

Report of LOVA panel session at Workshop (En)gendering new conversations

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On November 23rd and 24th, 2017, the workshop *(En)gendering new conversations: Ethnographic research and its contribution to politicized debates on gender and sexuality* of the Network for the Anthropology of Gender and Sexuality (NAGS) of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) was held at the University of Groningen, The Netherlands. The event had been organized by Kim Knibbe (University of Groningen) and Anna Fedele (Lisbon University Institute) in cooperation with EASA, with Marina de Regt of LOVA, and with Brenda Bartelink and Jelle Wiering of the Centre for Religion, Conflict and Globalization at the University of Groningen. The workshop aimed to bring together anthropologists from all over Europe to initiate a wide-ranging conversation on how anthropologists might contribute to the intense public debates around issues regarding gender and sexuality which so often problematize migrants in particular. The two day workshop consisted of four panel sessions with presentations of papers, a roundtable discussion and a closing meeting with reflections on the outcome of the conference. In this report I focus on the panel session organized by LOVA but I start with a short summary of the opening speech of Tamsin Bradley because of the important ideas she presented.

Tamsin Bradley (Professor in International Development Studies at University of Portsmouth, UK) had been invited to talk about anthropology at the intersections of gender, religion, culture and violence. She stated that it is most important to use the language of cultural relativism in order to navigate between the activist struggle for banning practices of female genital mutilation (FGM) and taking into account the critique of ethnocentrism and reproducing postcolonial narratives of underdeveloped poor victimized women. Cultural relativism and deep ethnography is important to understand the continuation of FGM. It does not exist because of women's subordination to men but has to do with marking borders. Women are willing to bear the pain of circumcision in order to belong to a specific group, like bearing the pain of child birth. It gives them control over their own body and sexuality. FGM is a pre-Christian and pre-Islamic custom in Egypt and Sudan, and nowadays practiced by people of both religions in these and neighbouring countries; culture is a more important factor than religion. Migrant women from Somalia in London protested against the FGM prohibition law in the UK and anti-FGM campaigns because they rejected the interference in their lives and bodies. They experienced the law and campaigns as racist, reductionist and condescending and they felt they were not really listened to by the activists.

Marina de Regt and Brenda Bartelink of LOVA organized the panel session *Anthropology, development, gender and sexuality*. The aim of this session was to investigate how anthropologists navigate critical, intersectional methodologies and ethnographic research on women's lived realities around the world in combination with their roles in activism, civil society as well as influencing

policy. Rahil Roodsaz (Postdoctoral Research Fellow at UvA) opened the panel by reflecting on her current participation in a research project regarding comprehensive sexuality education for adolescents in Bangladesh, funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Having a critical view on international development cooperation, Roodsaz hesitated a lot to participate in the project. However, she still thinks that international solidarity can exist and so she stepped in. The research showed various gaps between the spokespersons of the Dutch donor organization and the seven Bangladeshi NGOs involved regarding their views on sexuality and how to implement sex education. Now she asks herself: What can be done with these findings, what will be done?

The other three presenters of the LOVA panel also shared their personal dilemmas and ambivalences as scholar and activist. Shuchi Karim (Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Radboud University Nijmegen) experienced these in her work in the field of the sexuality rights activism in Bangladesh. Being a single woman working on the sexual and reproductive rights and health program at the Bangladeshi NGO of BRAC she was more or less compelled to state her personal position as a lesbian to continue the funding by western donors for the LGBT group she was involved in. This implied a break with her family and she is now reflecting on her personal position and struggling how to present her PhD research on heteronormativity and her later experiences in a book. May Ngo (Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Asia Research Institute of National University Singapore) reflected on her research among a community of three Roman Catholic Christian nuns from Korea and The Philippines in Cambodia who work in a factory of the export garment industry to support local female

workers there. The nuns strived for an ‘ethics of immediacy’ in their ‘politics of presence’ like so many other development workers do. Ngo questioned the sacrifices of these nuns and also shared her problems with the ideal of ‘ethnographic co-presence’ in her research. Francesca Mininel (PhD candidate at Marseille University) talked about paradoxes in the HIV/aids prevention campaigns of the national government and Christian faith based NGOs in Togo in which the propagation of abstinence before marriage, monogamy and fidelity is central. The NGOs and women participating in virginity tests pretend that this policy approach is based on Christian beliefs, enhances African cultural identity, and empowers women in their control over their sexuality. Mininel saw, however, rather a weakening of women’s position and a blaming of women; the focus on women and their virginity is neglecting the more structural factors in the spreading of HIVA/aids.