

“Gender-based violence and sexuality in South Africa”

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SUMMARY NOTES

ELAINE SALO

Viewed from a sociological perspective, gender-based violence (GBV), like all other violence, is always shaped by the social and historical contexts we live in – the cultural norms and expectations about gender and gender relations. Uniquely across class, race and ethnicity, GBV is perpetrated mainly by men on women and children, including boys. Yet for the most part, ‘gender’ is seen as being of concern to women and other sexual or gender minorities such as gay men and lesbian women.

A quick scan of research on GBV in South Africa at the Medical Research Council (MRC) and Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation websites indicates that this issue has been much talked about, researched and separated out into its different expressions. In graphic detail research has covered rape; gang rape; rape during wartime; rape during peace time; rape as an expression of masculine identity; domestic violence; intimate femicide; wife and partner battery; and the psychology of emotional trauma that women and children experience.

However, this vexing issue is still dismissed as not being quite as key, as pressing, as peace negotiations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) or Rwanda, or the housing needs of the poor. Yet, as Jane Bennett, Lily Artz, Lisa Vetten and others indicate, GBV is often at the heart of these issues. How can one negotiate peace in Rwanda or the DRC without addressing the role that rape of women played in these wars because their bodies ‘represent the enemy’? Amina Mama has argued that the unification of Somalia can hardly be addressed without addressing the fact that it is women who married across clans and yet were subject to violence during the collapse of the state there. With regards to housing – how much homelessness has GBV created in poor communities as trauma and battery drive women and children onto the streets or into shelters in search of peace and safety? To what extent has GBV increased the spread of HIV/Aids as men’s power over women and some men and children is displayed through sexual assault such as rape?

As Jane Bennett suggests, the problem is not ‘not being loud enough to be heard’, but rather ‘one of deafness’ – deafness on the part of a male-dominated power structure – what, in classical feminist parlance, we have termed patriarchy. It seems that, since the problem has been defined as a gender problem (read – for women only) that it therefore does not constitute a serious issue. This is despite recent MRC statistics indicating that every six hours in South Africa a woman is killed by her intimate partner. To argue that GBV is an issue left to women to solve is dangerous for two reasons. This explanation defines the problem as one that is undeserving of serious attention; it also implicitly accepts that violence is normal, natural, and,

particularly GBV is a central part of South African society. I would like to suggest that GBV incurs enormous indirect costs for the economy. Finally, despite our claims about *ubuntu* or 'humanness', GBV is a slur on all that is considered to be nurturing and humane in South African cultures.

To address the first point on violence being normalised in our society – note the responses of communities to wife-battery. It is explained away by it being a 'shameful, disgraceful situation in which most women have looked for it'. Or police responses to reports of battery – a private matter, not to be taken seriously. Or in the case of sexual assault of young women – that they were 'looking for it by dressing immodestly'. The unspoken assumption in these explanations is that South African masculinities are by nature violent and that violence is a natural part of everyday life here.

As Kopano Ratele has noted:

Our history is a violent one. Violence is a characteristic, perhaps the main characteristic of our institutions as we have them. Our personal lives are written...in blood. Our identities as men and women were stitched together in violent times, realised against brutal conditions...it may only be when we admit these things, that we are talking about men, who are not mad, but rather, if anything was mad, it was our own society; that these men are in fact the embodiment ... of that society.

Here Ratele helps us understand by arguing firstly that, in this society, gendered identities are shaped in and through violence. He also reframes the issue of violence as a societal one, and I would argue, indicates that violence is a central problem for men. In this society in transition, if we are to make a new South Africa, then men need to take on board the issue that their identities are gendered. They need to take on board that, in this society, they have mostly learned that their normal way of relating to women is informed by violence. And they need to make efforts to redress their assumptions about 'normal male behaviour'. With few exceptions, most men in South African society accept that violence is central to masculine values, and they are complicit in reproducing this violence. For if we accept that the culture of power is gendered and that, for the most part, it is the culture of power is informed by masculine values, behaviours and mores, then we can begin to understand how certain masculine values in this society reproduce everyday violence, including violence against women and children. In this manner attention is shifted away from GBV being seen as a women's problem that *they* [women] have to address (and have they been addressing it – through numerous visits to religious counsellors, to psychologists, to legal institutions, to safety shelters) – to one that is central for building a peaceful, prosperous country; and an issue that is central for men, if they are to assist in building that better society. Also, we need to note that masculinities and the central values of masculinities are socially constructed, that they change over time, and that the centrality of violence in South African masculinities is not immutable.

At a recent conference on masculinities, entitled 'From Boys to Men: Masculinities and Risk', Jeff Hearn suggested that GBV should be approached from another direction. He has framed GBV as 'problems that men and boys create, that feed into the problems that men and boys experience'. I would suggest that Hearn and Ratele are correct in reframing GBV as a problem for men, and one that has disastrous consequences for themselves and for young boys who later grow into manhood. Jeff Hearn argues rightly that the challenge is to convince men that patriarchy, namely

the concentration of power in men's hands, is not only a problem for women, it is a problem for men too because it harms children and men too.

In *Ending gender-based violence* by Ferguson et al. 2004, the authors indicate that:

men's violence demands urgent action – from the perspective of women, of children, and of men themselves...Men's violence is a problem for men. There is increasing recognition that men have a responsibility to end men's violence and indeed have much to gain thereby.

Increasingly, researchers in South Africa need to indicate how men's violence is not only harmful to women and children, but to themselves too. Let me refer to my own research on masculinities in Manenberg township. Manenberg men are socially excluded by other men, and many have adopted alternative values of masculinity that have been created within the gangs. This includes a deadening of emotional feeling and a valorisation of toughness which includes active alienation from educational authorities; from care-giving and from loving behaviour towards women. It feeds into the desire of such men to display their ability to withstand physical depredations. The economic and social costs of this macho code are enormous, both to the individual and to the society at large. It results in a low-skilled labour force, and marginalisation of individual men from work, family and community life. In addition health costs for the individual in terms of risky behaviour related to masculinity such as unsafe sexual practices, experimentation with drugs, depression and bravado can lead to further emotional corrosion and even death.

We need to hold up alternative positive models of masculinities to boys and young men – models that show that care-work such as teaching, parenting and nursing are not necessarily antithetical to masculinity. We need to show that men who do creative work such as cooking, or who talk about their emotions, their fears, their dreams, their loving relationships with children or with other male figures are not necessarily weaklings. We need to celebrate men who are successful because they have sought an alternative route to masculinity via unpopular arenas such as care-work, education and so on.

Geoff Hearn looked into the characteristics of societies which do not experience high levels of GBV. He found there is no strict division of gender relations there, and that gender roles are not seen as binary opposites as they are in South Africa. Value is accorded to care-giving, so care-giving is seen as valuable, not just a natural part of 'women's work'. There are examples of different ways of being a man. The people referred to on the Cape Flats as *moffies* are subject to gender abuse because they are different men. The values they sustain should be upheld as alternative masculine values. Unemployed men in Umthapo Centre in Durban have been nurtured into approaching the sustenance of life through working for food security. They have found alternative ways of being men by delinking themselves from the notion that they can only be men through the possession of consumer goods and the display of machismo. They have found that food production is a different way of providing care. Men and women in these poor communities have found different ways of performing their personhood.

The direct effects of GBV as suffered by women and children has huge, hidden economic implications. The show of machismo through battery, rape and so on leads to massive social and economic costs as injured women and children seek assistance from already overburdened legal and health institutions. Lily Artz's work

on GBV in the Eastern Cape provides some insights into the economic costs of GBV for individual women, their households and the regional economy. Women have to travel to legal advice centres and courts for assistance. This requires absenteeism from work (if they are working), or absences from home where they may be the primary caregivers. They may seek medical assistance from hospitals for their injuries, overburdening an already creaking healthcare system. They may seek alternative shelter – thereby increasing the numbers of homeless people. They fill shelters for women and children where they are able to obtain some temporary relief – often only to have to face the stark choice of returning to a violent domestic environment or to life on the streets. A national study still has to be done on quantifying the costs of GBV to the economy. This would enable us to reflect on the loss of human and financial capital that could otherwise have been used in socially useful ways.

On a final note I would like to say something about the issue of culture rights versus women's human rights. The recent debate between President Thabo Mbeki and Charlene Smith comes to mind. In challenging Smith's representation of sexual violence in South Africa, President Mbeki interpreted Smith's argument that culture played a major role in perpetuating the violence against women as a direct attack on black or 'ethnic' masculinity. The President's response was unhelpful because it shut down the possibility of considering that white South Africans, too, 'have culture', and that monogamy as well as polygamy have a role to play in continuing GBV; that the notion of respectability amongst the respectable working classes, the middle and upper classes assists in hiding GBV; and that religious institutions such as the church implicitly increase GBV by remaining silent on the issue – or worse, encourage women to pray and to stay in their homes in 'the interests of the family'. In the President's response he also seemed to infer that culture was not only black but also masculinised. This prevents the development of anti-GBV arguments from being formulated within a cultures-based approach that decries GBV. It also does not allow for the insistence by people like Thandabantu Nhlapo who holds that 'no society has sexual harassment and sexual abuse as part of its deep culture'. The principles of *ubuntu* – that uniquely South African value – promotes humanness, and therefore has no tolerance for GBV.

ZACKIE ACHMAT

All of you will know about TAC member Lorna Mlofana who was murdered after being gang-raped in Khayelitsha in December 2003. When her rapists found out she had Aids (even though she was on anti-retroviral treatment), they killed her. The case will come to the High Court in October. For me the critical part is why those young men did this. One was only 15 years old.

Between 70% and 80% of our members are aged between 15 and 30-something. A significant number of men have joined TAC, more than any other Aids organisation. We presumed that Sifiso Nkala became a member of TAC because he had two sisters with Aids. But then he started developing dementia and became sick with pneumonia because he too had Aids. Why did he not go on medication, even though it was available? Why do so many men join TAC? One reason could be that it is easier to *toyi-toyi* against health companies than to speak about your own vulnerability. There is a lot of potential for men to do good, but they are not used to admitting a degree of vulnerability about themselves, their families and using the public health system, except in a stigmatising way. In other words, they fear being seen as weak.

The way in which society is gendered has an important impact on how HIV is transmitted and gives clues as to how the spread of HIV can be arrested. One of the most important moments in our public history was when Nelson Mandela admitted his son Makgatho had died of Aids. At the funeral Makgatho's son spoke about the fact that his father had been admitted for treatment for alcoholism, and he spoke about a case of inter-generational sex with a girl of 17 or 18 who now has a child and is HIV-positive. To have a non-judgemental attitude is to understand the difficulty men have with being vulnerable, and the vulnerable position of women.

Discussions about violence often miss the class dimension. Every section of society is affected by patriarchal violence by men against women, although it does so in varying degrees. As long as we have a society in which most men will never have a job, we will never address violence against men, and violence against vulnerable groups – women, gays and people of a certain ethnicity in war situations. Think about the frustration of a young man of 31 years old who has two or three children, who lives with his mother who works to support him and his children, who then finds out he is HIV-positive and must find a way of telling his parents. Addressing the epidemic of violence requires addressing the lack of economic opportunity for everyone. The economic independence of women is critical. Give young men a vision of an economic future, and use this to address the culture of everyday violence.

The President is in denial about HIV/Aids and is in denial about GBV. In a developed country, most people are expected to die from the age of 75. In a developing country without Aids, the life expectancy is 65. After counting death certificates, the Medical Research Council reported that in South Africa the age group most affected by death (and here we mean Aids deaths) is only 35. We are experiencing the violence of everyday death. Our communities find it difficult to deal with domestic violence and rape because they have become insensitive to life itself. Speak out in order to reverse the death rate. There was actually a decline in violent deaths in 1997 from 57 000 to 50 000 in that year, but the number of attempted murders and assaults are largely unrecorded. We need to protect women and children first because they are so vulnerable, and we need to protect other vulnerable groups such as immigrants, gays, lesbians and transgendered individuals. We need to look at the epidemic of violence by young men against other young men. If we do not speak about this, the deafness will continue.

There are two court decisions of critical importance in relation to GBV. Alex Carmichael was assaulted by a person who had been released on bail after being charged with rape, in spite of evidence suggesting he might be violent if released. The courts ruled that every one of us has the right to put pressure on government not to release rapists on bail. In the Van Duivenboden case, two old white people running a fish and chips shop in Mowbray regularly pointed guns at each other. Even though the police had regularly been informed about this, they did not take the man's gun away. They therefore failed to prevent him holding his family hostage. There is a big job to do. We cannot discuss GBV without addressing the lack of economic opportunity. But this cannot excuse violence – one hand raised is one hand raised too many.

DISCUSSION

Is there really a link between violence and unemployment?

- There have been other periods of social change, for example, the Depression in the 1930s. There was a feeling of impotence among men who lost their employment at that time, but was there an increase in violence?
- How do we give men a sense of purpose in a country with 42% unemployment?
- There is a danger here of economic determinism – the idea that when people are poor, they will behave in a violent way. Many parts of the world are subject to extreme poverty and the level of GBV is much lower than in South Africa.
- It is economic determinism to suggest that if only men had jobs and could afford to keep their women, they would not be so violent. But we need to change men's perception of what it means to be men. Care is so underprovided for in South Africa, why not put men into positions of care-giving?
- Men feel powerless and take it out on others. I pass a lot of men at the traffic lights hoping for a job or selling low-value goods for a living.
- The rhetoric of deviance and poverty links the political economy to GBV.

Zackie Achmat: The biggest problem we have as middle class people is that have forgotten where we have come from and what we have. People criticise taxi drivers for being aggressive, but a taxi driver's job is a terrible job. Most work for less than R150 a week. It is not just about having work, but also the *quality* of work which affects our relationship to society. This is not as much about poverty as it is about deep inequality. When poor people in Khayelitsha see us middle-class people driving around in cars they may feel undermined as people because they do not have the same economic opportunities.

Elaine Salo: Some have blamed GBV on the promotion of employment equity for women at a time when there is high unemployment among men. These men are seeing themselves as victims and blaming women for what befalls them. Economic inequality does not accompany high levels of violence in societies where there is a low level of inequality and a high level of social cohesion. Our society has a high level of inequality and a low level of social cohesion. There is no certainty that development in South Africa will result in lower levels of violence.

Religious organisations and violence in society

- Do religious organisations with their lack of openness about sexuality in general maintain the status quo and contribute towards a conservative society?

Zackie Achmat: I am an atheist. Pakistan is hailed by its Western allies for its efforts in the 'war against terror', but the majority of women in prison in that country are there because they have been raped and admitted it. The Catholic Church hides paedophilia in its clergy's ranks, but sidelines gay marriage. It says no to condoms but ignores a father raping his daughter. In an interview with *Huisgenoot*, I spoke about how my dad beat my mom when we were kids. The Islamic community in Mitchells Plain were incensed because they looked up to my father.

Gratuitous violence and the media

- When I see the number of gratuitously violent movies on etv, the level of violence in our society is no surprise. We can't hope to reduce violence as long as people are exposed to this. There is a need for censorship here, although is not a popular option.
- How the media portrays GBV contributes to a siege mentality among many men.

Elaine Salo: The portrayal of gratuitous violence on television plays a role in promoting violence and the view of women as sex objects – as objects of desire subjected to graphic violence. I am not qualified to speak about censorship. How much violence should be portrayed in movies? We should source movies in which violence is not central to the story.

Zackie Achmat: The media driven by market forces and an assumption of what people want to see.

Militarisation causes violence

- High levels of violence in society are often linked to high levels of militarisation. In some societies there are high levels of armed robbery after wars because men have guns. The culture of militarism in South African society is what brings violence and poverty so closely together.

Zackie Achmat: South Africa is militaristic in parts, in others not.

Substance abuse and risky behaviour

- There is a relationship between substance abuse and risky behaviour – young people are less likely to use a condom when they are drunk. Fifty percent of cases made under the Domestic Violence Act are withdrawn because parties were drunk.

Elaine Salo: Alcohol is not a causal factor for GBV – it complicates the situation, it does not explain it.

Culture and socially assigned gender relations

- The social construction of gender identifies women as normally and naturally associated with the biological reproduction of the species, so gay men are ostracised for not fulfilling their function of reproduction.

Elaine Salo: We think about reproduction, evolutionary theory and the roles and functions of the different sexes in terms of culture. Gender roles are socially constructed and they change over time. If cultural practices denigrate an individual's person's personhood, any attempt to talk about this is critiqued as if it is racist, and as if only black people have culture.

Zackie Achmat: I am a *moffie* but I don't feel pathologised.

Do something about it, don't try to understand it completely

- GBV is a function of economics, self-esteem and our violent history. The only value of trying to understand it is if it enables us to do something about it. It is too complex to understand completely.
- I have not heard about action in this meeting, about what to do to make a difference. This has been an academic back-patting exercise. The next generation of women abusers are in school now. We need to focus on positive role models in schools. Don't research it, we know enough already, tackle the next generation of men.
- The topic of GBV gets people so upset that they look straight at root causes and exacerbating factors – unemployment, substance abuse and so on. We ghettoise and pathologise poor communities, we never talk about us in our comfortable middle-class enclaves. GBV knows no colour, no class, no age, it also occurs in teetotal environments. Race-based violence we understand. We need to break

down the divide between public and private – let leading figures say ‘I do not believe in democracy in the home’ so that it can be out in the open.

Elaine Salo: GBV is complicated. It overlaps with structural violence, militarism and so on, but that should not stop us from trying to understand it. It is through understanding that we can better think of a strategy to tackle it. Theory informs practice and vice versa. Discussing it in public is the best way of bringing the issue into the popular arena. The best thing that has happened to radio is radio talk shows because it gets people talking about these issues. They also discuss these things in community newspapers.

The discourse against inequality and exclusion is beginning to include GBV

Elaine Salo: We are a society in transition, and one of the hopeful signs I see is that we are talking about GBV as a sign of ill-health in society. We are moving on from only discussing racial inequality and the exclusion of some from political power. Discussions about misogyny and homophobia were sidelined in the past. Emma Mashinini, writing in the 1980s, referred to having been abused in her marriage, and Ellen Khuzwayo also hinted at this in her book. These conversations were being held 20 years ago, but this was seen at the time as a bourgeois feminist issue which was at odds with the work of the struggle comrades. It is encouraging that this issue is being discussed in public forums.

Providing support for positive role models

- At a certain age girls and boys start to define themselves and judge themselves in terms of success with the opposite sex. The extent to which this abates is the extent to which alternative environments for young people to engage with each other seriously. We need a different kind of currency – men and women need to engage as equals, they need to engage with each other on the quality of the points they raise in discussion.
- We have a role to play in raising our sons. Where are the fathers, why are there so many young men growing up without men in the household – uncle, father, neighbour? Lots of boys spend most of their time around women, if they had a father figure who took an interest it would make a big difference.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Elaine Salo: GBV is a key issue for the men among you. Women have been shouting for a long time about the high incidence among men of early morbidity, depression, and poor relations of affect with those nearest and dearest. Heterosexual men should take these issues up instead of ghettoising them. The statistics stay the same. You want action – start it! Young men need positive role models. I have defined my turf as writing, teaching and speaking, you men are in a workplace, what are you doing about challenging violence? The challenge is in your hands.

Zackie Achmat: We have acted to support the Save Jobs Coalition, the Alliance for Children’s Access to Social Security (ACCESS) coalition and the campaign for a Basic Income Grant. We must add our voices to make a difference in a range of arenas. To assume a fatalism about GBV – for example, saying it is culturally or economically determined – is hopeless. We have to take action. If there is one lesbian in Africa, why do we have to attack her rights? We are publicly pious and privately permissive. We won’t admit publicly what we do it private. Australia had a massive HIV epidemic because it had lots of gay men doing lots of anonymous sex with cocaine. The public health authorities in that country went on a massive harm reduction campaign by

having a campaign in gay bars and other venues. There were explicit materials showing men with erections and depicting anal sex so that the people who needed to get the message could actually see what the cause of the problem was. This direct approach stopped new infections. There is a place to address harm reduction directly. I hope some of the public health specialists will address us on harm reduction against GBV and a range of other issues.