



## Gender and HIV in South Africa: Advancing women's health and capabilities

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## Book Review

# Gender and HIV in South Africa: Advancing women's health and capabilities

**Courtenay Sprague**

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The inequities faced by black South African women living with HIV remain dire, yet there is a lack of innovative responses and analyses. *Gender and HIV in South Africa: Advancing women's health and capabilities*, part of a series on Global Research in Gender, Sexuality and Health, fills this gap, offering an innovative approach to how we should both understand and respond to the crisis. Using the Capabilities Approach, Courtney Sprague explores the current situation in South Africa, raising critical questions about "health and gender as social justice". This is not merely an exploration of inequalities – the gendered nature of HIV, and lack of health care; it goes further to explore health equity and social justice.

Sprague follows two main lines of enquiry: first, what are the opportunities for South African women living with HIV to be healthy? In other words, what are their *capabilities* for achieving a healthy life if health capabilities are defined as "an individual's ability to achieve good health" (Ruger, 2006, p. 999), with an emphasis on choice and whether individuals are able to make meaningful choices about their health (Sen, 1999). Second, using a social justice approach, Sprague explores what more the state should do to address widening health inequities. She reflects on the barriers faced by black women living with HIV in South Africa, yet allows for the possibility that this country may achieve health equity and social justice.

This work is groundbreaking and urges the reader to reflect on the structural links between gender inequalities, HIV, health, and social justice. Readers cannot avoid re-thinking how they approach these issues.

Using the Capabilities Approach developed by Amartya Sen (1999) and expanded by Martha Nussbaum (2000), this work unpacks and applies this approach to South Africa. Nussbaum's contribution was significant for this study as she focused more directly on women's health and development needs, and created "a list of ten central capabilities that serve as an essential precondition for a just society" (Sprague, 2018, p. 142). The Capabilities Approach views health as social justice, suggesting that an exploration of health needs to consider "individuals' or groups' opportunities (capabilities) to be healthy" (Sprague, 2018, p.17).

Sprague convincingly argues that this approach is invaluable for framing health as an issue of social justice and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. This approach recognizes that people and groups have a set of capabilities, but that these can be realized or constrained depending on the reality of what is available to them through public institutions and services. Throughout the book Sprague applies the Capabilities Approach to the complexities and particularities of black South African women living with HIV, reflecting on capabilities, equity and health in South Africa.

This book successfully brings together the theory of social justice, health equity and the Capabilities Approach, with the extensive primary qualitative data collected by the study. Sprague undertook 89 in-depth interviews with black South African women living with HIV and 44 key informant interviews with health providers and key experts in gender, health, and human rights over two time periods – 2008 to 2009, and 2014 to 2016. In order to gain insight into perspectives beyond those of the women and key informants, the work draws on multiple independent sources who examine the social structures in which the women lived, including the health systems.

*Gender and HIV in South Africa: Advancing women's health and capabilities* has three parts. Part 1 (chapters 2 to 4) considers "HIV, gender and health in black South African women"; chapter 2 presents the magnitude of HIV among black South African women and applies normative considerations to health and social justice; chapter 3 assesses black South African women's opportunities to access health and HIV care, concluding that "gaining such insight requires investigation into this population's opportunities to be healthy, or capabilities." Chapter 4 provides a detailed exploration of the Capabilities Approach, and suggests that "justice in health" should be viewed as the opportunity to realise health (capabilities). Sprague believes that this approach offers a way to develop greater understanding of "the capabilities and potential capabilities" of the women participating in her research.

Part 2 (chapters 5 and 6) reflects on "capabilities for black South African women: gender as a structural health determinant". In chapter 5 Sprague makes a strong case for the value of qualitative methods for research on health equity and justice. Sprague challenges the reader to reflect upon how information is gathered and for what purposes, questioning whether quantitative data alone provides sufficient knowledge of women's lives, opportunities and abilities, and arguing for deepening our understanding of the experiences of black South African women living with HIV by using multiple research techniques.

Sprague describes the strengths of the qualitative methods employed in this study, for investigating women's capabilities to be healthy. She does not shy away from the ethical challenges that can arise, but highlights the vast contribution of this method for improving our knowledge, as well as the benefits for both the participants and the researchers themselves. She notes the importance of qualitative research as a method that allows 'the picture and the reality to emerge from the participants' as they describe their social world and realities, and which enables researchers to explore the 'web of complex individual, social and contextual factors that affect marginalized women particularly' (p. 166).

The storytelling aspects strengthens the voice of the participants and gives them more agency. Research methodologies that unpack the depth of a person's experience as well as serving to give voice and agency to marginalized women offer critical information and empower communities. Using the Capabilities Approach adds another strength – it offers a strong framework, an essential element of qualitative research. No method is without limitations and these are explored, especially the subjective nature of such research, Sprague proposes that such limitations once recognized can be overcome by supplementing the internal, subjective views with external perspectives and data.

In chapter 6, "Capabilities for women living with HIV: linking health systems to social structure", Sprague presents the voice and experiences of black South African women living with HIV, as well as the views of key health care personal. Her analysis applies the 'ten central capabilities' as developed by Nussbaum, through this lens she reflects on whether these women meet the threshold level for capabilities; and finds a number of capability deprivations for women, especially 'bodily health', 'bodily integrity' and 'her material environment'.

Part 3 (chapters 7 to 9) looks to action and how we can, and must achieve social justice and health equity, "Moving from evidence to action." Chapter 7 explores two gender transformative interventions, Stepping Stones and the IMAGE, and provides reflections on whether and how these can support women's capabilities. In Chapter 8, Sprague discusses whether the experiences of these 89 black South African women living with HIV reflect a "crisis of health inequity in South Africa". In her concluding reflections: from research to policy and practice, Sprague emphasizes that the Capabilities Approach has the potential to support rigorous research to better understand women's lives and capabilities as well as the achievement of health equity in South Africa.

"Health" as opposed to "health care" is a theme that runs throughout, speaking to the distinction between the health care system and the actual health of citizens, reflecting on the realities that improvement in the health system, while fundamental, may not translate into securing health and well-being for all, especially marginalized populations. Sprague believes that a Capabilities Approach offers a framework that explores health as a goal, as opposed

to health care, and which views "good health as an appropriate social justice goal in South Africa". A goal which is often forgotten in policy.

For all its strengths (and there are many), this book is dense in places and runs the risk of losing a key readership, that is practitioners and policy makers, by becoming too abstract. Nevertheless, whether one is an activist, politician, practitioner or community worker, it is important to engage in the theoretical debates in order to influence those discussions as well as to learn from new ideas. One hopes that readers with different interests will explore the sections that are most relevant and, indeed, that some who normally gloss over the more theoretical chapters may be tempted to read those too, thereby contributing to breaking down the silos between scientists, practitioners and activists, and policy makers.

This book should be read by everyone in the fields of justice, health equity, gender, and HIV. It has relevance for all researchers aspiring to contribute towards improving lives and society. While it is a qualitative research study, quantitative researchers will also gain a deeper understanding of the role and contribution of qualitative research, perhaps supporting more inter-disciplinary collaborations and mixed-methods approaches. Policymakers and practitioners will find this book inspiring because it outlines an approach to achieving equity and social justice that really is possible. Finally, it should be read by all health practitioners and policymakers because it challenges us to reflect on health care, women's capabilities to realize health, and health equity. Although the book focuses on South Africa, the "health as social justice" and Capabilities Approach are relevant to all settings where women experience limited capabilities and inequitable health. As Sprague notes, "... the robust aspects of the Capabilities Approach make it particularly responsive to complex health problems, and this can be attributed to its formulation as a theory of human development rather than a health theory" (p. 321).

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