ABSTRACT

FEMINIST THEORY ON HEALTH AND POWER – 
THE CASE OF HIV/AIDS AND WOMEN IN AFRICA

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This paper presents some results from an ongoing research project on feminism and gender in HIV activism in South Africa (especially on the Treatment Action Campaign in SA). We work by contrasting activists’ views with academic discourses on women and health. What are the feminist politics that can be detected in these different approaches? What does activism tell us about the feminism in feminist theory?

While many feminist scholars present a gender sensitive agenda and an intention to valorize the problem in complex ways, there are three themes that are worth a discussion. First, HIV/AIDS does not seem to be the major feminist concern in the Anglo-American scholarship on women’s health. Second, paradoxically, texts that focus on HIV/AIDS and women in Sub-Saharan Africa, tend to start with a presentation of very alarming numbers, e.g. that 30% of young women are already HIV+, employing a discourse of extreme catastrophe in Africa (Patton 1997). Third, in HIV/AIDS texts, the focus is on prevention—despite the numbers of women already infected. What we will do in our paper is to try to understand this peculiar and paradoxical way of dealing with this global health issue. We believe the odd discursive turns can be traced to the feminist theorization on power, medicalization, materialism, and “the other”—leading to an inability to address concrete health inequalities on a global scale. The activist approaches go beyond a dichotomous perspective on power, knowledge and global economy, thus offering new ways of thinking around politics, change, and feminism.