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## **Editorial: Pleasures, practices and troubles – Young people’s gendered sexualities in the 21st century**

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Gendered sexual acts and relations represent the most intimate spheres of life. At the same time, the 21st century has witnessed an unprecedented politicization of gender and sexuality. In 2017, the globally viral #MeToo movement, for instance, intensified the discussion on the pervasive nature of sexual harassment and abuse, highlighting the claims for sexual and bodily integrity as a basic human right (e.g. Horeck et al., 2023.) Momentum has continued to build internationally, with activists and supporters of these movements often young people. From frequent protests against sexual violence across India in the aftermath of high-profile cases; to *Everyone’s Invited*, a school-student led movement to challenge rape culture in the UK.<sup>1</sup> In parallel, over recent decades, diverse legislative reforms, international treaties, and prevention programmes have been implemented to advance sexual health and bodily integrity of all, including young people (e.g. Dowds, 2022). While positive steps may thus be recognized, the development is far from self-evident and linear. Instead, sexual health (e.g. right to abortion), sex education and LGBTQ+ rights, among other issues, remain fields of ongoing struggle in most if not all parts of the world (Berthet, 2022; Kováts, 2017). The overturning of *Roe v. Wade* (right to abortion) in the USA in 2022, testifies to the fragility of progressive development.

Along with sexualities being addressed in public campaigns, legislative changes and polarized debates, they are mundane parts of the everyday life of young people (Hirsch & Khan, 2020). Youth is an intensive phase of identity development when many young people familiarize themselves with and experiment with sexual issues, among other things (Honkatukia et al., 2022; Holmström et al., 2020). These experiences are not detached from public and political discussions. By contrast, youthful sexual relations and practices have always been a matter of concern, monitoring and control in society (Albury & Byron, 2019; Crofts et al., 2015). They continue to be a source of concern sparking heated debates. More recently, the expansion of digital and social media platforms have given rise to new kinds of discussions and worries, as young people are claimed to face significant vulnerabilities online

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<sup>1</sup> Established in 2020, to date over 50,000 school students, mostly young women and girls, have responded and reported a range of sexual violence (Schools and Universities List, 2022).

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(e.g. Ringrose et al., 2021; Setty, 2020; McGlynn et al., 2021). While the shifting and emotionally laden debates on gendered sexualities concern young generations in multiple ways, adding significant impetus to political decision making (e.g. Setty, 2020), young people’s agency and their varied experiences and struggles over legitimate ways to express their sexualities and gender identities are not always recognized, nor taken into account (Aggleton et al., 2019). Rather, public discussions and moral panics position them in homogenizing ways as objects of concern, control and interventions.

This special issue contributes to this contested landscape. Although the articles can at first glance appear to represent very diverse issues, a closer look demonstrates that they share some core elements. First, and perhaps most importantly, they discuss gendered sexualities from young people’s perspectives. They make sense of how contemporary youth “do” gender, sexuality or intimacy in their everyday lives. Therefore, the special issue as a whole foregrounds how young people understand, negotiate and struggle with diverse issues connected with their sexuality, involving their bodies, identities, emotions, relationships and communities. The articles analyze a broad range of experiences and practices from pleasurable and consensual encounters to serious victimisation. The meanings of these experiences are understood as deeply societally embedded and entangled with social relations and structures. In this way, the special issue powerfully contests the still prevalent adult-centred understandings of gendered sexuality.

Second, besides producing new empirical knowledge on young people’s everyday negotiations and practices, the articles engage in theoretical discussions providing and developing insights to better understand and conceptualize the nature of youthful gendered sexualities. They build on and contribute to conceptualisations in the field of gender and masculinity studies, materialist feminism, post-humanist scholarship, affect theory, sexual script theory and micro-sociological conceptualizations around self-presentation. In the articles, these theoretical frameworks are used as tools needed in the in-depth knowledge production on gender and sexualities as part of young people’s everyday lives.

Third, the special issue offers a global lens to the multiplicity of young people’s negotiations on gender and sexuality. The contributions derive from empirical work conducted in seven different national and local contexts around the world involving young people from different ages (12 to 25 years), showcasing the diversity of the category of youth itself. The spatial and geographic contexts also vary, as the articles analyze gendered sexualities in educational and social media contexts, public city space, from the position of being employees in the service sector as well as through navigating nightlife and intoxication contexts. The authors use, problematize and at times question, the explanatory power of conceptualisations around gender and sexuality developed mainly in the Global North.

Methodologically, the studies included in this collection are mainly based on qualitative approaches, mostly analyzing data gathered in individual or focus group interviews, but also through art-based participatory methods. However, they also include a statistical analysis of the diversity of sexual assaults experienced by young people.

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## **Negotiations and performances of intimacy in public and digital spheres**

The journey begins with Eeva Puutio's, Suvi Pihkala's, Jukka Lehtonen's and Tuija Huuki's article from Finland, *School, Online Communities and Creative Workshops as Spaces for Non-normative Pre-teen Gendered and Sexual Cultures*, that analyzes pre-teens' negotiations of their sexual/gender identities. Grounded in feminist new materialistic and post-humanistic discussions, the article eloquently explores the potential of diverse interactional contexts in enhancing equal possibilities to express one's gender and sexuality. The school appears to provide young people mostly with only traditional hererosexual order, making it challenging to develop non-binary and non-heterosexual ways of belonging. Online communities, by contrast, lend more adequate support for young people's non-normative gendered and sexual cultures. The researchers importantly note that the latter type of spaces often lack adults. At the same time it cannot, however, be regarded as only young people's responsibility to provide spaces for meaningful discussions and interaction. Based on the researchers' observations, the artistic workshops that the researchers organized as part of their project, have potential for pre-teens to address sensitive topics of gender and sexuality safely together with adults.

The second article in this special issue takes us to Kolkata, an Eastern-Indian city where Utsa Mukherjee and Anil Pradhan have studied the lived experiences of young self-identified gay men in their twenties. Their article, *'Let Us Hold Hands': Lived Practices of Intimacy Among Gay Youth in Urban India* examines how intimacy, in this case embodied and affective self-disclosures of gay sexual identity, is constructed by the research participants in the urban space and in the general atmosphere characterized by homophobia and heteronormativity. The authors' interpretations importantly challenge some underpinnings of masculinity theory by e.g. making visible contextually specific possibilities of showing and doing intimacy, e.g. holding hands in public. The creative use of "homosocial tactility" is, according to the authors, simultaneously a personal project for the interviewed young men but can have the potential for larger societal change too.

Digital technology and social media platforms have become major sites of sexual expression, claims making as well as of forming and maintaining sexual and intimate relations among young people. This dimension is explored in Natalia Gerodetti's and Charlotte Hackett's article *'Am I Too Straight for the Gay People, Am I Too Gay for the Straight People?': A Qualitative Analysis of How Young Bisexual Women Navigate Self-presentation on Dating Apps*. They study how 19 to 24 year old young bisexual women in the UK creatively use the affordances of online platforms in searching for intimate partners. Despite the fact that these platforms have become very important meeting places especially for same sex couples, a monosexual assumption still prevails, which easily stigmatizes bisexual women. By applying sociologist Erving Goffman's ideas of dramaturgical self-presentation, the authors analyze how the young women actively construct their dating profiles and monitor reactions. Displaying bisexuality as a sexual identity requires constant vigilance and management of

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“binegativity”, which causes ambivalent affective reactions ranging from pleasure to uncertainty and frustration.

### **New lessons from ambiguous and risky sexual encounters**

Besides possibilities for identity construction and performing intimacy, the ambiguities and risks related to young people’s sexual encounters deserve scholarly attention from novel perspectives. Specifically, there is a need to overcome the dichotomous ways of either focusing on risks or emphasizing only the pleasurable and emancipatory dimensions of sexual encounters. The four remaining articles of this special issue delve into this problematic. They analyze mainly young women’s ambiguous sexual encounters.

In working life, parallel to many other fields of life, young women’s experiences of sexual harassment are common. Yet, this phenomenon is rarely conceptualized as a youth question. Sexual harassment is not adequately addressed either in educational settings or in working life practices, which leaves (mostly) young women managing these adverse experiences alone. This situation may have serious repercussions for newcomers in working life as it may risk their feelings of acting as valuable members of society through work. In their article *When the Flirting Guest’s Age Is Crucial: Young People in the Hospitality Industry Reflect on Sexual Harassment*, Maria Hedlin and Eva Klope study young people’s understanding of sexual harassment in the service sector in Sweden on the basis of the accounts of young women and men in vocational education who gain their first experiences of working life as part of their studies. The adverse experiences are common and align with binary gender norms and heteronormativity, but importantly also intertwine with norms related to age. Hence, younger males’ unwanted approaches to young female employees are more easily interpreted as flirting by the female interviewees, whereas older males’ similar conduct is experienced as ‘slimy’ and more problematic. Hedlin and Klope’s analysis also highlights young men’s difficulty in understanding themselves as victims of sexual harassment.

Nightlife and being intoxicated are ambivalent social and spatial settings for young women’s sexual agency, offering possibilities for pleasure, freedom and emancipation but also entailing risks of being hurt and abused. As the findings by Lars Roar Frøyland, Kari Stefansen and Patrick Lie Andersen in their article *Distinguishing Types of Sexual Assault Among Young People: A Latent Class Analysis Approach* reveal, alcohol is a significant factor in young women’s experiences of sexual violence. Rachel Levi Herz and Miri Rozmarin in their turn, analyze how young Israeli women make sense of the practice called “attacking”, a socially accepted habit in nightlife where typically young male partygoers initiate sexual interaction by approaching young women from the back and touching their bodies. Their article *Affective Dynamics and Young Women’s Sexual Subjectivity: The Case Study of the Israeli Practice of ‘Attacking’* meticulously analyzes young women’s accounts of these situations as “affective dissonance”. This means that young women experience these situations simultaneously as vulnerable and pleasurable. The authors argue that processing this affective dissonance

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together with female friends has potential for creating transformative, affective knowledge and hence supporting autonomous sexual subjectivity of the young women. The authors regard relationality and intersubjectivity as crucial elements in this process.

These interpretations are interestingly contrasted by Margit Anne Petersen’s, Alexandra Bogren’s and Geoffrey Hunt’s article *Ambiguous Encounters: Young Women’s Expectations and Experiences with Intoxicated Sexual Relations in Danish Nightlife*. While Levi Herz and Rozmarin emphasize the possibility of positive transformative sexual subjectivity to appear in vulnerable contexts, Petersen, Bogren and Hunt paint a more pessimistic picture. Accounts of pleasure and freedom are visible in the Danish young women’s accounts, too, but at the same time their sexual agency seems to be greatly constricted by patriarchal power relations. Most of the women interviewed in Petersen, Bogren and Hunt’s study, spoke about ambiguous experiences, which they did not define as violence despite e.g. admitting having unwillingly consented to sex. The authors claim that young women’s negotiations of consent nourish a “schizoid subjectivity” where young women are forced to occupy impossible spaces and end up experiencing loss of agency and a jeopardized social standing. They conclude that gendered norms related to intoxication seem to exert another layer of pressures on contemporary young women to consent to unwanted sex.

Sexual violence is a particularly harmful form of sexual interaction, yet not an uncommon experience among young people, especially for young women. The article by Lars Roar Frøyland, Kari Stefansen and Patrick Lie Andersen attests to the nature of sexual victimization patterns among youth (mainly among young women) as based on Norwegian survey data from 18 to 19 year olds. The results show that sexual violence experiences are gendered but diverse. Violence can be perpetrated by peers of similar age in intoxicated and other contexts, by romantic partners of the same age and by adults in different contexts. Moreover, intoxication related violence and violence in romantic relationships are most likely connected with adverse outcomes related to e.g. ill-being, whereas assaults by peers are associated with the most severe outcomes. Knowledge of the variety of sexual violence and their outcomes can aid young people in acknowledging their diverse experiences as violence and also to better acknowledge different effects of violence.

The seven articles comprising this special issue open up new lenses and reach towards new directions to study youthful gendered sexualities in the 21st century. Overall, the articles display the multifaceted ways through which young people of different ages, residing and acting in different national, spatial and institutional contexts around the world, constantly make sense of the dimensions of gender and sexuality as part of their everyday lives. They are active agents in this process, despite their agency being constrained in various ways by the power relations defined by their respective social and societal environments (Bessant et al., 2017).

Moreover, the articles reinforce the potential of the youth-centred approaches to studying gendered sexualities. Contemplating gendered sexualities from young people’s perspectives is imperative, not only for in-depth scientific knowledge production, but also as part of institutional practices that come in contact with phenomena related to youthful sexualities.

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Young people’s multifaceted voices, diverse experiences and sense-making should therefore be more firmly acknowledged and integrated into sex and relationships education and other preventive endeavors, as well as in interventions and support services designed to help in case of adverse experiences. Creating safe and convivial spaces for young people’s diverse stories to come out, be heard and be reflected in a supporting empathetic atmosphere is a powerful means to strengthen young people’s sexual subjectivities, sexual citizenship and well-being.

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