I-HISTORICAL CONTEXT

According to society, a woman is first of all a female and a man a male. In society gender matters greatly as the difference between the genders, meaning man and woman are the bases of inequalities: inequalities in power, inequalities in access to resources, inequalities in opportunities and, therefore, inequalities in life experiences. Hence the need to empower women and to put an end to some cultural practices that are likely to hinder joy of life in society: genital mutilation. In fact, gender is usually seen as a socially determined difference based upon the biological differences between the sexes. Sex, the state of being either female or male, is determined by biological characteristics, such as anatomical (that has to do with the body), reproductive and attributes. Sex is deemed to be natural whereas gender is seen as the social expression of natural, biological differences primarily based upon the appearance of genitals – penis and vagina. This in itself is not unproblematic, for: when, in modern societies, a child is born with ambiguous genitalia, parents are asked to make a difficult decision: which of the two sexes will they choose for the sex of the rearing? This decision is framed by medical expertise, made largely on the basis of the reproductive possibilities of the infant or its real genetic sex. In our highly medicalized modern societies, the resolution of ambiguous sex reveals how our bodies are rigorously policed into two sexes – male or female (Granny-Francis et al, 2003:5). Consequently, this binary divide in biology is reproduced in society, though not in all: sex is accepted as being one of two possibilities and people are required daily to define ourselves in such a manner; each time we go to the toilet in a public place – such as school, university or restaurant – each time we fill in a tax form, a registration form or even each time we complete a shopping survey, we are required to acknowledge our sex, but only two categories are allowed. Thinking in terms of two distinct sexes has been criticized for a number of years. However, although sex may not just be male or female these two biological categories have concerned social scientists because sex differences have been proposed for the differences in the social roles women and women conduct in society.

Before to turn to look at gender difference it is necessary to note that just as Oakley (1972) commented on sex, gender too can be regarded as a continuum which has masculinity at one end and femininity at the other, with people all different places along it. For some scholars, it is also important to note that masculinity is not only an aspect of male bodies and femininity of female bodies. As a consequence, a recent political and academic shift has been in the challenge to see gender beyond a duality of male or female, resulting in the development of new identities that departed from the medical constructions of transsexual and transvestite...etc. People would define themselves as gender-benders, gender-blenders, bigenders or simply describe their identity more loosely using the umbrella concept of transgender. Then, both male and female bodies can express both masculinity and femininity, for as a social construct, not a biological characteristic, gender is not restricted by genes. Gender is usually described as socially constructed, and sex as biological. The categorizing of all human beings as ‘male’ or ‘female’ is for a time left unquestioned. However, for some scholars, this does not always fit with local realities. For example cultures of Eunuchs in India, transvestites in Brazil, ladyboys in Thailand, or transgender in the USA all suggest that there is more to sex than just male and female. Perhaps ideas of sex are socially constructed, too. Therefore, is a woman a woman because she can bear children? Is she a woman because she bleeds every month? Many women are born without this potential, and every woman ceases to possess that capacity after menopause – Do these women cease being women? Is a man a man because he can father children? What if a man’s sperm count is too low, is less than one hundred million? What, if he were exposed to nuclear radiation and were rendered sterile. Is she then a woman? Is a woman a woman because her birth certificate says female? Is a man a man because his birth certificate says male?
Everyone – from comedians to politicians, from the man and woman in the street to royalty and celebrity – is interested in sex and sexuality, and who they are sexually. Images of sex and sexuality are around us. We are all encouraged to measure our sexual identity(ies) and sexual behavior(s) against a politically and popularly supported ideal of and images of this ideal predominate in cultural representation. Sex is also used to sell us everything from cars to chocolate, from newspaper to insurance policies. On the other hand sex and sexuality is a very personal thing and our personal relation to it may give us pleasure, make us anxious or cause us pain. Despite all the attention it receives in the media, on billboards, and over coffee break discussion some aspects of sex and sexuality are still taboo. As a matter of fact, heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships are still sanctioned in law and social policy in a way that homosexuality and homosexual relationships are not and this is supported by lay understandings of heterosexuality as “normal” and “natural” and conversely homosexuality as “abnormal” and “unnatural.” These definitions are based on statistical, what most people do, religious, what one’s religion permits or prohibits, and cultural, what one’s culture encourages or discourages, norms (Holmes, 1991). Heterosexuality is also subject to sanction and censure. Particularly significant here is the gendered double standard and again the cultural significance afforded to sexuality is relevant in that it reflects and encourages the appropriation of women’s bodies by men (Jackson and Scott, 1996; Abbott et al., 2005). In other words the sexual subordination of women is culturally defined as “normal” and “natural.” Social scientists, including gay and lesbian theorists have argued that sex is a political phenomenon characterized by power relations. Speaking of the dominant perceptions of “normal” and “natural” behaviors and practices in relation to sex and sexuality, Julia Hirst notes that such views become hegemonic because they are reinforced both by the institutionalized ideology of the day and by the lay perceptions in providing explanations for subjective feelings and prejudices by giving them a clear and unavoidable cause. (2004:69/2004, ‘Sexuality’ in Taylor, Gary and Spencer, Steve (eds) Social Identities: multidisciplinary approaches, London, Routledge). Sexuality is shaped by the culture in which we live (The Laobé in Senegal), the religion we believe in, and religious teachings, laws, psychological theory, medical definition, social policies and the medial all inform us of its meaning. Thus our socialization, the socialization process, the way we are socialized, affects our sexuality (Plummer, 1975, 1995; Hirst, 2004). Our sexuality is also influenced by our ethnicity, class position, our age and whether we are disabled or able-bodied.

II- PROBLEM STATEMENT

In Britain and the USA the gay and feminist movements emerged more or less simultaneously at the end of the 1960s, and the more radical elements of both movements saw themselves as facing a common enemy: the patriarchal establishment/system. A more recent development has been the development of Queer theory and Queer politics, the aim of which is to demonstrate that gender and sexual categories are not given/innate but constructed. Queer theory is not just relevant to gay men and lesbians but to bisexual as well. According to some gender scholars, both heterosexuality and homosexuality are social constructions. As some scholars have pointed out there is no essential homosexual experience and the experience of being homosexual varies. The use of the term “homosexual” to describe a certain type of person is a relatively recent phenomenon (Weeks, 1990, 1991, 2000); and as lesbianism has never been fully recognized under some countries’ laws/British. Homosexual identity is mediated, gained after, not solely through same sex activity per se but through the individual’s willingness or ability to deal with being labeled as homosexual. Whether one is “out” as a homosexual or in the closest, maintaining heterosexual identity but with desire and/or sexual involvement with the same sex, depends not so much on biological drives but on the individual, social and political circumstances that will or will not support the chosen identity. In order to understand attitudes towards lesbianism it is necessary to consider female sexuality in general. Historically, and arguably to date, women are expected to be passive, receptive and dependent on the male. Forms of sexuality outside this model have been portrayed as deviant, off-norms, abnormal, unnatural, dangerous and/or sick. In a classic piece of writing Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence Adrienne Rich (1980) argued that heterosexuality rather than a ‘natural’ choice was in fact imposed upon women.

Arguably, for some gender specialists, the social construction of sex and sexuality and the way in which sexual relations have been institutionalized through heterosexuality have served to control and
oppress not only lesbian, gay and bisexual men and women but all women (e.g. Rich, 1980; Jeffreys, 1990). For some women, heterosexuality and the social relations that accompany it, such as romance and marriage, have been crucial to the persistence of male dominance. Consequently, men’s and women’s roles in society should reflect their sex, sexuality and gender. From then on, biological differences become the basis for differences in sexuality expectations, that is sexual orientations and sexual identity(ies). Cultural factors can also be looked at as accounting for the emergence of sexuality stereotyping. Based on these biological and socio-cultural characteristics and attributes, sexual values, attitudes and expectations are elaborated for each gender with heteronormativity as the sole governing body policing heterosexuality. Many people then have condoned and reproduced these culturally and socially constructed attributes and patterns to being male or female based on biological determinism. The questions that one may ask are: how are people sexually defined in society? Does society’s definition always fit the one defined? How has culture influenced some sexual practices like genital mutilation and man-woman relations? What are the other topical issues relating to sex such as HIV/AIDS?

III- RELEVANCE OF THE TOPIC

The postcolonial literature has been perpetrating for a long time the male-female binary system dictated by the politics of patriarchy and capitalism. However, a new scholarly trend embodied by both men and women has emerged and attempt at exploring new long-time held taboo issues such as sex, sexual orientations and sexual identity, thus challenging the existing heteronormative conception of sex and sexuality for a new sexual consciousness embodied by “new” essences that are more concerned about their sexual pleasure and fulfillment-seeking. However, the feminist movement of the last century, as an ideological ideal which has been first christened in the United States and then in Europe, has set the tone for people to look a woman with a new eye by pleading for her empowerment in society and the reversal of gender roles. Sexuality can be defined as the sexual phenomena observable in human beings or a different modalities of instinctual satisfaction related to the reproduction of the species. Sexual identity, being the way one views themself sexually and how they express that to others, and sexual orientation referring to a person’s actual or perceived preference for (a) sexual partner(s), that is, heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual, are issues well sketched in African writings. In fact, the representations of the body from Africa as well as narrative strategies of writing the body, sexuality - sexual orientations and sexual identity(ies) - and gender have received much attention recently among scholars, male and female. The reflections of these issues in Africa do not consider these three terms as separated entities, but rather as entities that are very closely related to each other. Sex and sexuality, sexual orientations and sexual identity(ies) as transgressing concepts of gender with regard to Africa, form a considerably contested space because of their being only subjected to power relations. Here is then where the relevance of such a topic lies as this will enable us to explore the interrelationships that exist between these different elements and their closely related ones such as genital mutilation, women’s empowerment and HIV/AIDS.

IV- METHODOLOGY

This study will explore how, from a methodological view point, and the reflections of agencies, concepts and paradigms such as postcolonial or feminist theories, postmodernism, patriarchy, matriarchy, capitalism, queer theory, womanism have helped to construct then deconstruct and (re)construct socially and culturally constructed sexuality towards better analyzing the complexities of the issue as represented in society. The work aims at laying out new trails for the pursuit of gender, sex and sexuality, sexual orientations and identity(ies) scholarship in order to depart from the outdated and lengthily-nurtured inscriptions and debates. As part of its implementation, privilege will be given to data collection, researches and reading so as to update and broader our knowledge in the area prior to any restitution before students.
V. EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Up to now, few researches have been done in the sex-related field as we are in the process of fully setting up what we have called an African and Postcolonial Studies Laboratory. The issues of sex, sexuality, sexual orientations and sexual identity(ies) have become central to human being’s life and development in so far as they provides them with somehow the “balance” needed in life. Unfortunately, myth and taboo have always surrounded African sexualities. The continued insistence that the one-dimensional conception of heteronormativity-based sexual orientation represents a slice of African realities, even when historical documentation and ethnographic and sociological findings question its validity, provides ample evidence that reality is indeed (re)creatable. New sexual consciousness against the hegemony of sex, gender and heterosexuality has now emerged and is claiming existence and recognition. So, how can one justify or excuse the conspiracy in erasing the other woman, the other man, that independent, strong, and pleasure-seeking human being, whose presence, sexuality, sexual orientations and sexual identities, as well as lifestyle are often misunderstood and rejected in most African societies?

As the Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar is currently implementing new academic reforms and, as a scholar in African and Postcolonial Studies, I have been tasked with conceiving a curriculum on the issues of gender, sex, sexuality, sexual orientations and sexual identity(ies) and all the closely related elements that turn around them: women's empowerment, gender-based violence, HIV/AIDS, sex and gender-based cultural and traditional practices, this Fulbright scholarship, if granted, will help me to be much more equipped in the field and, in turn, better share the knowledge with my students. As a consequence, this will enable them to be better knowledgeable in all the theories developed around the issues of gender, sex, sexuality, orientations and sexual identity(ies). In so doing, I will entice them to commit to investigate the gender and sexuality relations, and their implications on masculinity and feminity, which have, however, somehow known a new trend and requires a new approach and analysis. “New” human beings have emerged in the new sex-based literary trends as a result of the impact of the global economy, neocolonialism, contact with other cultures through emigration and the subsequent policy of women’s emancipation and feminism. As this has produced new orders and new essences representing the male and female subjects, there is need for the students to ponder over the ongoing reversed gender stereotypes, roles, sexualities, patriarchy, masculinity, polygamy, heterosexuality, among other vices designed to create a feeling of otherness. It will also be a way for them to understand that such a topical issue like human sexuality, as the expression of sexual sensation and related intimacy between human beings, as well as the expression of identity(ies) through sex and as influenced by or based on sex, shapes today scholarship across the world, hence its relevance. Yet, in contrast to other scholars, Africans, especially those in West Africa, are still trailing in openly fusing on sex matters, on its philosophical and religious underpinnings, as well explicit boundaries of its expression. In so doing, I open new trails for research and show how can one go beyond the binary system postulated by gender to understand male and female sexualities, sexual orientations, sexual identity(ies), sexual diversities in Africa as well as the way some society’s members subvert sexually or gendered-established orders, authority, and transgress gender and view body and sexuality as creative powers through political and gender deconstruction. In dealing with the issue, I will engage them into knowing how to reflect on how elements of queer theory and feminism and how they are applied to scholarship to challenge long-standing notions as well as perceptions which have always fostered the dominance of male views and patriarchal social structures. Meanwhile, this will be also an opportunity for them to question some sex-related cultural practices that steal people’s lives such genital mutilation, to understand the need towards empowering women and halting the spread of HIV/AIDS across the Continent.
References


