CONFERENCE REPORT

4th Africa Conference on Sexual Health and Rights
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
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In February 2010 Professor Juan Nel, Boshadi Semenya, and Yolanda Mitchell represented the Unisa Centre for Applied Psychology (UCAP) at the 4th Africa Conference on Sexual Health and Rights in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

The conference has been taking place every second year since its inception in South Africa (2004). This year the conference was jointly organised by the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) Africa Region, the Family Guidance Association of Ethiopia and the African Federation for Sexual Health and Rights (AFSHR). It was hosted at the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) conference centre in Addis Ababa.

The focus, which was on Sexuality and HIV and AIDS, provided a rostrum for open and honest discussion that extended beyond epidemiology to the factors that undermine sexual rights and increase vulnerability to infection, prejudice and discrimination. The conference brought together more than 800 delegates from diverse organisations including NGO’s, funders, government representatives, and academia. There was a transparent avidity to address long-standing taboos that have been found to have a severe negative impact not only on the power to redress the growing disease burden of HIV and AIDS, but also on the individual’s healthy expression of sexuality.

The conference was opened on the evening of 8 February by the President of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, HE Mr Girma Woldegiorgis. Other speakers included the patron of the conference, Minister of Health HE Dr. Tedros Adhanom and Dr Gill Greer, the Director General of IPPF. The three conference days were replete with presentations of more than 50 papers, seven skills building workshops and 10 plenary sessions.

The strong Human Rights Framework in which the conference was embedded proved opportune for highlighting the persistent disregard of rights pertaining
to sexuality, gender equality, and sexual orientation. We heard many harrowing accounts of transgressions ranging from lack of awareness to blatant violation and persecution. The urgency of the appeal for implementation of existing (but under-utilised) frameworks for intervention was telling of the readiness for change on the African continent. Much critique was levelled at the non-execution of the declarations and resolutions that resulted not only from the previous conferences in this series, but also of those following related international agreements such as the Maputo Plan of Action. There was a strong call for transparency and accountability by organisations to those whom they serve.

UCAP’s presentation, in contrast with the dominating discourse of the conference, centred on the platform that is created by South Africa’s progressive constitution for the establishment of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities, even in rural South Africa. Our presentation was based on qualitative data gathered early in 2009 in Mafikeng, North-West province, on factors that influence the establishment of emerging LGBT communities in this province. Although the findings were nuanced by accounts of ongoing prejudice, even though all human rights are protected by our constitution, the focus of the presentation was on the positive role a progressive constitution and supportive government can play.

It is clear that governmental support and endorsement of all human rights is not enough to ensure that those rights are upheld. The inhibiting effect of traditions, customs and a hegemonic discourse on the fostering of a rights-based culture resonated throughout the conference. Although ‘equality for all’ is far from being established, hearing such a collective incitement certainly bears hope for the cultivation of transformation.
BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Yolanda Mitchell is a research psychology intern at the Unisa Centre for Applied Psychology. Her research interests include informing social and legislative policy in the fields of sexuality and hate crimes. She is a member of the editorial team of *New Voices in Psychology*. 