

# Decolonizing Gender and Sexuality in the Curriculum in Malawi

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# Decolonizing gender and sexuality in the curriculum in Malawi

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#### Abstract

This essay aims to decolonize the concepts of gender and sexuality in the education spaces in Malawi. Our article focuses on the curriculum and pedagogies used in the teaching of gender and sexuality topics in secondary schools and higher education. The concepts of gender and sexuality are defined from heteronormativity--an essentialist perspective advanced by colonial settlers. Given that education spaces are places for knowledge production, disrupting the ways in which the mainstream scholarship defines gender and sexuality is critical in a quest for enhancing inclusive education. Drawing from intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), queer theory/pedagogy (Shlasko, 2005), decoloniality (Lugones, 2010), and our lived experiences, we specifically deconstruct the binary gender and sexuality and argues for a democratic curriculum and definitions of pedagogies in the teaching of gender and sexuality. Our paper is structured as follows. First, we describe the historical context associated with gender and sexuality issues dating from colonial rule to the dawn of democracy in Malawi. Second, we offer a detailed description of the theoretical frameworks underpinning the discourse of gender and sexuality. This is followed by a critical analysis of how gender and sexuality are conceptualized as well as pedagogical strategies used in the teaching and learning process. Our essay argues against cultural normalcy that tends to binarize gender and sexuality. Therefore, we call for reconceptualization of gender and sexuality within the curriculum and pedagogies. This can be done through integration of queer lens and pedagogical practices in the teaching of gender and sexuality so as to embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion in the education spaces in Malawi.

Keywords: decoloniality, gender, sexuality, heteronormativity, curriculum, pedagogy, Malawi

### Introduction

This essay aims at analyzing the concepts of gender and sexuality across the education spaces in Malawi. Our focus is on how these concepts are defined in the curricula as well as pedagogical strategies teachers used in the teaching and learning of gender and sexuality topics in Malawi's secondary schools and higher education. Malawi was once ruled by the British conservative government and their legacy in regards to laws and policies on issues of gender and sexuality remains pervasive in Malawian societies today. In 1937, the colonial conservative government passed the anti-sodomy laws and policies, which aimed at controlling human sexuality aligned to the understanding of gender (Mawerenga, 2018). These laws were made to criminalize homosexuality, which further suppressed the rights of marginalized groups (Mawerenga, 2018). They legitimized the incarceration and execution of every individual who is sexually attracted to someone of the same sex (Mawerenga, 2018). After the collapse of the British colonial rule, their legacy on gender and sexuality was inherited by the post independent government. People's aspirations to have an inclusive education system became a nightmare or fantasies as the self-ruled dictatorial government inherited the oppressive system that dehumanized minorities. The self-ruled autocratic government banned sexuality education across the education spaces in Malawi (Mwakasungula, 2013). Thus, despite the country's transition to democracy in 1994, the discourse of gender and sexuality beyond binary as well as heteronormative in the education spaces

remains problematic. Our essay questions this colonial thinking by disrupting the essentialist understanding of gender and sexuality left by the colonial government. We draw on our experiences to interrogate whether the existing classroom pedagogies response to gender and sexual diversity in the education spaces in Malawi. Our interest is to provide a critical analysis and challenge the heteronormativity on definitions of gender and sexuality focusing on the curriculum and pedagogies. Our intention here is not to advance what the critics would call extremist liberal ideologies on gender and sexuality, but rather to offer a safe space for a better conversation as one way of dealing with an apartheid of knowledge (Bernal & Villalpando, 2002) on the discourse about gender and sexuality in the democratic era. We do this by exposing the oppressive curricula and pedagogies, which ignores social construction and understanding of gender and sexuality through the lens of decoloniality and queer theory. This article draws on several theoretical frameworks such as intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), queer theory/pedagogy (Shlasko, 2005), and Lugones's (2010) theory of decoloniality to argue against heteronormativity that undermines non-binary discourses of gender and sexuality in the education spaces in Malawi. In this essay we argue for an inclusive curriculum and pedagogies that would embrace diversity and equity for holistic understanding of gender and sexuality in the education spaces in Malawi (Bradshaw, 2019).

#### **Theoretical frameworks**

Decoloniality as a theoretical framework is used to critically analyze how gender and sexuality are conceptualized in the education spaces in Malawi focusing on the curriculum and pedagogies. Maria Lugones is credited as the first scholar to write about decoloniality of gender as a lens to argue against the colonial understanding of gender in relation to power and patriarchal practices (Lugones, 2010). In the article on "Toward a Decolonial Feminism" Maria Lugones contends that there are power struggles between the subjectification and active subjectivity in which the minimal sense of agency requires so that the oppressed should resist the relation of being an oppressed by the modernity (Lugones, 2003). Lugones defines resistance as one of the ways through which the oppressed in society display their power and voice to challenge the existing status quo, thus the systems and structures of the coloniality of gender. Lugones discusses the coloniality of gender as an institution of power that continues to oppress female bodies. The coloniality of gender categorizes women as oppressed beings, not as human beings. It further fosters a dichotomy of men as representations of excellence while women as weaker versions or imperfections. Lugones (2010) proposes decolonization as the only way to overcome the coloniality of gender. According to Lugones, decolonization simply means the use of practical strategy to critique the existing racialized, colonial, capitalist, heterosexual and gendered oppression that are legacies of colonialism. Thus, decolonization is a process of

challenging dominant views and traditional methodologies of knowing (Bhambra, 2014 McShane, 2021).

We also used intersectionality to understand the interplay between the concepts of gender and sexuality and implications on students' experiences in the education spaces in Malawi. Kimberly Crenshaw is credited to have coined the term 'intersectionality'. Crenshaw (1991) defines intersectionality as various strategies in which race, gender and class interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). Crenshaw notes that in the United States, domestic violence is structurally and systemically politicized and women of color have been the victims of domestic violence throughout history. Intersectionality is also used in various social issues including addressing issues of equity in education, as a lens for legal justice, as an LGBQT framework therapy, and as an anti-discrimination policy at state levels (Craven, 2019). In addition, intersectionality is perceived as a pedagogical approach as well as a methodology for studying women's and gender studies curriculum (Craven, 2009). Patricia H. Collins and Sirma Bilge view intersectionality as a tool for analyzing complex human lives in complex societies, promoting social justice, critical inquiry tool, praxis, as well as a critique of classroom practices of defining gender in binary terms (Collins & Bilge, 2016). This resonates with the ideas of Cho et al (2003) who argues that development and contestation of the focal points of intersectional

studies within the politics of academia and social movements are naturally intersectional, and therefore, they must continually be interrogated as part of the intersectional projects.

This essay also uses queer theory/pedagogy to further explore how the concepts of gender and sexuality are conceptualized in the curriculum, as well as examine the existing pedagogies used in the teaching/learning of gender and sexuality education. Shlasko (2005) in the article queer theory vs pedagogy, equity, and excellence in education offers a detailed framework on how the education spaces can be made safer and more inclusive for the minorities through the application of queer theory or pedagogies. Shlasko argues that queerness is not only about being a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transsexual, but rather a subject position and politic. Queer as a subject categorizes people whose sexual preferences and gender identities fall outside of our expectations and cultural norms (Morris, 1998). Thus queer people identify themselves as neither male with no sexual attraction to women, nor as females with no sexual attraction to men, but rather a combination of the above-described gender identities and sexual orientations (Morris, 1998). In regard to politic, Shlasko argues that queer pedagogy challenges the concept of 'normalcy' as described by mainstream scholars from the dominant cultures. They reject the idea of inclusion from normal at the same time refusing to be recuperated from that normalness (Shlasko, 2005). In addition, Shlasko cites Morris to explain how queer politic positions itself as

both outside hetero-norms and gender identities besides challenging the existence of these norms and structures that restrict their boundaries. Thus, queer theory challenges the existing enforced norms of gender and sexuality and its claims on normalcy as well as the processes in which the borders of normal have been defined and policed in our societies (Britzman, 1998; Green, 1996; Morris, 2000). As Luhman (1998) puts it, queer pedagogy entails the application of queer theories into teaching and learning (Shlasko, 2005). Thus inquiring how queer theory is useful in the discourse of gender and sexuality across progressive mainstream education is thus critical for queer pedagogy as well as for promotion of exclusivity, and democratic education.

#### Conceptual definitions of gender and sexuality

This section critically examines the concepts of gender and sexuality as defined in the secondary school curriculum, the content and the existing pedagogies for teaching gender and sexuality studies, as well as the driving theories linked to the concepts in question. We begin by providing the definitions of the concepts of gender and sexuality as stipulated in Malawi's school curriculum. Malawi's curriculum conceptualizes gender in the context of defined roles and responsibilities assigned to males and females that are socially learned from families, churches, communities, and other social institutions and these vary from culture to culture and generation to generation (Chirwa, Naidoo, & Chirwa,

2014). To elaborate, the curriculum gives an example of the division of labor based on gender in Malawian societies in which women usually do household chores while men are mostly breadwinners (Chirwa et al., 2014.).

On the other hand, sexuality is defined as a total expression of an individual which includes values, physical appearance, beliefs, emotions, likes, dislikes, behaviors, as well as the ways in which a person has been socialized sexually (Chirwa, Naidoo, & Chirwa, 2014). Upon examining gender and sexuality are conceptualized/defined, we then begin our analysis with the concept of gender followed by sexuality. First, the concept of gender as defined in the curriculum is problematic as it does not address all aspects of gender. Thus, the definition offered only conflates the concepts of 'gender' and 'roles' without offering any meaning. Rather, it offers a colonial understanding of gender in binary terms which suggests the state of being male or female with associated gender roles. This understanding is narrow in the sense that it ignores several other sexual orientations or preferences of other peoples. Examples of other gender and sexual preferences include but are not limited to bisexual, asexual, non-binary, gender neutral, gender fluid, gender non-conformity, and transgender (Collins and Bilge, 2016). In Malawi, the content in the curriculum offers limited understanding for students to explore other sexual and gender identities other than thinking through binary category.

Drawing from Cho et al. (2013) in "Toward a field of intersectionality studies' 'intersectionality helps to better understand the concept of gender. This challenges the dominant notions of sameness or differences in the context of law, politics, and civil society movements. Collins and Bilge (2016) provide a detailed analysis and understanding of gender arguing that gender performative and intersectionality are mutually inclusive. From an intersectional perspective, such definition of gender as prescribed in the curriculum reveals the existing social injustices experienced by minority students by not recognizing their existence, gender identities and other diversity issues. This shows the curriculum of deficit in which other forms of oppression such as social exclusion are exposed in the education spaces. The curriculum does not capture the needs of people with non-binary or bisexual in the context of gender identities and sexuality. It only responds to the needs of those with identities such as disability, age, and gender norms, ignoring sexism which is a crucial element in Kimberly's (1989) idea of intersectionality. For the curriculum and the whole education system to be intersectional, it has to respond to all the intersectional identities; gender, race, class, age, disability, and sex. Drawing from decolonial approach, Zinga and Styre (2019) in their article on "Decolonizing curriculum: Student resistances to anti-oppressive pedagogy" argue that educators and students should be given opportunities that would enable them to critically reflect and engage in various educational discourses on matters of gender and sexuality issues. Thus,

decolonization in this context implies the process of resisting the mainstream approaches to teaching and learning, as well as challenging the existing taken-for-granted assumptions within the education system.

This has left minority students continuing to be subjected to oppressive pedagogical practices in the classrooms in which their space for knowing, exploring, as well as expressing their social identities becomes limited. Given that gender as a concept is not explicitly defined in the curriculum, we therefore support the ideas of Rem's (2010), and Shlasko's (2005) who argue for an increased adoption of the queer theory/pedagogies in the teaching of gender and sexuality studies in the education spaces. We believe that this pedagogical practice can help not only to broaden our understanding of gender and sexuality studies, but also embrace the existence of the minority students and make the education environment much more inclusive and diverse. Integration of queer lens in the education spaces would provide a pathway to challenge to the existing cultural normalcy of understanding gender and sexuality from essentialist perspectives that limit the diverse knowledge of social identities and the lived experiences of non-binary, queer, transgender, and or bisexual students and teachers (Rem, 2010). Sexuality is also another concept analyzed in this essay. Drawing on a critical analysis of Shlasko's queer theory/pedagogy, Kimberly Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, and Lugones's theory of decoloniality, we contend that the

definition of sexuality as stipulated in the curriculum in Malawi is thus limited and somewhat flawed.

Our argument is based on the fact that the curriculum does not explicitly define sexuality as it lacks detailed aspects or clarity. It does not capture fundamental concepts such as 'individual's preferences' attached to their rights to sexual preferences. Drawing from Shlasko's understanding of queer pedagogy, we argue that the conceptualization of sexuality in the curriculum embraces heteronormativity or cultural normalcy. It reinforces Lugone's (2010) coloniality of gender that suppresses women and sexual minority groups. Besides, the curriculum also fails to elaborate or give concrete linkages between those beliefs, values, likes, dislikes, physical appearance, or emotions to a wider discourse of queer cultures or sexual preferences of the minority students. Several reasons could explain why the curriculum does not explicitly offer a broader understanding of sexuality as a concept as described below. Thus, given that education spaces are places of knowledge production, the vast majority of Malawians today have limited understanding or knowledge of sexuality as the education system excludes issues of individual's sexual identities, preferences or orientations. In an article authored by Chanika, Wanda, Muula. (2013) on "Gender, Gays and Gain: The Sexualized Politics of Donor Aid in Malawi" the authors provide a detailed explanation as to why Malawian society still resist and have limited understanding of the rights of marginalized such as LGBTQ communities. One of

the reasons highlighted in the article has to do with the social, cultural, and religious beliefs, which are deeply rooted in the Malawian societies, and this has resulted in the evolution of the notions of "God-fearing nation", "anti-Christian", and "anti-Malawian" into the larger political discourses in relation to human rights issues (Chanika, Wanda, Muula, 2013). Scholars such as Currier (2018), and Mawerenga (2018) note that in Malawian context, issues of homosexuality as well as the rights issues focusing on the minority groups are hugely politicized. The politics of sexuality in education and how it is viewed in our society has historical roots from the colonial education system. In a study conducted in Malawi, Mwakasungula (2013) notes that the emergence of homosexuality in the country is traced back to the British conservative colonial rule whose laws and policies were against same sex marriages. Given that the existing curriculum in Malawi is hugely censored by authorities and stakeholders who have power to decide what content to include or exclude in the curriculum, this has resulted in liminal discourses on sexual identities in the educational spaces in Malawi. Therefore, in such educational space, marginalized students are exposed to a restrictive and oppressive curriculum and pedagogies that infringes their rights to be visible and embrace their sexual identities and orientations. Other studies show that transgender and gender diverse (TGD) young people are often invisible in school curriculum, yet, potentially hyper visible in school communities, where they are frequently targets for discrimination (Kosciw et al. 2018; Ullman 2017).

In line with Rem (2010), the modernist and critical approaches to gender and sexuality rely on fixed definitions. This understanding limits us to broadly comprehend the social constructs of gender identities and the experiences of the minority students and or teachers.

# Pedagogical strategies on gender and sexuality topics

Our task here is to describe if the pedagogical practices in the education system in Malawi respond to diverse gender and sexual preferences of the students during teaching and learning process. The question we ask and seek to address in this session is that: how have resistance and solidarity politics informed approaches to pedagogy in formal learning contexts for queer-decolonial educators? (Sifuentes, 2021). Thus, our discussion is informed by queer pedagogies, intersectionality, and gender responsive pedagogy to address the question of whether the existing pedagogical practices respond to issues of inclusion, diversity, and equity. The pedagogical strategies on topics of gender and sexuality as stipulated in the secondary school social studies curriculum include brainstorming, group work/discussion, questions and answers, teacher observations, family tree, role play (Betemeni,2000). Our analysis shows that the teacher's use of these instructional strategies in the education spaces are gender binary (Banda 2003), in which their concern is mainly on gender balance in the context of male/female when it comes to classroom participation. For example,

when teachers employ group discussion and questions-answers pedagogies, they usually plan on how to accommodate students in groups equally based on gender binary (Wanjama and Njuguma 2020). Thus, teachers would put equal girls and boys in groups and plan three questions for boys and three questions for girls (Wanjama and Njuguma 2020).

On the topic of sexuality education, teachers perhaps use images as pedagogical strategies to illustrate only heterosexual couples and then let the students brainstorm about their understanding of marriage attached to sexuality. As such, we question whether those pedagogical strategies do enhance gender inclusion in the education spaces in Malawi. In formed by queer pedagogy (Shlasko, 2005; Neto, 2018), we therefore contend that such pedagogical approaches are not inclusive as they do not acknowledge as well as recognize the visibility of the minority students in the classroom. Our understanding of inclusive pedagogies goes beyond gender and sexuality binary education. Thus, we incorporate queer lens in the pedagogical practices in which teachers should be able to observe the diverse possibilities of defining the concepts of gender and sexuality and associated social expressions without the necessity of using fixed social identities (Neto, 2018). Thus, assigning students in groups for classroom discussions based on essentialist understanding of gender ignores the existence of non-binary or gender-neutral students and this infringes the principle of safe space in the education system.

From intersectional perspectives, students whose gender identities are fluid or non-binary are therefore subjected to oppressive pedagogies, hence they continue to suffer in silence throughout their schooling experience (Crenshaw, 1991). Our experiences have informed us to acknowledge that existing gender pedagogies in the education spaces in Malawi do not necessarily address gender and sexuality issues, but rather they perpetuate social injustices among the minority students. Gender binary pronouns such as he/she are typical common examples used by teachers when addressing students during the classroom activities. Tania Ferfoija and Jacqueline Ullman (2021) examine gender and sexuality in curriculum in Austrian public schools and they observe that transgender students are not visible in curriculum. As educators and to the best of our knowledge, we believe schools are agents of change and they play a critical role in creating safe spaces for everyone. Thus, through this space, the knowledge, practices, values, and beliefs of the minority students should be integrated in the curriculum and pedagogies as a way of challenging the dominant cultures spread by the colonial settlers on the discourse of gender and sexuality.

# Conclusion

This essay has critically analyzed how gender and sexuality are conceptualized in the education spaces in Malawi. We used multiple theoretical lens such as decoloniality, intersectionality, and queer theory or pedagogies on gender and sexuality education to offer insights and other ways of knowing about the concepts of gender and sexuality. Through these lenses, our essay has identified a critical curriculum of deficit and pedagogies on gender and sexuality are defined and how these concepts are taught in secondary schools and higher education in Malawi. We argue that there is limited or deficit in the understanding of gender and sexuality in Malawian context and this is a legacy of the British conservative colonial government's laws and policies that were imposed in the education system in Malawi for nearly seven decades. Given that the colonial knowledge on gender and sexuality is still dominant in the education spaces, a lot has to be done in reforming the curriculum so as to unlearn such colonial understanding. Using the theory of decoloniality (Lugones, 2010), the concept of intersectionality (Creshaw, 199), and queer theory/pedagogy (Shlasko, 2005; Rem, 2010), we strongly contend for the need to disrupt the colonial hegemony on the curriculum and pedagogies used in the teaching and learning of gender and sexuality topics. The curriculum as a tool for critical consciousness should be able to accommodate and respond to the broader theoretical frameworks of gender and sexuality that would help to better understand the concepts of gender and

sexuality more broadly. Our article provides a pathway to challenge the dominant social and cultural hegemony that has historically binarized gender identities and sexuality in the education system, which subject the minority students into oppressive curriculum and pedagogies in education spaces in Malawi. For example, the education system remains euro-colonial-centric in nature on how gender and sexuality are conceptualized and viewed. We agree with the ideas of Lugones who argues for decoloniality of gender as a practical strategy to critique the racialized, colonial, and capitalist heterosexuality of gender oppression inherited from colonial doctrines. Thus we reject the notion of heteronormativity or cultural normalcy that tends to view gender and sexuality in binary terms and calls for inclusive curriculum and pedagogies that embrace queer theory/pedagogy in the teaching and learning of gender and sexuality topics.

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