

Becoming a virgin Intimate geographies of global body politics

Abstract

The purpose of the research project is to investigate ways in which women's bodies in Kyrgyzstan become the site of national reproductive and sexual politics.

Description of the scientific motivation of the project

Worldwide, **right-wing nationalist politics are on the rise** (Gest, Reny, und Mayer 2018): right-wing political parties entered the majority of European parliaments, a political administration with the goal 'To Make America Great Again' installed itself in the USA, and in the Global East fantasies of pre-soviet glorious nations legitimize patriarchal orders after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Droeber 2006).

Globally circulating right-wing politics identify migrant, homosexual and female bodies as threats to pure and future white majority nations. At their core, these **right-wing nationalist politics aim at regulating reproductive and sexual activities of female bodies**, in particular (Gökarıksel, Neubert, und Smith 2019). The ongoing contestation of the legality of abortions or state-induced programs of forced sterilization exemplify ways in which racialized reproductive and sexual politics operate through female bodies (Roberts 1997; Ross 2017).

One consequence of these globally circulating right-wing politics is the **growing popularity of the myth of virginity and sexual purity**. For example, under the guise of public health, Evangelical Christians in the US organize nation-wide sexual abstinence campaigns (Moslener 2015) and the federal constitution of the State of Texas permits sexual education in schools only in case of abstinence-only education (85th Texas Legislature 2017). In the Middle East, for example in Iran (Ahmadi 2016) and in Central Asia, as for instance in Kyrgyzstan (Militz und Schurr, accepted), an increasing demand for virginity testing and the observation that more and more women seek hymenoplasty (the surgical restoration of virginity) illustrate ways in which certain sexual practices of women are condemned, in need of regulation and thus under the control of medical, juridical and family authorities.

Yet, **through reproductive justice movements, solidarity and peer-to-peer education programs women also resist these repressive, reproductive sexual politics**. For example, the Reproductive Health Alliance of Kyrgyzstan (RHAK) – partner of the International Planned Parenthood Federation – has developed education material for peer-to-peer sexual education in schools, despite strong and, at times, aggressive opposition from local populations and societal authorities. Apart from developing information and educational material, RHAK also runs a small gynecological clinic with two treatment rooms, offering sexual and reproductive health consultation and treatment, such as advise on family planning, contraception and abortion services.

Based on these observations, **the project has two objectives**. On the one hand, the project reflects the contexts of and ways in which globally circulating right-wing biopolitics emerge. On the other hand, the project inquires upon the effects of these right-wing politics on women's sexual practices. The project is thus also interested in exploring ways in which differently situated women(s groups) develop strategies of resistance to the regulation of their reproductive and sexual practices.

Conceptually, the project **expands feminist political geographic approaches on biopolitics** through building on the concept of the 'global intimate' (e.g. Pratt and Rosner 2006) in order to examine dichotomous understandings of scale and to interrogate the entanglements of intimate practices, national body politics and globally circulating imaginations of virginity.

Methodologically, the project **mobilizes multi-sited ethnographic research approaches** (Jokela-Pansini 2018) and analyses the global circulation of intimate practices and knowledge about female sexuality through two different empirical sites: *digital spaces* of social media (e.g. hashtags and forum-accounts on Instagram) and *medical spaces* of gynecological practices (e.g. clinics for reproductive and sexual health).

As part of a larger research project with research sites in Kyrgyzstan and in the USA, the **aim of the planned research stay at AUCA is to develop and to establish the necessary research network and field access in Kyrgyzstan**. I want to expand and deepen the connections with already existing research partners, initiate research cooperation with new partners and collect data for a first analysis of the intimate geographies of global body politics in Kyrgyzstan.

During **my visit to AUCA** I want to connect and enter in exchange with renowned scholars from my field such as **Elena Kim** and **Mohira Suyarkulova** and **other social scientists at the CASI**. In addition, I intend to expand my existing collaboration with the Reproductive Health Alliance Kyrgyzstan (RHAK), social media activists and the local chapters of UN Women and UNFPA. I also want to collect more context information on the Instagram forum Molodye_Mamochki_KG through getting in touch with the founder and moderator Asem Kurmanalieva.

Bibliography

- Ahmadi, Azal. 2016. „Recreating Virginity in Iran: Hymenoplasty as a Form of Resistance“. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 30 (2): 222–37. <https://doi.org/10.1111/maq.12202>.
- Droeber, Julia. 2006. „Back to Islam? Women’s Sexualities and Body-Politics in Muslim Central Asia“. *Hawwa* 4 (2): 181–213. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156920806779152264>.
- Gest, Justin, Tyler Reny, und Jeremy Mayer. 2018. „Roots of the Radical Right: Nostalgic Deprivation in the United States and Britain“. *Comparative Political Studies* 51 (13): 1694–1719. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414017720705>.
- Gökarıksel, Banu, Christopher Neubert, und Sara Smith. 2019. „Demographic Fever Dreams: Fragile Masculinity and Population Politics in the Rise of the Global Right“. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 44 (3): 561–87. <https://doi.org/10.1086/701154>.
- Jokela-Pansini, Maaret. 2018. „Multi-sited research methodology: Improving understanding of transnational concepts“. *Area* online first (0). <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12494>.
- Militz, Elisabeth, and Carolin Schurr. (Dis)comforting reproductive bodies in the global intimate. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*. Accepted.
- Moslener, Sara. 2015. *Virgin Nation: Sexual Purity and American Adolescence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Roberts, Dorothy. 1997. *Killing the Black Body: Race Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Ross, Loretta J. 2017. „Reproductive Justice as Intersectional Feminist Activism“. *Souls* 19 (3): 286–314. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2017.1389634>.