

Safe sex and the Rambo/Bimbo divide: A look at the gender imperative of AIDS

Book review

Wilton, T (1997) **Engendering AIDS: Deconstructing sex, text and epidemic.** London: Sage Publications.

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As a social scientist engaged in researching AIDS and evaluating AIDS prevention programs in southern Africa, I have always been dismayed by the lack of preparatory "ground-work" for understanding the context in which this epidemic was occurring. AIDS prevention/education programs just seemed to spring up everywhere in the past decade, with program directors actually believing that it was only a matter of not having proper knowledge about AIDS. Give them the necessary knowledge and behavioural change would follow. Sadly, it didn't happen. Ten years later we are just coming to grips with the complexity of it all.

Wilton's book is an attempt to unravel some of this complexity, and to separate some of the most salient strands which hold together the social webs of "un-safe" sexual practices which continue to be reproduced during this time of a world-wide AIDS epidemic. She does this by examining representational and discursive practices - the *con-text* of AIDS - arguing that the way in which gender and sexuality are represented has important implications for individuals' ability to prevent sexual transmission of HIV by practising safe sex.

Noting that education and promotion of safe sex are all we have at present in the struggle against the AIDS epidemic (with a lack of any vaccine in the foreseeable future) Wilton especially focuses on representational practices of health education as instrumental in the discursive constitution of gender and sexuality. These she subjects to a vigorous and critical deconstruction, which makes this book a very valuable contribution to the global AIDS efforts, and of much use to those involved in developing AIDS education programs and safer-sex promotional materials.

Wilton refers to her primary focus area as the "overdeveloped modern Anglophone nation states" of which she is most familiar as a lecturer in the Faculty of Health and Community Studies at the University of the West of England. However, there is much that is of relevance to any and all modern countries in which the AIDS epidemic is

occurring. For example, the overdeveloped Anglophone countries can't claim a monopoly on patriarchal social norms which subjugate women to men. Unfortunately, this is more or less a global fact of life, as real in South Africa as it is in northern England or eastern Java. The "heterosexual imperative" of Wilton may be culturally and historically specific in detail, but the implications of female subordination for the continued spread of HIV/AIDS are the same. After more than a decade of AIDS prevention education, at least this much has become clear: gender-based relations of power have alarming implications for our ability to prevent the sexual transmission of HIV/AIDS.

The theoretical perspectives which inform Wilton's work are broadly outlined in the first chapter. Here the author states her objection to the popular western model of individual responsibility for HIV/AIDS prevention in favour of a social model which recognises that both the initial adoption and the continued practice of safe sexual behaviours are intimately bound up with factors such as gender, race, socio-economic class, geographical location, kin/peer relations, and related socio-psychological factors such as self-esteem and sexual identity. It is with the gender patterning of this disease that the author is most concerned. In the context of HIV/AIDS (primarily a heterosexual-transmitted condition world-wide), deconstructing the gendering of the pandemic is important for two reasons. Firstly, according to the author, large numbers of women have been and continue to be needlessly infected with HIV, become ill with HIV-related conditions faster than comparable men, and die more quickly than men once diagnosed with AIDS. Secondly, because the gendering of AIDS has profound implications for the ability of *all* people - men as well as women, straight as well as gay - to protect themselves from infection and to live well with HIV or AIDS if already infected.

In the second chapter, the whole area of sexual desire is examined from the different representations of gay men, gay women, straight men and straight women. A highly informative discussion is provided on the early days of the AIDS epidemic in the so-called First World, and the gay activism to which it gave rise. In the face of government neglect, gay communities in the U.S. and Britain developed their own AIDS campaigns, often with militant gay/AIDS agendas. The use of condoms during anal penetration was constructed within gay male sexual-political discourse as politically radical, resistant to homophobia and protective of the gay brotherhood/community with the ultimate goal of modifying gay identity so that it *meant* safe sex. Choosing safer sex thus became the easier choice, suggesting that making the safe-choice the easy choice may be one way to go with future AIDS prevention campaigns. No doubt we still have a lot to learn from gay communities and their on-going struggle with AIDS. It is also in this second chapter that Wilton offers a tentative deconstruction of straight masculinity, an effort which should be much applauded and where much remains to be explored. While we spend so much time concentrating our AIDS education on the need to encourage assertiveness in women, we must ask ourselves why there are no complimentary efforts to encourage responsibility or compliance among men. Clearly, we are all victims of our own representations of reproductive heteropolarity and a traditionally-rooted health/illness paradigm expressed by Hippocrates when he asked: "What is woman? Disease".

Chapters three and four are largely historical accounts of the western health/illness models and gendered constructs of disease and sexuality. Comparisons between the social construction of AIDS and shifts in the historic construction of syphilis and

gonorrhoea are very illuminating. In southern Africa, where I have done research on the impact of the AIDS epidemic on young people's lives, I've often come across the idea that one could cure oneself of AIDS by having sex with a young virgin. It was highly interesting for me to learn that a similar myth prevailed in Europe at different times, especially during the great syphilis epidemic of the last century. This suggests woman as repository of disease and repository of cure - a sort of like-cures-like homeopathic approach to sexually transmitted disease. Unfortunately, Wilton concludes that it will take more than a global pandemic to disturb the heteropolar narrative of gender which locates chaos, entropy, sex, disease and death in the female body and constructs a masculinity out of order, activity, health and life. It is tragic to think that our modern AIDS discourse has so obediently recycled these foundational gender narratives.

The latter chapters are a look at pornography, both gay and straight, to see how these texts contribute to the heterosexual imperative of female subordination and male dominance. At the same time, the author argues for a "new porn", one which challenges these representations which continue to reproduce heteropolar constructs of gender and to work towards a type of "pornographic healing" similar to that produced and used by the male gay communities to reinforce the safer sex message.

A concluding chapter entitled "Action=Life" summarises Wilton's perspective on the state of health (or rather ill-health) of current HIV/AIDS promotional materials in the West, and offers some suggestions for the future. The most urgent task is seen as the need to engage women (lesbian and heterosexual) and non-gay men for education about safer sex which is as accurate, explicit and useful as that developed by gay men.

This is a book which will be of use to all people engaged in AIDS work, at whatever level. Health promotion in the context of safer sex is a monumental task. Gender is one of the most significant factors contributing to continued epidemic growth. To make the healthier choice the easier choice demands no less than the eradication of the institution of male supremacy. Wilton's book goes a long way in illustrating how and why this is simply an imperative.