

Abortion workshop inaugurates new Centre for Cultures of Reproduction, Technologies and Health

On 13th and 14th November 2014, the newly-launched Centre for Cultures of Reproduction, Technologies and Health (CORTH) held its inaugural event entitled *Re-Situating Abortion: Bio-Politics, Global Health and Rights in Neo-liberal Times*. The event brought together an international group of researchers from a diverse range of disciplines as well as practitioners in order to begin a timely conversation about the relationship between abortion, globalisation and neoliberal reform.



In her **introduction** Maya Unnithan, Director of the Centre, expressed elation that for its inaugural event CORTH was tackling the marginalised topic of abortion in a way that emphasised the importance of not only an interdisciplinary conversation, but of a dialogue between the Global North and South. As an event that explicitly set out to re-situate abortion, the conference's key themes included the issue of sex-selective abortion in the Global North and South, the modern landscape of reproductive technology, and researching neoliberal construction and subjects through the issue of abortion.

The first day of the conference prompted discussion around several topical issues. Sex-selective abortion was addressed at several levels, with a focus both on the experiences

and narratives of women in India and the South Asian diaspora who are negotiating complex reproductive decisions, as well as the macro-level landscape of law and policy. Participants were particularly concerned about the recent Abortion (Sex-Selection) Bill read in the UK which seeks to amend the Abortion Act; concerns raised included the undermining of practitioners and the Othering of South Asian women. Another key theme of Thursday's sessions was the methodology and ethics of researching abortion; participants discussed the necessity of contributing quantitative evidence to contemporary debates as well as using qualitative methods like life-course narratives to 'read between the lines' of big data and connect individual experience to wider discourses of regulation, neoliberalism, and race.



The stimulating discussion continued on the **second day** of the workshop, which saw an impressive range of papers and emphasised the importance of resituating abortion as a global issue.

A recurring theme of discussion was stigma and the moral framing of abortion, from the effects of conscientious objection amongst doctors to internalised stigma which restricts women’s reproductive options. Researchers doing work in contexts where abortion is illegal or severely restricted including Northern Ireland, South Sudan and Nigeria lead a discussion about the practice of abortion ‘on the ground’, the ways in which both women and practitioners are negotiating these restrictions, and examined the moral contradictions evident in the spaces where the reality of women dying from unsafe procedures clashes with religious and moral discourses around abortion. The role of international

intervention in countries like South Sudan was also problematized.



CORTH was also delighted to be joined on Friday by **representatives from Marie Stopes International and Amnesty International**. Bethan Cobley of MSI presented the vastly different contexts in which the organisation works, and spoke about MSI’s aim to de-medicalise abortion in a way that places it firmly in the hands of women. In the final session, Christina Zampas of Amnesty gave a fascinating insight into the human rights debates surrounding abortion restriction and access, pointing out that international bodies recognise barriers to abortion access as human rights violations



On Thursday evening there was a **drinks reception** hosted by Jackie Cassell (BSMS, board member of CORTH). Pro-Vice Chancellor Michael Davies raised a toast expressing his excitement at the launch of the first of the new interdisciplinary research centres supported by the University's Sussex Research initiative. Gill Love (CORTH Doctoral associate, LPS) spoke about the first meeting of the Centre's Doctoral Forum and its plan for group events. At the reception staff from Global Studies, LPS, HAHP, Education and Social Work and more mingled and looked ahead to future events.

This forward-looking mentality formed the final note of the workshop on Friday, as participants put forward their ideas for collaboration, networking and publication to Hayley Macgregor (IDS, board member of CORTH).



CORTH's **inaugural event** has begun an international conversation on an often controversial topic, and laid the ground for a network of engagement around the cross-disciplinary issues of reproduction, technologies and health. The more detailed workshop report will be available at the centre website shortly.

Report by: Gill Love, CORTH doctoral associate

Photo credit: Catriona Shepard, CORTH workshop organise

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