

Preface

This book was born out of my personal journey. From an early age, through my family, school and community, I was raised to understand sex as negative, something to suppress or repress. Sexuality was portrayed as dangerous and shameful. Parents, teachers and religious leaders rarely spoke of it in positive terms or at all. When I had my first crush in primary school, a teacher mishandled the situation, and I was shamed for the experience.

A turning point came 13 years later while studying philosophy. I took an elective on sexuality, based on the book *Your sexual self: Pathway to authentic intimacy* by Fran Ferder and John Heagle. For the first time, I encountered a resource that framed sexuality as a positive part of being human. This realisation was liberating, but also unsettling. If sexuality was positive and integral to being human, who had been telling the truth: the adults of my childhood, or Ferder and Heagle? Why did adults in my community treat sexuality as something to fear or silence?

That contradiction stayed with me and sparked a curiosity that has shaped my scholarly path. I became interested in how knowledge about childhood sexuality is produced, circulated and legitimised. That interest persisted when I read law and eventually led to the research underpinning this book.

What follows is the product of that intellectual journey. This book explores how law, and the wider assemblage of cultural, religious and state institutions, construct and negotiate the meanings of childhood and adolescent sexuality. I argue that law functions not simply as a set of rules, but as a discursive force: one that constructs sexual subjectivity and influences how adults respond to children in matters of sex and sexuality.

I explore a central contradiction: How can laws and policies speak so eloquently about protecting children's rights, while in practice children are judged and punished, for normative sexual behaviour? What does it mean for children to be hailed as rights holders in legal texts, yet are shamed, expelled from school, or criminalised for sexual behaviour that is part of growing up?

This book is not a call for better laws or policies to address young people's sexual health. Rather, it invites reflection on the assumptions that underlie such laws. Understanding these assumptions, and how

they shape relations of power with children, is key to promoting positive sexuality experiences for young people.

By the time I completed the initial research, I was convinced that law was not best placed to critique itself. I turned to post-structural theory, which approaches law as a cultural and political artefact rather than a neutral or apolitical authority. Without formal training in post-structuralist theory, I applied for a research fellowship in the Department of Psychology at Rhodes University. Under the mentorship of Professor Catriona Macleod, I deepened my use of feminist post-structuralist tools and developed a richer critique of how knowledge about childhood sexuality is reproduced in Malawi's gender equality law.

I hope this book will be useful to students and scholars, especially in African contexts, who are asking critical questions about childhood, sexuality and the law. I also hope it will challenge those who produce legal and normative knowledge, including judges, parliamentarians, civil society actors, teachers and policymakers, to reflect on how ideas and practices around childhood sexuality are reproduced. It further prompts them to consider how these practices often contradict the ideals stipulated in national and international laws and child rights instruments.

Godfrey Dalitso Kangaude LLD

Research Associate, Psychology, Rhodes University

Executive Director, Nyale Institute for Sexual and Reproductive Health Governance

Senior Lecturer, Malawi School of Government