternal and child health; prevention of sexually transmitted diseases; including HIV; prevention of unwanted and high-risk pregnancies; shared control and contribution to family income; children’s education, health and nutrition; and recognition and promotion of the equal value of children of both sexes. Male responsibilities in family life must be included in the education of children from the earliest ages. Special emphasis should be placed on the prevention of violence against women and children.<sup>96</sup>

---

<sup>96</sup> Programme of Action, paragraph 4.27.

Paragraphs like the one above can be interpreted as an illustration of Cairo's feminist victory. It does recognize the many different social spheres where men and women need to take equal responsibility, and gender-based violence is promoted as a high priority issue. Still, by only mentioning men and not women it reaffirms gendered stereotypes and portrays women more as victims than as individuals with their own opinions, sex drives and preferences when it comes to sexual and reproductive health and behaviour. They are never described as sexual agents or as having the right to their own sexuality. Neither are men, in that sense, but at least they are presented as sexual beings, with power over their sexual and reproductive decisions and behaviour. Paragraph 4.29 explains that, in order to achieve equality in the family life "*relevant programmes to reach boys before they become sexually active are urgently needed.*"<sup>97</sup> Why do only boys need this? Are girls just assumed to know what equality entails? To naturally want to use protection and to know how to negotiate a sexual practice that suits them? The Programme of Action gives no further explanation to this matter, but the quotes from the document paint a picture of women as non-sexual. By addressing women's sexuality, women could have been given an acknowledgement from the international community that they, too, are sexual beings and have a right to sexual pleasure and expression. If women were recognised as sexual actors, with a sex drive of their own, then their power over this drive could be emphasised as an integral part of sexual and reproductive rights. Because this drive is neglected and never addressed, their right to decide over it is a difficult topic to discuss. What the Programme of Action clearly does is that it safeguards women's right to say "no", but never encourages their right to say "yes".

---

<sup>97</sup> Programme of Action, paragraph 4.29.

### 5.3 The Sexuality Connection in the Programme of Action

The sexuality connection will be used to further examine what biases and assumptions are embedded within the Programme of Action. The sexuality connection includes the recognition of sexual pleasure as an important factor in family planning and population control, but is wider in the sense that it also encourages health and development workers to reflect openly upon the various forms of sexual expressions and family forms that exist, apart from the monogamous, heterosexual relationship. Non-reproductive intercourse is widely neglected in this type of work, but this chapter will argue that a document with the status ascribed to the Programme of Action needs to acknowledge that there are many ways in which families can be created today and that heterosexual, reproductive sex does not have to be at the core of each potential parenthood. There is also a point in addressing various types of sexual practice – even the non-reproductive ones – when working with disease prevention, which is an issue that the Programme of Action also focuses on.

As noted in chapter 5.1, the Programme of Action rests upon the vision of all human beings being born “*free and equal in dignity and rights*”<sup>98</sup>, but what stands out in the document is the hetero-normative discourse used when addressing couples and spouses. Paragraph 4.24 contains the following sentence; “*It is essential to improve communication between men and women on issues of sexuality and reproductive health (...) so that men and women can be equal partners in public and private life.*”<sup>99</sup> This clearly shows the narrow focus on heterosexual couples. The Programme of Action fails to reflect upon the fact that reproduction does not have to occur between the people who plan to be the parents. Also, equality and communication regarding sexuality are important parts of most people’s lives – despite what sex, gender or sexuality they identify with. The fact that the word “partners” is used also signals a non-reflective assumption of all sexual and/or

---

<sup>98</sup> Programme of Action, principle 1.

<sup>99</sup> Programme of Action, paragraph 4.24.

reproductive relations taking place between two people. To discuss this further, principle 9 is also of interest:

The family is the basic unit of society and as such should be strengthened. It is entitled to receive comprehensive protection and support. In different cultural, political and social systems, various forms of the family exist. Marriage must be entered into with the free consent of the intending spouses, and husband and wife should be equal partners.<sup>100</sup>

This principle can be interpreted as being built on double standards when it mentions “various forms of the family” and then assumes that marriage is entered into by a husband and a wife. It could mean that “intending spouses” can marry, but that if they are of opposite sex they must be equal – to protect women from coercive marriages with men, perhaps. However, considering the participants present at the conference and the situation for LGBT-people across the world, it is probably quite unlikely that this paragraph was written with the intention of encouraging same-sex marriages. Even if it was, it could very easily have been expressed in a different, more straight-forward way. Also - saying that the family is the basic unit of society is generalizing, normative and probably not a universal perception, agreed upon by all communities.

Paragraph 5.1 also mentions varying family forms:

Parents are often more dependent on assistance from third parties than they used to be in order to reconcile work and family responsibilities. This is particularly the case when policies and programmes that affect the family ignore the existing diversity of family forms, or are insufficiently sensitive to the needs and rights of women and children.<sup>101</sup>

This section is better in the sense that it refrains from saying that women and men are the natural parents. However, if this paragraph had been more detailed regarding what type of family forms it is referring to (same sex-couples, single parents,

---

<sup>100</sup> Programme of Action, principle 9.

<sup>101</sup> Programme of Action, paragraph 5.1.

families with more than two parents, divorced parents, polygamous relations, surrogate mothers... and so on) then it would appear more including than it is now, when family diversities are mentioned in such a vague way. Other paragraphs explicitly refer to couples that consist of a man and a woman, so that becomes the most obvious family norm reaffirmed by the Programme of Action.

Another interesting sexual practice left unchallenged by this document is sex outside of marriage. Paragraph 7.13 refers to statistics showing how many couples currently use methods of family planning. After accounting for this information it is added that “*these numbers do not include the substantial and growing numbers of sexually active unmarried individuals wanting and in need of information and services.*”<sup>102</sup> This illustrates how normative assumptions affect the way family planning and development work is carried out. The Programme of Action does obviously address the lack of relevant statistics, but on a side note this paragraph illustrates the trap holes in other parts of the development field. If studies like the one referred to, attempting to show how many people use methods of family planning, are targeted only at married couples then it says something about which individuals are expected to engage in sexual practice. This paints a picture of sexuality being something that only people of a certain age and status are, or need to be, in touch with. Opening up these assumptions with a concept like the sexuality connection makes it clear that sexuality is something that can be an integral part of all individuals’ lives – despite their age, civil status, gender, sexual orientation and preferences. An influential document like the Programme of Action needs to be more nuanced in the way it addresses relations, sexuality, sex and reproduction – especially as it claims to be based on an ideology which views all human beings as equal. Otherwise it risks excluding people from the normative assumption of who is assumed to be a sexual being.

---

<sup>102</sup> Programme of Action, paragraph 7.13.

## 5.4 Conclusions

Sexual pleasure is never mentioned in the Programme of Action – either as a right or as a factor that plays a part in shaping sexual and reproductive behaviour or decision-making regarding contraceptive methods etc. This clearly shows that there is a pleasure deficit in the Programme of Action and, according to Higgins’ and Hirsch’s theory, this leads to two consequences. One is that strategies of population control and disease prevention become incomplete as they assume away sexual pleasure as an integral part of both women’s and men’s sexual and reproductive behaviour. The second consequence is that the international community reaffirms the assumption that the way sex feels does not matter to women. As seen in chapter 5.1, the Programme of Action explicitly addresses patriarchal structures that subordinate women in many spheres of life, but it fails to do so when it comes to sexual expression, sexuality and the right to sexual pleasure. The pleasure deficit is a consequence of the ICPD’s failure in challenging gender roles. Women’s sexuality is more controversial than men’s and the population control field targets women, which leads to a pleasure deficit that is most apparent when talking about women’s sexuality. The Programme of Action is based on the assumption that women are unable to negotiate safe sex and that women want protection while men do not, which is also compatible with Higgins’ and Hirsch’s theory.

As discussed in chapter 5.2, paragraph 7.2 explains that; “*reproductive health (...) implies that people are able to have a satisfying and safe sex life*”. This can of course be interpreted as including sexual pleasure - but a UN document like this needs to explicitly address women’s right to sexual pleasure and acknowledge that it is an aspect of life that is as important to them as it is to men. Men’s sexuality may not be described in a positive way – but at least it is mentioned. The Programme of Action is supposed to be feminist, and it recognizes patriarchal structures that subordinate women – but what it does in practice is reaffirm stereotypes of women as victims of men’s sexuality. Women need to be recognised as sexual agents. The Programme of Action has many paragraphs where gender inequalities are promoted as high priority issues, which is compatible with a feminist vision, but when it focuses on protecting women it also risks victimising them and por-

traying them as non-sexual beings without any agency. As mentioned in chapter 5.2.1 the Programme of Action does a good job of protecting women's right to say "no", but never encourages (or even mentions) their right to say "yes". The right to say "yes" must exist despite the focus on population control, but it cannot be promoted until women's sexuality is recognised and talked about on an international level.

When it comes to recognising diverse forms and expressions of sexuality, family and relationships it is clear that the Programme of Action is based on a heteronormative assumption. Men and women are explicitly mentioned in the context of marriage and equal relationships. The document never addresses same-sex relationships nor does it reflect upon the possibility that not all relationships are monogamous or constructed in ways that comply with the norm. Although the Programme of Action does mention the fact that various forms of family exist and that these must be taken into consideration, these paragraphs never go into detail on what types of variations are being referred to. A parallel can be drawn to Pigg's argument presented in chapter 3.3.2, regarding the universal approach used by population programmes, where paragraphs always include a sentence promoting the importance of adapting the programme to local and cultural contexts:

This injunction, however, conveys the neutrality – and hence natural universality – of the frameworks and the information they contain by relegating cultural difference to a problem of fine-tuning information delivery.<sup>103</sup>

The same argument can be applied to the Programme of Action and its sections mentioning the importance of respecting diverse family forms. It never goes into detail on the definitions of these family forms or how the message of the Programme of Action might be adapted to suit those families who fall outside the normative assumption of a nuclear family – which makes the heteronorm even stronger. Never mind if heterosexual couples are biologically viewed as "natural reproducers" – there are other ways for couples of different sexual orientations to start families. The Programme of Action could be normative by at least acknowl-

---

<sup>103</sup> Pigg 2005, p. 47.

edging this in a more straightforward way and by moving away from the reoccurring categorisations of men, women and families. The way this is done in the document helps create a normative assumption of who is assumed to be a sexual being.

To conclude, the pleasure deficit is apparent in the Programme of Action and it creates an image of women as out of touch with their sexuality and as a group who do not view sexual pleasure as a priority. The document also reaffirms gender roles which create a stereotype of men as driven by their sexuality whilst women are victims of it. The sexuality connection uncovers assumptions regarding sexuality, reproduction and family forms which exclude groups and individuals that fall outside the heterosexual, monogamous norm of sex and relationships. In short, men are the only group who are recognised, by the Programme of Action, as having a natural sex drive. Couples consisting of a man and a woman are addressed, but the way women's sexuality is neglected suggests that they are not viewed as sexual agents in themselves. With this in mind, the Programme of Action is far from being compatible with a feminist vision and the next ICPD needs to recognise these inequalities within the field of sexuality and sexual pleasure. It needs to make an effort, take a huge step forward and be open to the fact that all sexualities – whether they are men's, women's, heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, transsexual, asexual or anything else – are just as real and important and need to be acknowledged as such by the international community and the population field.

## 6 Discussion

This chapter will discuss the conclusions from the previous section, through a social construction perspective. It will address the limits posed by the use of this theory and towards the end the future of the population issue and sexual and reproductive health and rights will be reflected upon.

### 6.1 Conclusions from a Social Construction Perspective

Despite my attempts to read the Programme of Action with a mind open to the possibility of everything being socially constructed, the way sexuality is described differently depending whether a man or a woman is being referred to strikes me as the most pressing issue.

Because this document is said to encompass a feminist vision it is the reaffirming of conservative gender roles, and the discourse describing women as victims of men's sexuality rather than sexual agents, that appears to be the greatest flaw in the Programme of Action. It recognizes patriarchal structures whilst at the same time using language that reaffirms many of them. From a feminist perspective a document of this type needs to address and acknowledge women's sexuality, their sex drive and that the way sex feels matters to women just as much as it matters to men. From a social construction perspective there are of course problems with these conclusions – it may not be possible to assume that all women want to be viewed as sexual agents or that all women and men can or will choose to express themselves sexually in a certain way. The population field cannot either view women as an entity, but must recognize the many diversities between them

and that the way their sexuality is socially constructed may be more affected by the circumstances under which they live than directly linked to their gender.

Applying the social construction perspective to the Programme of Action is difficult, and even though it is fruitful in many ways because it opens up categories that are normatively set, the problems it presents are in this case overshadowed by the neglect of women's sexuality that is so obvious in this document. The patriarchal structures that make talking about women's sexuality controversial are also part of the social construction that affects women in places all over the world. They are somewhat linked, and if we start by changing women's status in the international community and make it possible for them to be seen as sexual agents, then we can perhaps engage in more detailed future discussions on the ways in which their sexualities are socially constructed – and how a document like the Programme of Action can address this in the most suitable way.

When including a right to sexual pleasure in the Programme of Action, “pleasure” must of course also be viewed as a product of social construction. What is experienced as pleasurable – and what is not – varies depending on the time and place of the individual, but is also perceived differently in different cultures.<sup>104</sup> Before the social construction of pleasure can be discussed in a forum like the ICPD, however, the first step that needs to be taken is actually starting to talk about women's sexuality.

The concept of the sexuality connection is more naturally compatible with social construction theory than the pleasure deficit is, as it opens up the document and shows biases and assumptions regarding the construction of families and sexual orientations. In order for it to become even more nuanced, however, it could be more actively combined with social construction theory. This would make it possible to challenge sexual categories and concepts even further, and discuss in greater detail the implications of local and cultural circumstances constructing the field of human sexuality. Social construction theory would also be a fruitful perspective to apply when discussing which “local” is influential enough to set the basis for the “universal” approach that is so present in the Programme of Action.

---

<sup>104</sup> Dixon-Mueller 1993, p. 276.

My own assumption throughout this study has been that both men and women are capable of enjoying sex – whichever sexual orientation, preference or lifestyle they identify with or choose. Culture and social context may shape sexual pleasure and the way it is experienced and expressed, and I cannot claim that all women everywhere share my view but it boils down to the fact that men’s sexual pleasure *is* being talked about and this is a way in which our patriarchal world system expresses itself. From a feminist perspective we *have* to talk about women’s pleasure – and from a human rights perspective we have to talk about everyone as a potential sexual being.

### 6.1.1 The limits of Social Construction Theory

Social construction theory has its limits, in this case particularly because it is not compatible with my conclusion that the highest priority for the Programme of Action is to view all people’s sexualities, relationships and family constellations as equally “real” and important. I also argue that the Programme of Action needs to assume that all individuals are potential sexual beings. These conclusions are normative in themselves and rest upon my own assumption that sex, reproduction and sexuality can be important parts of anyone’s life. Therefore, the conclusions are not as nuanced as social construction theory would allow them to be, but I believe that the structural inequalities that are prevalent in this document need to be challenged before social construction theory can be fully integrated as a perspective throughout the Programme of Action.

## 6.2 The Future: is the world ready for a new document?

The ICPD Beyond 2014 does not appear to be set on developing a new Programme of Action next year. After writing this study I would like to argue that they definitely should. The content of the Programme of Action and the discourse used within it reaffirm gender roles and heteronormative ideals of sexuality, family constellations and relationships. In 2014, the international community needs to openly assume that women, also, view pleasurable sex as important and that it is an aspect of life that shapes their sexual and reproductive behaviour. Women need an international document that suggests they should be seen as sexual agents rather than victims. Documents like the Programme of Action also need to acknowledge contemporary forms of sexual identities, preferences, families and relationships and include them in a way that make them equal to the heteronormative ideal, rather than mentioning them in a vague side note.

A Programme of Action published by the United Nations is inevitably normative, and if a normative document promoted women's right to sexual pleasure then that would be a huge step for women's social standing and for their right to their own bodies and their own sexuality. If it promoted all types of sexualities and family forms then it would also be a huge step for LGBT-rights and the inclusion of individuals and groups failing to comply with the current normative ideal.

The Programme of Action is perceived by many as a feminist document, but when it comes to addressing women's sexuality it is certainly not. This needs to be acknowledged and accepted so that activists, world leaders and NGOs can push for a new rhetoric within the population field. One of the reasons why Cairo became such a landmark for women's empowerment was because feminist organisations were present, motivated and determined to influence the conference. The same thing can be done in the future, with an even sharper agenda – if the contents, assumptions and normative ideals within the Programme of Action are highlighted as a subject in need of scrutiny. Human rights and feminist demands need to be sharpened in this field and a conference like the ICPD cannot rest upon the praise it was once given. The next conference needs to challenge the past feminist

vision and human rights perspective in order to move forward and one day truly secure sexual and reproductive health and rights for all.

# References

## Literature & Articles

- Adams, V. & Pigg, S: "Introduction: The Moral Object of Sex", in: Adams, Vincanne. & Pigg, Stacy Leigh. (eds.), *Sex in Development: Science, Sexuality and Morality in Global Perspective*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2005.
- Dixon-Mueller, R. (1993): "The Sexuality Connection in Reproductive Health", *Studies in Family Planning*, 24(5):269-82.
- Freedman, L. & Isaacs, S. (1993): "Human Rights and Reproductive Choice", *Studies in Family Planning*, 24(1): 18-30.
- Harcourt, W: "Body Politics: Revisiting the Population Question", in Saunders, K. (ed.): *Feminist Post-Development Thought*, Zed, London, 2002.
- Hartmann, B., *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs: the Global Politics of population Control*, Rev. ed., South End Press, Boston , Mass., 1995.
- Higgins, J. ( 2007), "Sexy Feminisms & Sexual Health: Theorizing Heterosex, Pleasure, and Constraint in Public Health Research", *Atlantis*, 31(2), p.72-81.
- Higgins, J. & Hirsch, J. (2007): "The Pleasure Deficit: Revisiting the "Sexuality Connection" in Reproductive Health", *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, 39:4, p. 240-247.
- Jaquette, J. & Staudt, K: "Population and Gender: a feminist analysis of US population policy in the Third World", in K. B. Jones & A. Jonasdottir (eds): *The Political Interests of Gender*, Sage, London, 1988.
- Lee, James & Feng, Wang (1999), "Malthusian Models and Chinese Realities: the Chinese Demographic System 1700-2000", *Population and Development Review*, 25:1, p. 33-65.
- McIntosh, A. & Finkle, J (1995): "The Cairo Conference on Population and Development: a new Paradigm?" *Population and Development Review*, 21(2): 223-260.
- Petchesky, R (1995): "From Population Control to Reproductive Rights: Feminist Fault Lines", *Reproductive Health Matters*, 6: 152-161.
- Pigg, Stacy., "Globalizing the facts of life", in: Adams, Vincanne. & Pigg, Stacy Leigh. (eds.), *Sex in Development: Science, Sexuality and Morality in Global Perspective*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2005.

Vance, Carole S. (1991) "Anthropology Rediscovered Sexuality: a Theoretical Comment", *Social Science and Medicine* 33:8, p. 875-884

### Sources published by the United Nations:

Greene, M., Joshi, S. & Robles, O., *State of World Population 2012. By Choice, Not by Chance: Family Planning, Human Rights and Development*, United Nations Populations Fund, 2012. Available for download:

<[http://www.unfpa.org/webdav/site/global/shared/swp/2012/EN\\_SWOP2012\\_Report.pdf](http://www.unfpa.org/webdav/site/global/shared/swp/2012/EN_SWOP2012_Report.pdf)>

Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, adopted at the United Nations' Conference on Population and Development, 5-13 September 1994, A/CONF.171/13. Available for download:

<[http://www.unfpa.org/webdav/site/global/shared/documents/publications/2004/icpd\\_eng.pdf](http://www.unfpa.org/webdav/site/global/shared/documents/publications/2004/icpd_eng.pdf)>

Resolution 65/234, adopted by the United Nations' General Assembly at the Follow-up to the International Conference on Population and Development beyond 2014, in April 2011. Available for download:

<[http://icpdbeyond2014.org/uploads/browser/files/ungass\\_res\\_65\\_243.pdf](http://icpdbeyond2014.org/uploads/browser/files/ungass_res_65_243.pdf)>

United Nations Population Fund's official website, *About UNFPA*, see:

<<http://www.unfpa.org/public/home/about>>

All webpages were last accessed on the 30th of May 2013.