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While it is refreshing and illuminating to describe sexuality research as ‘dirty work’, ‘an occupation that is simultaneously socially necessary and stigmatized’, in many actual social contexts where such stigma may amount to no less than social taboo, the ‘necessity’ of sex-related research may not be all that convincing – unless it is framed within the discourses of pathology or criminality. The natural relegation of sex research to the fields of family medicine, urology, gynecology, public health, or criminology is hence quite understandable. Unfortunately, such exclusivity within empirically-oriented professional fields also forecloses any possibility of learning from the insights and reflections produced in recent decades by the more critically-oriented fields of humanities and social sciences in response to changing social realities and rising social activism. Notably, differences in approach among academic disciplines often do not present themselves as coexisting pluralities but, rather, as rivals entangled in fierce contestations. For example, when the Taiwanese humanities and social sciences academics organized their first ever conference on the study of sexualities in 1996 and prominently featured homosexuality studies as one of the themes, the funding application to the Ministry of Education was denied on the grounds of the following comments typical of the views of sex education and public health professionals at the time:

The papers to be presented are mostly literature reviews centering upon subjective critiques of sexology and sexual deviations, with no empirical studies at all. Sex education is personality education, and should concentrate on heterosexual relations built on mutual respect and happy family life. The theme of the conference should thus contribute to promoting heterosexual intimacy and related issues. Emphasis should be placed on human nature and human happiness, or else it will result in distorted views on sex.

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It was only after a strong rebuttal, followed by a second review, that partial funding was granted.¹ Still, in an interview with the press, a leading sex educator/public health professor continued to challenge the legitimacy and qualification of humanities and social sciences academics to speak on issues in the 'highly professionalized' field of sex research. Obviously, institutional, or disciplinary, contestations could pose serious obstacles to the advancement of sexuality research in such contexts.

Another important source of hostility that has proven to be inimical to sexuality research in new aspiring democracies such as Taiwan developed from the gradual adoption of certain progressive values – in particular, gender equality – as an index of the nation-state's legitimacy in domestic governance as well as its international standing in civility and modernity. Ironically, this success of gender equality becoming national policy was purchased at the price of naming sex as a key component of gender inequality. In mid-1990s Taiwan, when a visible liberalization of sexual values and practices engendered huge social anxieties and controversies, state-oriented feminists, who were just beginning to harvest the modest success of a broadly mobilized women's movement, chose to navigate the new sexual landscape by zeroing in on women's vulnerability and victimhood in sexual matters in order to construct a compelling case for allegedly intolerable gender oppression. This sex-negative sentiment, framed in a righteous anti-patriarchal feminist language, proved to be much more persuasive than traditional moral condemnation, and the rhetoric was conveniently appropriated by conservative Christian women's NGOs in fanning a series of sex panics that increasingly portrayed sex as a domain of inequality and exploitation for women and children.² By the 2000s, as growing civility tempered public affects into a politically-correct intolerance for things deemed sexually offensive or harmful for the tender-hearted, public concern increasingly tilted toward the creation of proactive, preventive, even pre-emptive measures to protect women and children from real or imagined (sexual) contamination or harm. Opportunistic politicians were of course more than eager to white-wash themselves by collaborating with protection-minded women's groups in setting up, in the name of upholding gender equality and child protection, a vigilant web of surveillance and codification over things sexual. Intensification of the legal realm not only turned unfamiliar or controversial sexualities into occasions for judicial arbitration by judges who knew very little other than conventional knowledge about the topic, but also solidified widespread feelings of sexual shame and uneasiness into exceptional disgust and blame that were quick to target the problematic.

Falling in the tracks of such juridification are sexual minorities and sexuality researchers who refuse to tow the mainstream line and are hence easily perceived as 'misleading or corrupting the young' before an actual charge is found and levied at them. As the best-known feminist sexuality researcher and outspoken sex emancipationist in Taiwan, I myself was taken to court by a total of 11 Christian groups in 2003 for including two hyperlinks in my sexuality databank webpage that may, after the cautionary reminder, lead to some zoophilia images on an overseas

website. The charge was ‘dissemination of obscenity’ because the prosecutor, who had long been collaborating with the Christian women’s NGOs, believed that I, even though serving as Coordinator of the Center for the Study of Sexualities at my university, had no cause to collect information on zoophilia as I ‘did not have any research grant on the subject’. My court case thus became a course in Sexuality Studies 101 as I explained in great detail to the judges the need to study sexuality, to study sexualities that are deemed unbelievable or distasteful, to include images of the unfamiliar and difficult, etc. It took me 18 months to fight through the district court and then the high court. Fortunately, with the help of a global petition and local mobilization of social movement groups, my eventual victory in both courts protected the very basic freedoms of speech, information, and academic research in relation to sexuality.³ Still, the remaining scare and silencing effect on the sexuality research community as a whole cannot be easily dismissed.

If the cause of child protection has effectively closed off a lot of social space for discussions and research on sexuality, gender equality has certainly emerged as the staunchest patrol over whatever space is left. In fact, it has now become commonplace to condemn images that present women (and, in more recent cases, even men) in sexually potent postures as – and all are quick to cite the familiar feminist jargon – objectification, dehumanization, degradation, humiliation, and commodification. The more blatant images may be prosecutable for ‘instilling gender inequality’, based on laws that are now aligned with international covenants such as CEDAW (The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women). The less serious ones are required to be pixilated, if not removed altogether, so as to protect children from coming into contact with such improper material. Images of or references to sex could easily become suspect if complaints of discomfort or offensiveness are filed. Discussions of sex, especially on the internet where access by children is believed to be easy, are vigilantly monitored. One can well imagine the difficulty with which sexuality could be discussed or studied within this atmosphere.

Gender equality, when indiscriminately applied and enforced in aspiring democracies, could become a formidable barrier to sex-related academic work in yet another aspect. As ethics reviews become institutionally required procedure for the protection of the subjects under study, believed to be the weaker party in the interaction in biomedical and behavioral researches that involve humans; by analogy and extension, the gender equality directive also demands that itself be included as a dimension of such reviews. After all, the global protocol of ‘gender mainstreaming’ decrees that a gender perspective be actively included in all national policies and programs to ensure that their effects on women (and men) are thoroughly assessed. And as the political correctness of gender equality (and child protection) steps in, sex negativity again reasserts itself and sexuality research suffers.

For sexuality researchers in the aspiring democracies, it has become increasingly urgent that we move beyond the usual project of modernization of sex or sexuality, and critically examine the configuration of sexuality in the context of concepts such

as civility and modernity, equality and democracy, before we find ourselves trapped in the treacherous paths of prosecution or professional suffocation.

Notes

1. For those who read Chinese, the website for the historical conference carries all the press reports that documented the open contestation (<http://sex.ncu.edu.tw/conference/4-Sex/01/index.html>). To the dismay of its opponents, the conference grew into more than two dozen academic conferences closely linked to local gender/sexuality activism and has continued to enrich the study of sexualities in the Chinese-speaking world.
2. Sex-positive feminists and queers fought such rigidifying tendencies continuously and maintained a vibrant front of sex radicalism in Taiwan, led by the Center for the Study of Sexualities, National Central University. Website: <http://sex.ncu.edu.tw/>
3. I know of at least one other academic who was prosecuted at about the same time for doing research on popular teenage sex work, another topic that was also seen as needing only condemnation but not research.

Josephine Ho is Chair Professor and Coordinator of the Center for the Study of Sexualities, National Central University, Taiwan. Professor Ho has written extensively and provocatively on many cutting-edge issues in the Taiwanese context, spearheading sex-positive views on female sexuality, gender/sexuality education, queer studies, sex work studies, transgenderism, body modification, and in recent years, gender/sexuality deployment under global governance. She has written and edited more than 20 volumes of Taiwanese gender/sexuality research, which have greatly enhanced and challenged Taiwanese academic research into marginal gender/sexualities.