CIEA7 #7:

MODERNIDADES, MARGINALIZAÇÃO E VIOLÊNCIA: ESTRATÉGIAS DE SOBREVIVÊNCIA E AFIRMAÇÃO DOSJOVENS EM CABO VERDE E GUINÉ-BISSAU.

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The double marginalisation:

reflections on young women and the youth crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa

There has been an upsurge in academic studies on youth in Sub-Saharan Africa since the last decade of the 20th century, underlining the growing importance that generational cleavages seem to play in today's societies. However, gender has been neglected in research and policies bearing on youth, unveiling a rather negative and limited approach to Sub-Saharan African youth: limit situations are those most focused on (as the role of youth in conflicts), young males being perceived as the most active in those contexts and who therefore shall be the focus of political (and academic) attention. Acknowledging the need to integrate gender in the approaches to youth, this paper tries to grasp, through a preliminary literature review, how the predicaments of the so-called "youth crisis" are lived and perceived by young girls, and identify the main themes and theoretical perspectives of the literature that has tried to explore this thematic.

Youth, Gender, Marginalisation, Sub-Saharan Africa.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is the outcome of research conducted in the first months of my PhD project, which focuses on strategies of young girls in Bissau to face the so-called "youth crisis" [1]. Taking into account the initial stage of the project, this essay is based on a preliminary review of the literature on girls and young women in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), going therefore beyond the Cape Verdian and Bissau-Guinean specific contexts.

The objective of the paper is to reflect on how girls and young women in SSA are approached and dealt with by a non exhaustive set of articles and books on this subject but which, nevertheless, seems to indicate the main topics and perspectives that dominate the research available on the subject. I argue that, despite the heterogeneity inherent to the youth concept, research on girls and young women in SSA is scarce, both within youth studies as well as within gender and women's studies. This situation is due not only to the fact that only recently youth has acquired feminine contours, but also because gender and women's studies still privilege adult women.

After some brief methodological considerations, I will present in the first part a general overview of youth studies and make some reflections on gender studies in Africa, arguing also for the need to take in due account the heterogeneity of the youth category and presenting some elements which indicate its gendered character. The second part will explore some trends identified in the current literature on youth, particularly on female youth, and critically analyse the main theme which dominates this literature – sexual and reproductive behaviours. To conclude, we will put forward two hypotheses for explaining the focus of this literature on sexuality.

METHODOLOGY

The main fields of the African studies literature explored in this review were youth studies and women's and gender studies. The research encompassed specialised books, scientific journals and several resources available on the Internet, most of the sources being academic and in English or French languages.

This preliminary and ongoing literature review is far from being representative of the different regions of SSA, as the bulk of the literature consulted, namely through Internet, bears on West and Southern African countries.

Youth and gender studies: the importance of intersectional analysis

Approaches to youth in African studies: from figurants to actors

Youth and related aspects (such as initiation rituals, ceremonies, sexual practices and age grade systems) have been an important subject in anthropology since its beginning. Classical anthropology conceived youth as a transitory phase or life-stage between childhood and adulthood, focusing mainly on youth as a product of adult activity and as an example of broader social rules and dynamics within functionalist and structuralist frameworks; therefore, several authors consider youth had initially a secondary or supportive role in African studies (Durham, 2000: 114).

Other fields, such as history, also disregarded for a long period the study of youth in African studies. As Richard Waller recognizes, "the dominance of age also has shaped our own historical understanding" (2005: 87). Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch observed in the 90's that African youth was a quite recent subject in Africanist historiography and explained why: until the 90's, young people had been approached according to a perspective of liminality – and not as an analytical category in "its own right" – due to the fact that most SSA societies were organized according to seniority, in which age was equated with power and knowledge; therefore, adults and senior men were the main informants of researchers, including for issues regarding youth (1992: 35-36).

It is mainly in the 1990's (two decades ago) that SSA youth starts being consistently considered as something more than a life-stage or a process of becoming adults, by focusing on young people as social actors[2]. This increased visibility of youth within African studies is explained by a conjunction of factors such as the demographic weight of youth (young people constitute a burgeoning majority of African population), the longstanding economic deterioration in several African countries which impacted heavily on the social mobility of young people, as well as their participation in violent practices and adoption of marginal lifestyles (Diouf and Collignon, 2001: 5). This means that while youth as a social group existed well before independence and colonisation, and that intergenerational tensions were not a product of modernity nor globalization but something which pre-existed them (Miescher and Lindsay, 2003: 10), academics only started approaching young people as social actors in the 1990's.

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[2] This new approach, which Mary Bucholtz calls "anthropology of youth", is interdisciplinary and "characterized by its attention to the agency of young people, its concern to document [...] the entirety of youth cultural practice, and its interest in how identities emerge in new cultural formations that creatively combine elements of global capitalism, transnationalism, and local culture" (2002: 525).

While youth makes reference to a period which exists in most cultures, a universal definition based on age is hard to reach, superficial and not very clarifying[3] as youth is a socially constructed category. Youth shall then be perceived as a "social shifter" (Durham, 2000: 116), as a concept whose contours and flesh are grasped through a contextualised analysis, taking youth as a relational concept and an analytical lens through society which enables researchers to perceive "the social landscape of power, rights, expectations and relationships" which youth encompasses (*ibidem*).

A widespread consensus developed on the existence of a "youth crisis" in most African countries, reflected in the shift from a positive meaning and social expectations attached to youth at the time of independence and the first years of postcolonial states – as the hope and builders of new and modern independent countries –, towards the negative views on youth today, as synonymous with blocked social mobility, marginalisation and exclusion from decision-making and sustainable livelihoods, and a pervasive threat to national stability, urban security or family welfare (Diouf, 2003).

Nevertheless, the notion of "youth crisis" is problematic as the distinction between its two possible meanings – a societal crisis impacting on youth or originating from youth – is often blurred, leading to negative perceptions of youth that can easily bring to its "securitisation" (Richards, 1996; UNDP, 2006). Therefore, I use "youth crisis" to refer to a societal crisis impacting on youth, a crisis that is related to the economic and social breakdown of the 80's, which diluted promises of prosperity in postcolonial countries, making the State and society at large unable to respond to the demands of youth (Diouf, 2003). The youth crisis in Africa entails multidimensional elements, reflecting the failure of development paradigms and policies implemented so far and their impacts on the socio-economic fabrics of African societies: the limited availability, quality and relevance of education; scarce employment opportunities for both qualified and unqualified youth; limited opportunities for youth to channel their concerns and proposals to political decision-makers; changing family patterns, disintegration of community structures or contraction of social networks and of the 'economy of affection' (Chigunta et al., 2005; Lourenço-Lindell, 2002; UNDP, 2006; Vigh, 2003).

Some remarks on gender in African studies

While generational dynamics and age constitute an important stratification element in SSA societies and elsewhere, youth is not a homogenous category as other identity

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[3] Furthermore, defining youth based on age criteria may also produce further exclusion for those who, according to local criteria, are not yet adults but chronologically do not fit the age range defined at the global level, being therefore disqualified for support. Indeed, while the UN defines youth as anyone between the ages of 15 and 24 years old (with the World Bank keeping the upper limit but fixing beginning of youth at 12), the African Youth Charter (in line with most national policy definitions of youth in African countries), adopted by the African Union Heads of State in 2006, defined youth as "every person between the ages of 15 and 35 years" (apud Ismail et al. 2009, pp. 23-25).

categories and stratification principles intersect it, rendering it more complex and enriching nuances in the specific configurations of rights, obligations, aspirations and expectations attached to young people located in diverse social, cultural, economic and political backgrounds.

Gender, as a socio-cultural construction of masculinity and femininity, refers to "a cluster of norms, values, and behavioural patterns expressing explicit and implicit expectations of how men [and women] should act and represent themselves to others" (Miescher and Lindsay, 2003: 4). Ideologies of masculinity and femininity are historically and culturally constructed, and they are continuously maintained, contested and negotiated at the interpersonal, institutional and cultural levels (Schlyter, 1999: 12). Therefore, to analyse gender, we need to "know how people in given times and places talked about and characterized gender traits, how gender was embodied in practice, and how actors understood their own gendered identities" (Miescher and Lindsay, 2003: 7). This implies: a) focusing on discourses expressing cultural ideas and expectations of those considered masculine and feminine as well as on institutions which promote specific notions of masculinity and femininity; b) analysing social practices, both those which reproduce and transform gender systems, as gender "is not only merely 'constructed' but *produced* – by the ideas and actions of women and men in interaction with local and translocal structures and processes" (*ibidem*); c) and finally, understanding how notions of masculinity and femininity "are reflected in individual experience, identity and subjectivity", and the tensions that different models of masculinities and femininities during the life cycle produce and are lived within individuals without the resources to achieve those normative ideals (*idem*: 8).

While women's studies were predominant in the initial stage of discussions and works on gender in the 1970's – with the second wave of feminism and the debates around Women in Development academic and policy frameworks –, gender started being fully considered as a relational concept at the end of the 1980s (Sow, 2001). Men's studies and discussions on masculinities in Africa started developing in the mid 1990's, contributing to a reversal of the widespread assumption that "gender affects only women, and that man is the norm against which woman's 'otherness' can be measured" (Imam, 1997: 28).

Gender studies in Africa have been dominated, at least in the 80's and 90's, by debates regarding the applicability of Western gender analysis to African societies and the specific features which a gender analysis should take on board. The third wave of feminism, which took place in the 90's, was characterised by a proliferation of criticisms to a supposed universal script of gender relations, which was in fact said to be based only on the experience of Western, white, middle class women. This third wave, also

influenced by postmodernist criticisms to positivist sciences, showed the importance of other dynamics of power relations and principles of social stratification – such as ethnicity, class, religion – and fought against homogenous categories of women and men.

African social sciences showed a high reluctance to accept gender analysis and concepts which, in a postcolonial context where the nation-building project should unite and mobilise men and women, showed to be a threatening divisive force (academically and politically), several times repelled as the continuation of Western colonisation through academic and developmentalist means. Afrocentric paradigms, focused on reversing the negative images of African cultures produced by the "colonial library" which, among other things, depicted African women as being oppressed and treated as chattel and men as overly powerful and oppressive individuals, rejected the applicability of feminist and hierarchical gender analysis to African societies. Afrocentric paradigms focused on theories of African gender relations in the pre-colonial period as being based on a system of complementary roles with an equal status between men and women, patriarchy and women's oppression being considered to be the result of external forces – such as colonialism and the expansion of Islamic and Christian monotheist religions – which subverted the original African gender equality system (see, among others, Amadiume, 1997; Kanji and Camara, 2000; Oyéwùmí, 1997).

However, and despite the continuing refusal by Afrocentric authors of the pertinence of gender analysis and concepts, feminist theories and debates around gender entered African academies in the late 1970's and beginning of the 1980's, with several African authors acknowledging its importance. Ayesha Imam cautions against an idealisation of African societies: "In revolting against Western ethnocentric false universalisations, we should be careful not to enshrine in their place equally false essentialisations of Africanity, which disenfranchise us from examining certain aspects of oppressive relations (whether of gender, class or other group)" (1997: 17). Also, the Senegalese sociologist Fatou Sow argues that academic and political resistance to gender concepts and analysis is strong as their acceptance as a scientific tool would show that gender creates inequalities, highlighting therefore the contingency of male privileges (2001).

Both through academic as well as political agendas (first through Women in Development and the resulting women's state machinery created in the 1970's and 1980's and later the Gender and Development approach), gender can be considered today, albeit recent, an important and established lens to examine African power relations, both between men and women as well as among men and women. While taking into account the great impact of colonialism, monotheist religions and socio-

economic transformations which fashioned previous gender contracts where women's status were different from nowadays, it is important to bear in mind the highly differentiated contexts within the African continent and do not abusively generalise from specific examples of women's outstanding power to the whole continent nor conclude that gender was not pertinent in pre-colonial societies due to the prominence of other social stratification principles, such as age, in specific contexts (see for example Bakare-Yusuf, 2004). Indeed, it shall be analysed in each specific context whether it may make sense to "consider African gender relations as a 'patchwork of patriarchies', some imposed through colonialism, others locally derived" (Miescher and Lindsay, 2003: 3), instead of blatantly state that today's gender relations result from "external sources".

Despite the claimed need to recognise the heterogeneity of women's and men's situations and experiences, age and generation have not figured highly in the feminist and gender studies scholarship, where a systematic bias towards adult women is visible (*idem*: 10; Chant and Jones, 2005: 186), except for aspects such as sexuality and access to education – in which girls and young women are focused on.

The intersection of youth and gender: youth as a gendered social category

As seen so far, both youth and gender studies recognise the heterogeneity of youth and gender, but in both fields studies on girls and young female are scarce. However, the intersection of youth and gender is crucial to understand how the so-called "youth crisis" is lived by male and female young people, as both concepts of gender and youth denote relations to entitlements, social hierarchies and decision-making processes (Ismail et al., 2009: 22).

Until recently, Africanist anthropologists studied relations between generations mainly under the perspective of male elders and juniors, girls being mainly depicted as an instrument of elders' domination over juniors, as access to women for marriage was mediated through rituals controlled by elders which young men had to perform (Attané, 2007: 168). Even researchers focused on age class systems considered them as a male institution, with girls being mainly approached through analysis of kinship systems (see Bernardi, 1985; Abélès and Collard, 1985; Galland, 2007: 64). As remarked by Abélès and Collard, young women had been presented by anthropologists until the mid 1980's as objects or subjects exploited either by dominated juniors or oppressive elders, defining women as an a-temporal category (1985: 12). This androcentric bias is

also reflected in the relative scant analysis of female rituals[4], which rendered the category of youth mainly a synonymous with boys and young male.

Indeed, in the literature consulted, several authors mentioned the relative newness of the category of youth for girls, not only in terms of its visibility in the academic literature, but also as a lived experience due to the social organisation of pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial societies. In this regard, Ann Schlyter states:

> It can be said that in Africa, for girls, youth as a period lasting several years is a rather new phenomena. In the pre-urban society, childhood was turned into adulthood in a few steps. Shortly after girls had their first menstrual period they were initiated through a series of rites, they got married, and they gained respect as adults by becoming mothers (1999: 14; see also Kleiner-Bossaller, 1992; Rondeau, 1992).

The intersection of gender and youth draws our attention to how youth is in itself a gendered category. In a recent survey[5] on West African young people's perceptions on youth, it was found that "male perspectives of youth pinpoint the centrality of age and activity/energy levels, while female perspectives highlight a combination of age, marital status and social roles" (Ismail et al., 2009: 26). Also in a case-study on peri-urban youth in Zambia, it was noted that while motherhood and marital status were the key criteria to become female adults, for young men adulthood encompassed more dimensions beyond parenthood and civil status, including also livelihoods and mainly the ability to provide for a family (Schlyter, 1999).

Beyond the differences regarding the criteria for defining youth and adulthood, the way youth is lived is also differently described according to gender. For example, in Guinea Conakry, young people described males as "long lived, advantaged, free to travel and innovate, strong, etc, while females were described as weak, disadvantaged, confined to the home and, in a surprising number of cases, short lived and disease prone [...]; females' youth time also tended to be shorter than males' with male youth given more freedom compared to females" (Ismail et al., 2009: 27). It was also mentioned that young female did most of household chores (such as cooking and laundry) and therefore had less time to take part in activities such as sport and youth associations (*ibidem*).

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[4] There are however exceptions, such as the works of Margaret Mead (1973 [1928]) and Audrey Richards (1982 [1956]).
[5] The countries which were covered by this survey were Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Sierra Leone (Ismail et al., 2009).

MAIN TRENDS IN THE CURRENT LITERATURE ON GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN IN SSA

Researching youth in SSA: some biases

The literature review conducted enabled me to find three main biases in the academic research on youth in general, such as: 1) the concentration on urban settings, on low socioeconomic categories of young people and on problematic situations such as conflicts, delinquency and pandemics such as HIV/AIDS; 2) limited scope of research: there are few comparative studies either within countries (in terms of different social groups of young people) or between countries, and few works which take an integrated approach to youth, exploring simultaneously different dimensions of young people's lives (for exceptions, see Schlyter, 1999); 3) finally, and in a strong reaction to the initial focus on youth by classic anthropology and sociology, there is sometimes a tendency to overlook the relational character of youth, focusing highly on the perspectives and agency of young people but losing sight of other generational categories.

Some authors blame the restrictive sets of thematics explored on the unsatisfying connections and unequal relations between social sciences and short-term African and global superficial political agendas, which dominate academic production (Mufune, 1999). This remark echoes Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, where he shows that as youth becomes a specific category of social sciences analysis, it becomes a problematic category, with most studies on youth being deviance studies and diagnostics for programmatic interventions (Durham, 2000: 116).

As regards specifically the literature on young women, there is a quite limited set of issues discussed, with a heavy focus on sexual and reproductive health, as well as on thematic areas where policy goals (such as the Beijing Platform for Action or the Millenium Development Goals) have been set and monitoring is required – such as education and violence. Indeed, while some issues explored by the youth "in general" literature (but which often pertains to male youth) encompass subjects such as political phenomena (including participation in conflicts, gangs, as well as youth associations), livelihoods strategies, cultural production and consumption practices, the research on female youth on these subjects is rather rare[6].

Despite this big picture, there is nevertheless some research which explore new fields. Migration studies are one of them. With the late 1980's and 1990's deconstruction of previous theories of female migratory flows, which were depicted mainly as "associational" migrations (Adepoju, 2002: 8) – women simply following their

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[6] For exceptions, see Boehm, 2006; Larkin, 1997; Schulz, 2002.

husbands or other family elements –, there have been some studies on female youth migratory paths. Karen Jochelson summarised the dominant view on female migratory flows up to the 90's as follows:

> First, the implication is that men migrate for money, and women because of broken hearts; men are wage-earners, while women are daughters and wives then prostitutes. Second, it assumes that within a family women are protected, and their sexuality is constrained, while outside a family they are defenceless, uncontrolled and promiscuous. Third, it assumes a golden age of morality in contrast to the degradation of the towns, presenting the women as victims of the migrant labour system, and without ambitions or life strategies (apud Cornwall, 2005: 8).

Studies on how migrations increasingly become a component of female youth are on the rise, with accounts of girls leaving rural areas to become, for instance, domestics in cities through different adaptations of traditional fosterage practices, as well as analyses of the impacts these migratory flows have on new modalities of matrimonial practices and on the family and community perceptions of young female roles (Hertrich and Lesclingand, 2001; Jacquemin, 2009; Lesclingand, 2004; Sévédé-Badem, 1998). Migration figures also in the literature as an aspiration – built upon desirable Western lifestyles diffused through the media, and through local contacts with (and perceptions of) tourists, development cooperation and business expatriates – and a goal, to be pursued by different strategies such as *online dating* (Johnson-Hanks, 2007; Venables, 2008).

Another topic where girls and young women have been increasingly approached are conflict and violence, even if in a quite smaller scale than male youth and under different perspectives. In a substantive part of the literature, violence and conflict is equated with male, and therefore the majority of youth studies on these issues are on boys, while girls are quite often described as victims of violence and forced conscriptions. While there are exceptions to these accounts, namely through the analysis of survival strategies of young women during conflicts (see Utas, 2005), accounts of their motivations to embark on violent practices or rebel movements as well as their views on the meanings of violence and war are in short supply. Also, there are some studies on criminality and youth gangs encompassing female youth (Salo, 2003), despite accounts being often based on male youth perspectives (Latour, 2001). Although there are increasing efforts to overcome the widespread view that women and men are "at opposite ends of a moral continuum, where women are considered peaceful and men aggressive, women passive and men active" (Coulter et. al, 2008: 7), transgressive behaviour by young women is still narrowly constructed in terms of

sex (Waller, 2006: 83). Like in colonial times, while "male deviants were stigmatized as idle, potentially violent and possibly criminal; their female counterparts were simply 'loose'. 'Girls behaving badly' in non-sexual ways and contexts seem largely invisible in the record" (*ibidem*).

Sexual and reproductive behaviour: the female youth's chapter

The main focus of literature on girls and young women in Africa revolves around sexual and reproductive behaviours. The conventional approach to sexuality in SSA has fixated upon crises related to sexuality, translating sexuality into a restricted number of themes such as disease and reproduction. Since the 1980's, with the threatening expansion of HIV/AIDS epidemics and other reproductive problems, demographers and public health researchers revealed a renewed interest in studying the sexual behaviour and the different forms that relationships assume in SSA, youth being defined as a group at risk and therefore privileged in these studies (Ampofo, 1997). Deeper analyses, producing "'thick descriptions' in the context of long-term participant-observation and the contextualizing of the 'insider' perspective" have been hampered by the domination of short-term evaluations (Undie and Benaya, 2006: 4). As a consequence, development discourses either ignore sexuality or limit it to the examination of "(over) population or disease and violence", and sex is racialised "in both development discourse and western popular culture, where positive sensual and emotional aspects of sex are represented for white people in the north, but denied for people in the south where population and disease are taken to be the primary concerns" (*idem*: 7).

This racialisation of sex is the product of colonial framings (*idem*: 4) and contemporary theories such as those advocated by Caldwell and colleagues, who proposed an 'African sexuality' theory in which "morality (which they seem to equate with female chastity) and religion are tangential to sexual relations, which are, thus, characterized by a lack of guilt and a relatively higher level of commercial exchanges than found in other societies"(*ibidem*). According to Caldwell et al., this propensity for treating sexual relations as commodities would be explosive when combined with HIV/AIDS epidemics.

Girls have been particularly focused on, as gender identities and relations put them particularly at risk for their weaker negotiation positions as well as for the unequal consequences that pregnancy have for both girls and boys. Indeed, teenage pregnancy is one of the issues most dealt with. While infertility in several African contexts is seen as the true nightmare for a woman (Schlyter, 1999), teenage pregnancy has a great impact on girls' subsequent life chances. Often, paternity may or may not be assumed

by boys – depending frequently on his own and family's decision –, without further consequences, while pregnant girls attending school shall withdraw and see their educational perspectives curtailed, while facing different degrees of stigma according to the specific social contexts in which they live (Holtedahl, 1997 Kritzinger, 2002; Varga, 2003), despite receiving family support in several cases (Schlyter, 1999; Vigh, 2003). Even after giving birth, returning to school might prove impossible not only for economic reasons but also for symbolic ones: she is considered a bad influence and using a uniform is not compatible with someone who has borne a baby; she simply does not belong anymore to the liminal space that school is supposed to represent. Caroline Bledsoe, in a study on Mende girls in rural areas of Sierra Leone, gives one example of incompatibility of pregnancy and continuing education focusing on the symbolism of school uniforms for girls:

> First, it [the school uniform] suggests that she is being prepared for marriage to a man of importance, and as such should be treated with respect. Second, like the special Sande attire [for female traditional initiation rituals], it marks her as occupying a liminal preparatory status, and sets her off limits to sexual advances. The association between wearing a uniform and being untouched by pregnancy and childbirth helps explain why public resentment at a pregnant school girl is often voiced in the image of a tarnished school uniform (Bledsoe, 2005 [1990]: 85).

Another topic which has been persistently associated with girls and young women is transactional sex. There are several perspectives on the subject superseding the essentialist approach on an "African sexuality" advocated by Caldwell and others. According to a study conducted in 12 SSA countries[7], "unmarried young women and young men are at increased risk for engaging in transactional sex. In-school status, place of residence, and economic status of the household do not appear to influence the probability that a young person will engage in transactional sex" (Chatterji et al., 2004: 12). The study found that several factors lead young girls to engage in transactional sex, such as: the payment of school fees – rendering problematic the equation of formal education and decreased fertility due to the ambivalent attitude of parents in supporting their education and the search of alternative sources of funding by young girls (Bledsoe, 2005 [1990]); access to contacts and social networks (Swidler and Watkins, 2006); parents pressure, mostly implicit (Ampofo, 1997); peer pressure to acquire "modern" outfits and lifestyles, blurring the distinctions between meeting

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[7] Benin, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Chad, Guinea, Kenya, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Togo, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

'needs' and satisfying 'wants' arisen by global media flows and local adaptations of "modern styles" and the status attached to them (these wants becoming 'needs' in order to pursue local distinction strategies – Leclerc-Madlala, 2003); as well as poverty, even if extreme poverty is far from being the main factor (Chatterji et al., 2004: 12).

While prostitution exists in SSA countries, transactional sex it is not synonymous with it. As Ann Swidler and Susan Watkins remark, "a transactional element is a feature of most sexual relationships in many regions of sub-Saharan Africa, from marriages, to long-term non- or extra-marital partnerships, to short term relationships" (2006). Helle-Valle reflects on the way some authors establish differences between 'Western' and 'African' sexuality as follows:

> Many Africanists with a 'Western' background, including myself, feel that there are significant differences between sexuality in 'the West' and in Africa. Perhaps it is not so much a question of African permissiveness, or people's preoccupation with it—we certainly find similar traits in certain social groups in 'the West'. The regional difference is maybe more a question of sexual mores than sexual practice. Perhaps the most significant difference is the Western strictness about sex and motivations: romantic love and/or personal pleasure (physical and psychological) are the 'proper' motives for engaging in sex, while strategic, materially oriented uses of sexuality are strictly tabooed—being forcefully embodied in our image of 'the prostitute' (apud Undie and Benaya, 2006: 11).

These "implicit moral and analytic categories" of some researchers result in a standard narrative of transactional sex, linking it "to prostitution and emphasizing the exploitation of poor, vulnerable women by wealthier, more powerful men [and] misses a great deal of what motivates and sustains such sexual patterns" (Swidler and Watkins, 2006).

Instead, Swidler and Watkins propose a different account of transactional sex, seeing widespread transactional sex in rural areas in Malawi as an element of patron-client relationships. As they say,

> rather than a marginalized category of sexual encounters set off from the rest of sexual life, a great deal of what international observers label "transactional sex" can be seen as but another facet of a more profound dynamic by which those with resources transmute them into relations with dependents. […] these partnerships are but one form of a complex system of social insurance that mitigates uncertain risk by binding patrons and clients—at every social stratum, and in many of life's

activities—in a web of ties held together by a moral ethic of redistribution and reciprocity (2006: 21).

What is called "transactional sex" has then multiple logics, being seen either as a material expression of affection in the framework of a dominant gender contract (which nevertheless does not match reality most of the times) where men are breadwinners and women home-makers (Spronk, 2005: 273), as well as a strategic way of young girls 'navigating patrimonial networks' (Vigh, 2003).

However, the strategic use that girls and young women might make of the dominant gender contract and definitions of masculinity in which sex is also equated with virility is also a divisive element among young people. As young men need to provide gifts for their sexual partners and be able to sustain a family in order to become adults, the pervasive practices of transactional sex threatens virility to young men lacking the means to abide by the normative ideals of masculinity. Indeed, as Ruth Prince shows in her analysis of the pop Luo music in the 90's, in the Western Kenya, young boys use popular music to convey their frustration with their marginalisation, in a context of failed promises of modernisation and the increasing threat of HIV/AIDS. In these songs, girls are blamed for HIV/AIDS, for rendering sex a commodity and held responsible for the situation of stagnation of young boys. Depicting a world near collapse, in these songs male singers also include references to a harmonious and traditional past[8], and calls for leaving the towns and coming back to rural areas – which girls, in the dialogues performed in the songs' lyrics, strongly deny. While most Luo pop music songs were performed by male groups, the female's perspective was also present through the voice of the rare female singers, who reattributed accusations of men as being unfaithful, unreliable and irresponsible (Prince, 2006). However, this image of the greedy young woman is also fed and supported by girls, for instance in Mali, who blame the postponement of marriage for the scarcity of good mates available (Schulz, 2002).

TO CONCLUDE: SOME TENTATIVE HYPOTHESES ON THE EMPHASIS OF THE LITERATURE ON GIRLS' SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE BEHAVIOURS

To sum up, despite acknowledging the heterogeneity of youth and gender identities, there has been a negligible amount of research on girls and young women in SSA in both youth studies and gender studies, except regarding sexual behaviours.

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[8] The widespread assumption which equates tradition with elders and opposes it to youth is rather simplistic as youth make also use of the past, sometimes idealising it in contrast to their present circumstances. As White et. al remark: "For both young and old, tradition is about reading past and present in terms of one another, but they do so from different positions and to different purposes" (2008: 12).

The first hypothesis I put forward for this scarcity is the impact of the idea and processes of modernity and modernisation in gender relations in general and in the concept of youth itself. Despite being true that youth is not an outcome of modernity nor globalisation, the use of youth to refer to female elements is relatively recent in SSA context. This novelty is due to a change in researchers' perspectives – until mid 1980's, anthropology, by presenting girls mainly as objects or subjects explored simultaneously by oppressed boys and oppressive elders, reduced women to an a-temporal category and rendered youth a component of the male universe – but it is also an empirical phenomenon.

The way youth is perceived and experienced varies according to intersections with other social identities, namely gender, strongly shaped by the idea and processes of modernity. As sociocultural constructions of masculinities and femininities, gender pertains to a set of norms, values and patterns of behaviour which express explicit and implicit expectations regarding the way men and women shall act and present themselves to others (Miescher and Lindsay, 2003: 4). According to the anthropologist Dorothy Hodgson, the 'project' of modernity – born in Europe in the context of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century and characterised by its aim to "use knowledge, especially scientific knowledge, to develop technological innovations, ordered forms of social organization and rational modes of thought that would liberate people from the 'irrational' beliefs and superstitions that impeded their emancipation and progress as human beings" (Hodgson, 2001: 3) – was also a 'mission' and a justification for colonisation of Africa, Asia and Latin America (*idem*: 3-4). Components of this modernity mission included formal education, the constitution of modern centralised administrations, the generalisation of cash-economy and capitalism and so-called development endeavours in the economic and infrastructure fields, which fashioned heavily gender and intergenerational relations in Africa. As Dorothy Hodgson mentions, "modernity is commonly viewed as a masculine phenomenon", as it "not only presumes and promotes such gendered binaries as nature/culture, domestic/public, past/future, and traditional/modern, but it genders them, usually rendering the first, devalued term, female and the second, privileged term, male" (idem, 8-9).

The collusion, in several African countries, between colonial and traditional authorities in controlling the sexuality of girls and young women, namely by rendering more difficult their access to cities (namely in Southern and East Africa), produced a 'gendered moral spatiality' which came to equate proper locations for girls and young women with home and rural areas. Indeed, in the colonial Lagos, during and after the second world war, one of the targets of the juvenile delinquency policy of the British colonial State, with the support of "tribal unions", were the detention of boys hawkers

up to 14 years old and girls hawkers up to 16 years of age, as it was considered leading to abuse and prostitution. Despite the historical roots of juvenile street hawking in Lagos and the denunciation of abuses and erroneous criminalisation of child hawkers by newspapers, the number of girls detained in hostels spurred, their virginity was medically examined and they were brought before juvenile courts in increasing numbers, three-quarters of all juvenile crime dealt with involving illegal street trading by young girls (Fourchard, 2006: 132-4). As Laurent Fourchard concludes, while criminalising young girls hawkers, the colonial "social welfare service was missing its main target: the fight against organized prostitution and juvenile gangs" (*idem*, 135)[9].

According to Richard Waller, the Modernity project and its colonialist mission also had an impact on conceptions of youth and maturity. While giving male youth the means to initially emancipate themselves from their elders through labour migration, conversion and acquisition of new competencies such as formal education, colonial authorities acknowledged that both these new accelerated paths to maturity and autonomy and the protracted reaching of maturity and the uncertainties on its definition provoked by unequal opportunities and disruptive effects of economic and social change promoted new forms of defiance and unruliness which neither elders nor colonial authorities were able to control (Waller, 2006: 78-80). According to Waller,

> confusion over maturity emphasised gender and focused on marriage [...]
> The new 'masculinity', together with the telescoping of the process of
> male maturation, located maturity more firmly in marriage and increased
> the pressures on young women to conform. The discourse of
> respectability, family and marriage narrowed their options, and
> threatened to expose them as unruly simply because they aspired, or
> were forced, to be independent (Waller, 2006: 82).

One example in this regard concern the efforts of traditional leaders in the inter-war period in colonial Asante (Ghana) to come to terms with the "gender chaos" provoked by the decreasing economic power of men (due to the international crisis which affected cocoa prices) and the increasing autonomy of young women's economic activities (a result of their increased participation in productive, commercial and transformative activities) and their refusal to get married. In this context, local leaders regulated that all girls aged over 15 had to marry, otherwise they would be imprisoned

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[9] Despite the gendered nature of Modernity and colonialism – with its assumptions of the proper role and division of labour between women and men and which remained unquestioned in several ways in the modernisation processes took up by the postcolonial countries –, we shall however refrain from adopting an overly determinist analysis, as colonial and mission encounters with African societies and their influence on gender relations, and specifically on the role of women, are "more complex", often providing African women with both constraints but also opportunities (Adams, 2006).

and released only when the name of the future husband was pronounced and he would come to pay the fine to liberate his future wife (Allman, 2005)[10].

These examples point that to understand how youth is conceived and experienced differently by girls and boys, it is important to have a historical perspective of how different processes such as colonialism and its associated project of modernity, development and modernisation impacted on SSA gender and intergenerational relations, making youth a social and a specifically "gendered" deictic.

The second hypothesis which I would like to put forward to understand the focus on sexual behaviours identified in the literature on young women in SSA is related to the *youth bulge theory* which placed youth studies on the international political agenda (UNDP, 2006). According to this theory, the increasing demographic weight of youth in Southern countries is a matter of concern, as these countries are unable to offer them employment and means to reach social mobility, rendering youth a serious threat to social and economic stability, as well as to global security through the contagion of intrastate upheaval to neighbouring countries and obstacles this might place to access markets and resources in the South. In this framework, a dual threat emerged which needed to be closely monitored: explosive violence (by 'angry' young men) and explosive fertility (by 'passive' young women). Based on a rather simplistic reasoning which "blames social problems on overbreeding or demographics, as well as the determinism that insists that political instability inevitably follows from numbers", the youth bulge theory and its resulting policies strengthen gender stereotypes "by reducing male and female roles to the supposedly biologically-driven functions of violence and motherhood", while reinforcing gender, age and race hierarchies (Hendrixson, 2004: 14, 16).

Connected to this tentative explanation is also the prevailing understanding of the concept of agency. As Durham remarked, agency is still embedded in a predominantly "romantic" perspective, with origins in the European and Western imaginary of youth as inherently rebellious and problematic in the context of the transformations brought by modernisation and urbanisation, which were perpetuated through psychology and the sociological schools of Chicago and Birmingham, discounting other meanings of youth and other forms of agency (2008). The "problematic bias" of current research on youth connects this "conflictive agency" with male youth, echoing the stereotypes of a gendered Modernity in which women are rendered invisible and telescoped into an a-

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[10] As Jean Allman explains, the rationale for traditional leaders' decision was the control of productive and reproductive work of women, as before their economic autonomy they were the main labourers in their husbands' cocoa farms, but refused to marry as they assumed autonomous economic roles more advantageous than an unequal division of profits when they worked for their husbands (Allman, 2005).

temporal category, taking male youth as the norm against which female youth's 'otherness' is reduced to sexual practices and control regimes.

Overcoming the double marginalisation of young women – both as lived by girls and young women in the framework of the still dominant (despite contested) "gender contract" resulting from colonialism, modernity and modernisation processes (Schlyter, 1999), as well as currently approached in youth and gender fields – requires going beyond the "problematic" frame of youth studies to shed light on perceptions and strategies of different categories of youth, including different groupings of female youth, designed in the context of the so-called youth crisis in SSA. This entails expanding the current research topics, to encompass the economic, political and social initiatives as well as the cultural and religious dimensions of female youth's daily existences, exploring how needs, aspirations and life paths are fashioned and fulfilled, within or outside the framework of the "dominant gender contract".

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