

Why did colonial authorities seek to regulate “deviant” sexualities?

Colonial regimes were not only concerned about control of the land and labour but also the regulation of the intimate lives of the population they governed. Throughout the 19th century, European empires increasingly defined and policed certain forms of sexuality as “deviant”, imposing medical, legal and moral frameworks that reshaped social practices. For example “Africans supposed stunted or brutish sexuality was thought to engender laziness and stultify intellectual growth in men.”¹ Practices that differed from Christian norms were often labelled as immoral and dangerous, leading colonial governments to impose laws designed to discipline colonised populations. This essay questions why colonial authorities were so invested in regulating sexualities and what purpose such interventions served them..

To understand this process, it is important to define key terms. Colonial authorities refers to governments, administrators, missionaries and institutions that used power within colonial territories on behalf of imperial states such as the United Kingdom and France. The phrase “deviant” sexualities is important because the concept of deviance is socially constructed. In terms of colonial times, “deviant” referred to sexual behaviours and identities that differed from European heterosexuality and Christian ideals. This included things such as, same-sex relationships and non-monogamous practices. This essay argues that the regulation of “deviant” sexualities was tied to wider goals of empire and not just about moral concern, it became an attempt to reinforce imperial dominance and define racial difference. For example by portraying these societies as sexually immoral, they justified their own presence as a “civilising” force, imposing these standards helped reinforce racial hierarchies. Furthermore it also allowed colonial states to monitor populations more closely and maintain social order.

One of the main reasons why colonial authorities sought to regulate “deviant” sexualities was because they aimed to impose European moral and religious values onto colonial societies. Many imperial powers justified colonial expansion through the idea of a civilising mission, which claimed that European culture, Christianity and social norms were superior to those of colonised people. Same-sex relationships, polygamy and gender nonconformity were often targeted because they challenged European beliefs about family structure and morality. For example, ‘The new Western concepts introduced through colonial conquest carried strong sex and class inequalities supported by rigid gender ideology and constructions.’² Missionaries played a significant role in this process by promoting monogamous christian marriage and condemning indigenous practices arguing it was morally wrong. In many colonies, these attitudes became embedded within legal systems through laws regulating prostitution, homosexuality and marriage. Ann Laura Stoler, argues that sexual regulation became central to colonial governance because European

¹ Marc Epprecht. (2010). *The Making of ‘African Sexuality’: Early Sources, Current Debates*. [Online]. CompassJournals. Available at:

<https://compass-onlinelibrary-wiley-com.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/doi/full/10.1111/j.1478-0542.2010.00715.x>

² Ifi, Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex In African Society*. E-book, London: Bloomsbury, 1987, <https://hdl-handle-net.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/2027/hebo4120.0001.001>.

authorities believed moral discipline was necessary for maintaining imperial order and racial superiority.³ This further shows that colonial rule used religion and morality as tools to justify imperial control and cultural change.

Another important reason colonial authorities sought to regulate “deviant” sexualities was their concern with prostitution, which they mainly associated with disease, racial anxiety and the maintenance of imperial control. “Prostitution is conceptualized as the commoditization of sex, or a form of casual labor that involves payment for sexual services.”⁴ In most colonies, prostitution was not completely prohibited but was heavily monitored and regulated, mainly during War time as they were concerned about soldiers. Authorities feared that prostitution would spread venereal diseases among troops, weakening military strength and threatening the stability of colonial rule. As pointed out by Saheed Aderinto ‘they tolerated prostitution because it did not constitute any danger to the colonial status quo – at least until the outbreak of the Second World War.’⁵ This is highlighted with the data showing that “the incidence of venereal diseases recorded among the troops of the West African Frontier Force (WAFF) in 1942 was 43.2%, which was higher than cases of malaria.”⁶ As a result, colonial administrations introduced laws that subjected women to medical examinations, registration systems and confinement in lock hospitals. For example the Act for the Prevention of Certain Contagious Diseases (Act No. XIV of 1868) in India, that shows how medical practices could be used as instruments of coercion.⁷ These policies reflected the double standard in which female prostitutes were blamed for sexual immorality and disease, while the sexual behaviour of European men were ignored. As A. Pande argues, ‘the entire blame for the spread of VD falling on women’s uncontrolled sexuality: this was a disease that spread from women who were sexually active to men who, strangely enough, were not deemed culpable of any crime.’⁸ These regulations also reinforced racial hierarchies, as colonised women were frequently portrayed as sexually dangerous or morally inferior. The measures taken were not just about public health, but also about controlling colonised populations and reinforcing imperial power through surveillance over sexuality and women's bodies. Josephine Butler, who led a campaign against regulation, argued that the “CD Acts subjected women to degradation and exploitation, and institutionalised a moral double standard that

³ Patricia Purtschert. (N/A). *Ann Laura Stoler*. [Online]. The many futures of gender: Oral Histories of Feminist Theory. Available at: <https://www.oralhistoriesoffeministtheory.com/ann-laura-stoler>

⁴ Saheed, Aderinto *When Sex Threatened the State : Illicit Sexuality, Nationalism, and Politics in Colonial Nigeria, 1900-1958*, University of Illinois Press, 2014. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/detail.action?docID=3414456>.

⁵ Saheed, Aderinto. “The Problem of Nigeria Is Slavery, Not White Slave Traffic’: Globalization and the Politicization of Prostitution in Southern Nigeria, 1921-1955.” *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1–22. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/stable/43860318>. Accessed 18 May 2026.

⁶ Ekpootu, Mfon Umoren. “Sexualizing the City: Female Prostitution in Nigeria’s Urban Centres in a Historical Perspective”. *Selling Sex in the City: A Global History of Prostitution, 1600s–2000s*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2017. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004346253_013 Web.

⁷ An Act for the Prevention of Certain Contagious Diseases (Act No. XIV of 1868) Passed by the Governor-General of India in Council

⁸ A. Pande. (2023). De(coding) ‘loose women’ in colonial archives. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 41(3), 309–324. <https://doi-org.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/02589001.2020.1761012>

placed the unpleasant burden of sexually transmitted disease prevention and treatment upon the shoulders of women.”⁹

Furthermore, many women entered prostitution for economic reasons rather than personal choice. Colonial economies often disrupted traditional social structures, created widespread poverty and limited employment opportunities for women, leaving prostitution as one of the few available ways to make money. For example, “the practice of commercial sex by college girls has become for many of them a means of accessing societal resources and meeting family obligations. The income they earn is often used to set up businesses, in most cases hair salons, bars, and boutiques.”¹⁰ In most cases, prostitution was the means of survival and the income was used for daily needs. Despite this, colonial authorities did not address the structural causes of prostitution and instead focused entirely on policing women's bodies and sexuality. Further reflecting the double standard in which women were blamed for disease while men were ignored. “By codifying prostitutes, the colonial power, effectively ensured that women stayed within the private space of home, the space allocated to them.”¹¹

Colonial authorities also sought to regulate “deviant” sexualities because sexuality was closely connected to racial hierarchy and fear of miscegenation meaning the “mixing of races”. European empires wanted to maintain a clear distinction between colonisers and colonised people due to the belief in white superiority. Interracial relationships challenged these boundaries because they undermined colonial claims that Europeans were fundamentally separate from, and superior to, indigenous populations. As a result, colonial governments sometimes introduced laws and social policies designed to discourage or control interracial intimacy and marriage. In some colonies for example segregation policies were introduced to preserve “racial purity”. Colonial authorities frequently portrayed colonised men as sexually threatening and hypersexual, particularly in relation to white women, for example being described as ‘nearly untutored savage’, ‘not yet enough developed’.¹² Furthermore, Phillippe Rushton in 1997 argued that there was a “direct co-relation between penis size, intelligence, respect for the law, and sexual behavior. ‘Negroids’, in this analysis, were genetically predisposed to be sexually precocious, permissive, and criminal.”¹³ At the same time, relationships between European men and colonised women were often tolerated when they reinforced colonial dominance, revealing the gendered double standards within imperial rule. Historian Nigel Browne-Davis talks about

⁹ Phillips, Richard, ‘Imperialism and the regulation of sexuality: Colonial legislation on contagious diseases and ages of consent’, *Journal of Historical Geography*, 28.3 (2002) 339-62. [Imperialism and the regulation of sexuality: colonial legislation on contagious diseases and ages of consent - ScienceDirect](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0954-6693(02)00011-1)

¹⁰ Ekpootu, Mfon Umoren. "Sexualizing the City: Female Prostitution in Nigeria's Urban Centres in a Historical Perspective". *Selling Sex in the City: A Global History of Prostitution, 1600s–2000s*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2017. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004346253_013 Web.

¹¹ A, Pande. (2023). De(coding) ‘loose women’ in colonial archives. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 41(3), 309–324. <https://doi-org.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/02589001.2020.1761012>

¹² Ifi, Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex In African Society*. E-book, London: Bloomsbury, 1987, <https://hdl-handle-net.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/2027/hebo4120.0001.001>.

¹³ Marc Epprecht. (2010). *The Making of ‘African Sexuality’: Early Sources, Current Debates*. [Online]. CompassJournals. Available at: <https://compass-onlinelibrary-wiley-com.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/doi/full/10.1111/j.1478-0542.2010.00715.x>

interracial relationships specifically in colonised Sierra Leone, he argues the attitudes held by colonial authorities had an impact on race relations that resulted in the “clandestine nature of interracial sex and the shame attached to mixed-race ancestry in colonial society.”¹⁴ He further talks about the lasting issues of colonial rule and how this shame is sometimes still held today. By regulating interracial sexuality, colonial authorities attempted to maintain social divisions, reinforce racial hierarchies and change the cultural norms to a European Christian standard.

The criminalisation of homosexuality was another major way in which colonial authorities attempted to regulate “deviant” sexualities. Influenced by Christian beliefs, many European empires viewed same-sex relationships as sinful and unnatural. In many regions, same sex relationships and diverse gender identities had existed prior to colonial rule and were sometimes accepted in local cultures. For example, in Igbo culture, gender is a flexible construction meaning, daughters could become sons and consequently male. “Daughters and women in general could be husbands to wives and consequently males in relation to their wives.”¹⁵ Furthermore “Historical and anthropological studies show that same-sex African partnerships existed long before foreigners set foot on the continent.”¹⁶ However, colonial authorities redefined these practices as deviant and punishable in order to reinforce European superiority and discipline. Alok Gupta makes a point of this in their book about the origins of “sodomy” laws in British colonialism; they argue that the British law of section 377 introduced into the Indian Penal Code spread across the British empire and influenced more laws. “The Indian Penal Code became the model for British colonies' legal systems throughout most of Asia and Africa”¹⁷ and, ‘It was a colonial attempt to set standards of behavior, both to reform the colonized and to protect the colonizers against moral lapses.’¹⁸ This regulation served both moral and political purposes, it reinforced European ideals of sexuality while also strengthening colonial control over private life and social behaviour. The long term impact of these policies remain visible today, as many former colonies still have anti LGBTQ+ laws that originated during colonial rule.

Finally, colonial authorities also regulated “deviant” sexualities because sexuality was closely connected to wider systems of political control. Colonial governments understood that controlling intimate relationships, family structures and gender roles helped maintain order within colonised societies and reinforced authority. By imposing European ideas about marriage, masculinity, femininity and sexual

¹⁴ N, Browne-Davis. (2023). Interracial Sex as Taboo: The New Imperialism, Christian Victorian Values, Nationalism, and the Legacies of Intimacy in the Colony of Sierra Leone, 1861–1914. *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 51(1), 64–96.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Sylvia, Tamale ‘Confronting the Politics of Nonconforming Sexualities in Africa’, *African Studies Review*, 56 (2013), 31–45 <<http://dx.doi.org.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/10.1017/asr.2013.40>>

¹⁷ Alok Gupta. (2008). *This Alien Legacy The Origins of "Sodomy" Laws in British Colonialism*. [Online]. Human Rights Watch. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2008/12/17/alien-legacy/origins-sodomy-laws-british-colonialism> [Accessed 22 May 2026].

¹⁸ Ibid

behaviour, colonial powers attempted to create disciplined colonial subjects who conformed to the moral and social expectations of colonialism. Laws regulating sexuality therefore extended beyond morality and became a key tool of surveillance and governance. Monitoring lifestyles like prostitution, homosexuality and marriage allowed them to shape the everyday lives of colonised populations. For example, "The policing of illicit sexuality was subsumed under the Undesirable Advertisement Ordinance of 1932, the Unlicensed Guide (Prohibition) Ordinance of 1941, and the Venereal Disease Ordinance of 1943."¹⁹ This shows that colonialism operated not just through economic power but also through the control of private lives.

In conclusion, colonial authorities sought to regulate "deviant" sexualities because sexuality was deeply connected to wider systems of imperial power, racial hierarchy and social control. Through the enforcement of European christian values, colonial governments attempted to reshape colonised societies according to their own ideas of civilisation. Practices such as same-sex relationships, interracial intimacy, prostitution and non-European forms of gender were often portrayed as immoral or dangerous because they challenged colonial ideas of order and tradition. By regulating sexuality through laws, surveillance or medical examinations, they were able to control individual bodies and cultural life of colonised populations. Furthermore, the regulation of sexuality often revealed the contradictions of colonial rule, for example, women being blamed for prostitution and venereal diseases while the sexual behaviour of European men was often ignored or accepted. These policies were not just about moral concern but used as a broader strategy to justify colonial rule and reinforced colonial authority. Colonial sexual regulation continues to have an impact today as many former colonials still retain laws criminalising homosexuality that originated under European rule. This demonstrates that colonialism extended beyond economic exploitation or territorial conquest as it reached deeply into the lives of colonised people. Ultimately, the regulation of "deviant" sexualities reveals how colonial powers operated through control of bodies, relationships and identities, making sexuality a key component of colonial governance.

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