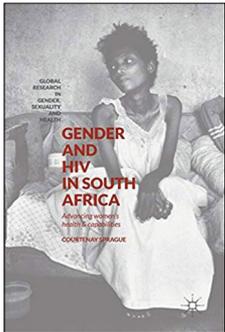




Book

HIV and gender justice in South African contexts



Gender and HIV in South Africa: Advancing Women's Health and Capabilities
 Courtenay Sprague
 Palgrave Macmillan, 2018
 Pp 436. £79.00
 ISBN 978-1137559968

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Nearly a quarter of a century into the post-apartheid democracy and since the realisation of the extent of the epidemic facing South Africa, the battle against HIV as part of a larger package of health and justice challenges is still very much with us. Despite a barrage of constitutional and legal efforts to address social and gender inequalities, the gap between commitments to and lived experience of gender equality is more than evident. Although it has long been acknowledged that the dynamics of HIV infection and impact are entwined with gender and racial class inequalities, both shaped by and exacerbating such disadvantages (as reiterated by the Fifth South African National HIV Prevalence, Incidence, Behaviour and Communication Survey, 2017), Courtenay Sprague's *Gender and HIV in South Africa: Advancing Women's Health and Capabilities* makes a strong argument for the contribution of social science, interdisciplinary research, and qualitative research to the larger public health scholarship on HIV. The core thesis of the book is a call for acknowledgment that HIV is a social justice challenge, and for a paradigm shift towards engaging and addressing structural issues, including adverse gender norms and power as they intersect with other ideological and material inequalities.

The book's primary thrust is to contribute to the larger goal of "securing health as a normative social goal and addressing gender inequalities that undermine women's opportunities to be healthy". As Sprague argues, "these challenges, formidable on their own, comprise disparate yet interwoven threads that are inextricably bound together within the ongoing problem of HIV acquisition and the disproportionate burden of HIV illness among women". The book's first section situates the study within a wide range of global and local contemporary public health research on HIV, providing a comprehensive picture of the intersecting and compounding levels of barriers with respect to dynamics of acquisition and access to care for women. Sprague frames her study within the influential human capabilities approach, conceptualised by development and feminist scholars Amartya Sen and Margaret Nussbaum, and widely taken up in interdisciplinary social justice scholarship. This concept is deployed towards arguing for a particular social justice lens in supporting women's right to health in the gendered, raced, and classed HIV epidemic that has characterised South Africa and many other contexts in the global south. Through this framing, Sprague elaborates her call for "justice in health" as powerfully enmeshed with the capability to be healthy.

The second part of the book includes an in-depth overview of considerations for undertaking social science research on HIV and towards advancing social justice, together with details on the study's methods. Sprague acknowledges the

overwhelming dominance of quantitative studies within HIV scholarship globally and in South Africa, which reflects the greater privileging of positivist and empiricist forms of knowledge, both symbolically (in terms of value and status) and materially (in terms of funding). The author raises concerns around how positionality and power in research on HIV are shared, a level of reflexivity that is scarce in current orthodoxies of public health research. This argument is not new in critical humanities and feminist scholarship on HIV, sexuality, gender, and reproductive health, and more engagement with such scholarship by the author could have strengthened the book's contribution. Nonetheless, the book provokes mainstream public health community to reflect critically on practices and products of research that continue to assume a neutral, objective researcher and research process.

The final part of the book is forward-looking, including an evidence-based interrogation of selected, gender-transformative interventions with respect to their potential to advance women's capabilities in respect of HIV and health in general. Sprague concludes that, in relation to international and local human rights instruments, women's rights are being violated, and that the lack of social and legal response to structural issues should compel state action, not only in South Africa, but across transnational contexts.

In summary, Sprague poignantly reminds the reader that, although HIV treatment is available in South Africa and emphasis on prevention has spanned many years, these interventions remain only partial answers given the structural drivers of the epidemic. The study's multi-method approach and the engagement with key questions, drawing on a diverse range of knowledge sources—including pairing of large, quantitative datasets with empirical and original qualitative research—are particular strengths of the book. The placement of the study within a clear theoretical and policy-relevant capabilities approach offers a path beyond the normative epidemiological measures that frequently neglect the lived experience of people and fail to offer a more holistic understanding of the problems being studied.

Sprague's work brings critical insight to the challenging entwinements of HIV with gender and other forms of social inequality created by structural and political contexts. The author calls on public health researchers to engage new lenses in everyday scholarly endeavours directed towards health as justice. Importantly, Sprague invites researchers to extend themselves, to draw on the richness of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary dialogue in researching the complex landscape of HIV and gender.

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