

## **Bringing activist voices into the classroom: Reproductive Justice Initiative's CEO, Barbara Ntumy, talks to students of 'Capitalism and Sexuality'**

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### **What was the rationale/aim of the project?**

Teaching a course on the political economy of sexuality means grappling with topics that have been historically neglected and marginalised within the field of Global Political Economy (and in the discipline of Politics more broadly). My third-year course, Capitalism and Sexuality, tries to correct this by exploring the relationship between sexuality and capitalist political economy, with a particular focus on the role of empire and colonialism in shaping gendered and sexual power relations. The reading list is primarily comprised of women, LGBTQ+, Global Majority, and Global South authors, but I am the sole lecturer: a British academic based at a British university. I therefore wanted my students to hear from someone who combines academic knowledge with extensive experience of organising and activism on the ground, in both the UK and the Global South, namely Ghana. That's why I invited Edem Barbara Ntumy, CEO of the NGO Reproductive Justice Initiative, to join us.

Edem's organisation was started by and for Black and People of Colour working in Sexual and Reproductive Health. Initially they worked on Decolonising Contraception, with the aim of challenging how colonial legacies continue to shape reproductive healthcare, including racialised health inequalities, today. This organisation later became Reproductive Justice Initiative. The organisation calls for wealth redistribution, reparations, and the rejection of capitalist frameworks—exactly the kind of real-world politics that connects to the theories we study in class. My hope was that Edem could help students see how some of the political economic phenomena we were studying—and academic concepts and theories used to understand these phenomena—actually play out in people's everyday lives and in social justice movements.

### **What was the output of the project? How was it delivered?**

The session took place in week 9 of the course, when we usually focus on development, colonialism, and sexual and reproductive health. We structured the session as part lecture, part workshop. Edem shared insights about her activism and the work of the Reproductive Justice Initiative, then she facilitated a discussion where students could explore what it actually means to decolonise sexual and reproductive health. The session was strategically timed ahead of their final essay preparations. Students write extended essays on questions like "Are development interventions on sexuality neocolonial?" and "How have neoliberal rationalities shaped the global HIV response?" Hearing from Edem gave them concrete examples to draw on when writing their essays. The session was a great opportunity for the students to move beyond just reading about sexuality and capitalism to hear from someone doing the work of challenging (colonial-)capitalist systems in practice.

### **How was the session received by students?**

The session was well-received by students. The question-and-answer session with Edem was lively and interactive with students asking wide-ranging questions about Edem's political activism and NGO work, the current political landscape surrounding reproductive justice, including the transnational anti-gender movement, and what it is like to be a radical activist in civil society and policy spaces in the UK. After the session several students approached me to say how useful the session was and asked if an additional topic could be introduced on abortion rights and struggles over decriminalisation. I will add this topic in for students in future years.

**What challenges did we face?**

There are some tensions in inviting activists into university spaces—given the ways in which academic institutions in the Global North have historically excluded and extracted from marginalised communities—so I wanted to make sure this wasn't just about using Edem's work as a 'case study'. Activist knowledge is just as valuable as academic knowledge and indeed the two are often co-constitutive, as in the case of Edem's organisation, which draws on Black Marxist feminist theorising and the broader Black radical tradition. There are also practical hurdles. Guest speaker fees, travel costs, and time for collaborative planning all require resources. Securing ongoing funding for annual speakers—especially those from outside conventional academic networks—is therefore a key issue. Finally, one session can easily feel disconnected from the rest of the course. It takes work to integrate it properly, through readings, contextualising discussions beforehand, and follow-up activities that help students connect the guest lecturer's insights to the course material.

**What are the next steps?**

Going forward, I'm hoping to invite more guest speakers linked to different course topics, while keeping race and colonialism as central themes. This approach serves multiple purposes; it will help to diversify the teaching team, introduce students to different perspectives on activism and civil society organising, and keep the course connected to real-world practice. Where possible, speakers will be involved in activism or community organising, and priority will go to people from Global Majority or other marginalised backgrounds. I'm also hoping to build a network of potential speakers and maintain relationships with organisations like Reproductive Justice Initiative. This could open possibilities for student placements or even collaborative teaching or research. In this sense, the project was about more than just changing one week's lecture on one course. It aimed to show how we can better centre historically marginalised perspectives in Politics, connect academic study to social justice activism and movement work, and help students see themselves as potential drivers of change, rather than just observers of inequality and injustice.