
Feminist Africa 6: Subaltern Sexualities



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Feminist Africa is a unique forum for progressive, cutting-edge feminist intellectual dialogue and gender research on the African continent. It offers a space for theoretical and strategic debates that challenge the prevailing technocratic approaches to global development, and the reductionism of economic and policy approaches that neglect the lived realities, ingenuity and cultural production of Africa's diverse and dynamic peoples. *Feminist Africa* challenges the shared continental history of exploitation and marginalisation by attending to the complex cultures of resistance and local strategy that characterise the postcolonial era, while at the same time remaining attentive to the shifting global geopolitical configurations of power.



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Editorial: Subaltern sexualities

Elaine Salo and Pumla Dineo Gqola



Anyone who is passionate about women, gender and development in African contexts needs to interrogate discourses about African sexuality. These discourses have long histories of academic authority that have assisted in ensuring that hegemonic discourses about sexuality were at the heart of the continent's underdevelopment during colonialism. And as contributors to *Feminist Africa 5* (on Sexual Cultures) point out, sexuality remains central to contemporary conflict about citizenship in postcolonial and post-apartheid contexts.

Even a cursory glance through the many travel diaries of European explorers in the Cape Colony reveals these early colonial adventurers' voyeuristic preoccupation with local women's sexuality. More importantly, as Yvette Abrahams indicates, Linnaeus' [the 18th-century Swedish scientist and taxonomist] and others' "scientific" examination and classification of indigenous women's genitalia in the Cape informed colonial science's classification of the local populations as sub-human species: "Linnaeus classified the Khoekhoe as not quite part of the human species on the basis of his perceptions of their genitals" (2000: 102). Social Darwinian systems of classification located these populations in the lower echelons of a racial hierarchy, on the basis of categorising these men and women according to their genitalia. This provided key moral justification for genocide and enslavement.

These descriptions of the genitals of Khoekhoe and Khoi women obliterated the rich texture and nuanced quality of their everyday sexual, social and economic lives. Instead, in what would become hegemonic discourses, as well as in the texts alluded to above, these women became hyper-sexualized bodies, devoid of names, individual personalities, personal opinions, vital relations with kin, or membership in social groups. The undressed Khoekhoe woman with her "strange" elongated genitalia and protruding buttocks became a trope that justified colonial racism and the economic underdevelopment of Africa, and implicitly sustained the power and the glory of the Empire. Scientific and legal



discourse about African sexuality informed colonial policies that denied the gendered personhood and citizenship of indigenous Africans. Moreover, once they had been consigned to a social death, the colonial powers' underdevelopment of Africa in the nineteenth century could continue, virtually unhindered by the moral discourses of human rights.

As Yvette Abrahams (2000) indicates, these colonial discourses, which sustained the binaries of race, nationalism and development (white/European/civilised – black/African/uncivilised), simultaneously entrenched the hegemony of heterosexual masculine regimes and homogenised the internal complexity and diversity of African sexualities as they interlocked with gender, identity and the political economy. Yet, historians of colonial processes in Africa have for the most part ignored the nexus between the discursive construction of gender, sexuality and colonial underdevelopment of Africa. Recently, however, feminist historians such as Luise White (1990), Helen Bradford (1991) and Terri Barnes (2002) have eloquently traced the incestuous relationship between colonial policies on migration, housing and reproduction on the one hand, and gender and sexuality on the other. These studies, based as they were upon innovative research methods that examined the historical record through the lenses of gender and sexualities, pointed to the need for a revision of historical methodology.

So too, as the contributions to this issue of *Feminist Africa* attest, an exciting genre of feminist studies on sexualities and identities in Africa suggest that in postcolonial contexts, the discourses, norms and practices of heterosexuality, centrally anchored in male authority, are emerging or have hardened into the central basis for defining personhood, gender and sexuality. Clearly, such heteronormative definitions hold major implications for human rights claims, as well as the diversity of gender and sexual relations that are considered permissible between consenting adults in diverse African countries. Current writings on sexuality inform our understanding of gender, and have begun to challenge dominant understandings of masculinity and femininity on this continent. Yet much of this writing on sexuality examines only how sexuality underwrites heterosexual masculinities and femininities (see, for example, Rwebangira and Liljestrom [1998] for Tanzania; Morrell [2000] for Southern Africa) and such scholarship itself falls within the parameters of prescribed heterosexual gender roles. The contributors to this issue of *Feminist Africa* seek to explore the diversity of sexualities that exist across normative heterosexuality and homosexuality.

While heterosexual masculine regimes appear hegemonic to notions of gender, personhood and sexualities in Africa, their dominance is fragile and



contested from multiple sites in civil society. Even in societies where the human rights of women and gender minorities are only cursorily acknowledged in, or are absent from national constitutions, societal responses to women and men who have transgressed the heteronormative masculine norms and practices, are often extreme, and demonstrated in acts of interpersonal and structural violence. These severe reactions to perceived transgressions attest to the very fragile, contingent nature of heteronormative masculine regimes. In her study of witchcraft accusations in Ghana in *Feminist Africa* 5, Yaba Badoe describes how women who are independent social agents are perceived to be such a threat to patriarchal, heteronormative cultural practices, beliefs, and institutions that they are accused of being witches, beaten and banished from their homes. Similarly, although under happier circumstances, Palesa Beverley Ditsie gave a landmark speech to the government forum at the Beijing Conference in 1995, challenging the heterosexual biases implicit in the international women's movement, and calling for the recognition and acknowledgement of lesbians' human rights as a key part of the struggle for women's human rights.



Other social movements have emerged in response to the HIV/AIDS crisis in southern Africa, such as the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), led until recently by a gay man, Zackie Achmat, have challenged the heterosexism of anti-retroviral treatment programmes. These were initially offered almost exclusively to HIV-positive mothers-to-be to prevent transmission to their unborn children. So too, as Wendy Isaack describes in her interview with Pumla Dineo Gqola in this volume, the Gay and Lesbian Equality Project has consistently pressured the South African Constitutional Court to grant lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTi) persons full and equal standing under the law. Even with South Africa's positive track record of changing much South African legislation between 1994 and 2004 in order bring it in line with Constitutional protection of minority sexual rights and freedom from discrimination, NGOs must continue to pressure for legal revision of the heteronormative biases in definitions of marriage and parenthood.

Contributors to this issue of *Feminist Africa* have challenged the dominance of heteronormativity as assumed in the limited set of sexualities considered permissible within African societies and associated primarily with patriarchal gender identities. Leaders within the African state and in civil society have often evoked the notion of culture, both to defend the hegemonic hold of heteronormative gender relations as anchored within dominant notions of masculinity, and to silence any nascent claims by those who self-identify

as homosexual, bisexual or transgender persons – even though, for instance, cross-dressing has a long history in parts of Africa, as pointed out by Jessie Kabwira Kapasula in this issue.

In her article “Re-righting the body”, Jessica Horn interrogates the evocation of morality associated with an assumed authentic “tradition” or “culture” that is used to justify the tide of homophobia in Africa. She traces the development of sexual rights that are not implicitly linked to heterosexual gender identities, and challenges both local and international feminist organisations to take up the struggle for sexual rights in Africa. In the same vein, Kopano Ratele argues in this issue that the recent rape trial of Jacob Gedleyihlekisa Zuma, erstwhile deputy-president of South Africa, and the latter’s revelations about what constituted “legitimate” as opposed to “unnatural” sexual activity, have fuelled the extant robust debates about gender, permissible sexual relations, sexual rights and citizenship in post-apartheid South Africa. Ratele indicates how Zuma’s power as a political leader helps to inform and enforce a hegemonic discursive gender regime located in heterosexuality, that is increasingly being challenged by feminists and LGBTi activists. Ratele follows the example of others such as Sylvia Tamale in Uganda (2003) as he points to the discursive power of the utterances of African leaders as a potent means of constituting and re-instating dominant societal beliefs about sexuality and gender roles, thereby sustaining gender inequality and homophobia.

As these scholars correctly note, the power of such individual opinions or their silences about permissible gender and sexual relations can be life-threatening. Their words of warning are borne out in the murder of Lorna Mlosana, the HIV/AIDS activist from Khayelitsha in Cape Town, South Africa. In her poignant obituary in this issue to this ordinary South African woman, Margie Orford maps out how men’s desire to control women’s sexuality through the rape epidemic in South Africa, coupled with the misogynistic notion that women are the primary vector of the HI virus, fuelled Lorna’s murder.

Chipo Hungwe’s article emphasises the importance of historicity in our conceptualisation of heterosexuality and heteronormativity. She addresses the meanings of heteronormative gender identities as these interlocked with race within the historical context of colonialism in Zimbabwe. She describes how black heterosexual masculinity relied heavily upon the colonial authorities’ control over women’s productive and reproductive labour, and enforced a notion of feminine respectability that undermined black women’s autonomy. Similarly, in contemporary Zimbabwe, the state attempts to manage the



current socio-cultural and economic crisis by categorizing women according to notions of “respectability”. However, as Hudita Mustafa indicates in her study of Senegalese women’s display of homosocial eroticism through the aesthetics of beauty, even as hegemonic patriarchal regimes police and reinforce women’s permissible gender roles and sexuality, women are still able to render the display of normative heterosexuality fluid.

Similarly, Shelley Barry’s standpoint, in which she reflects courageously on her sexuality as a disabled lesbian, evocatively lays bare our assumptions about the sexually neutered disabled body. She writes against the myth that only “able” bodies can be desired or evoke desire, revealing the extent to which sexuality and desire have become commodified, with only certain bodies considered suitable in the marketplace of desire. These bodies are able, youthful, often heterosexual, thin, middle-class; they adhere to contemporary Western dress styles and are ethnically neutral – or, occasionally, interestingly “exotic”. By celebrating the beauty and power of her own body and its scars, Shelly Barry provides a bold counterpoint to the dominant discourse of the commodified body in the global marketplace, which brands the disabled body as asexual. Shelley not only blurs the seemingly distinctive boundaries between homosexuality and heterosexuality, but also points to the plasticity and diversity of human sexuality.



The profiles of the organisations Sister Namibia and Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Trust, as well as the book reviews in this volume, reflect the small but growing activist-scholarly engagement with subaltern sexualities in Africa. Finally, in her reflections on the 50th anniversary of the famous march on the seat of apartheid power in 1956 by South African women, Elinor Sisulu reminds us of the rich traditions and real dangers that African feminists confront in the 21st century. Read, reflect and act.

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Re-righting the sexual body

Jessica Horn



Introduction¹

"There is a need for action and [lesbians] need everybody's help. Wherever you are, speak out for them and give them your words of encouragement."
 – Ugandan researcher on the African Women's Life Histories Project (Nagadya, 2005: 75).

"On a daily basis we struggle with contradictions that make us strangers to our bodies. Those from whom we should be able to expect support, too often end up betraying us." – Nigerian activist Dorothy Aken'ova in a speech before the UN Commission for Human Rights (Aken'ova, 2004a).

In January 2006, the Nigerian federal government announced plans to introduce punitive and homophobic legislation, on President Olusegun Obasanjo's proudly announced premise that such unions are "un-Biblical, unnatural and definitely un-African". The bill proposes to criminalise same-sex marriages, charge any officials who attempt to solemnise them, and to make activism for gay rights a criminal offence. Such a move seeks to close down political space for discussion and debate while violating the fundamental rights of all Nigerians to freedom of expression, association and democratic participation. The bill rides on the back of existing legislation in civil and Shari'a courts,² and aims, one protest statement asserts, to unite a "splintered and critical electorate" around an "easy scapegoat in distressing times" (Uhuru-Wazobia, 2006).

The Nigerian bill follows a ban on same-sex marriages in Uganda, the criminalisation of lesbianism and same-sex marriages in Zanzibar, and a slew of hate speech against gays and lesbians by Robert Mugabe, Sam Nujoma and other African leaders. With the exception of South Africa and its egalitarian (and much admired) Constitution, many African countries have in the past decade marked the continent as a place of legally-mandated homophobic intolerance.³ The tremendous furore and debate surrounding same-sex relations and identities stem, in most part, from a reaction to the blossoming movements for

lesbian and gay equality, and broader claims for respecting sexual rights within Africa's borders. These movements have contested hegemonic definitions of cultural propriety and appropriate sexuality, thus questioning discourses at the heart of the patriarchal body politic.

This article explores the concept of "sexual rights" and what this means in the context of state-sponsored and publicly supported homophobia across the African continent. It explores the growth of the movement for sexual rights in Africa and internationally, and looks at recent interventions by activist women. I contend that the use of a discourse of "culture" to defend and legislate homophobia constitutes a form of cultural violence, and urge the engagement of broader progressive social movements in the defence of sexual rights.



The definition of sexual rights, agreed internationally in the Beijing Platform for Action, states that "the human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination, and violence" (United Nations, 1995). Activist coalitions such as Health, Empowerment, Rights and Accountability (HERA) have critiqued the absence of "positive" rights to pleasure and enjoyment in the UN statement, and the implicit framing of sexual rights in purely heterosexual terms. Their Action Sheet provides an alternative definition, defining sexual rights as:

a fundamental element of human rights. They encompass the right to experience a pleasurable sexuality, which is essential in and of itself and, at the same time, is a fundamental vehicle of communication and love between people. Sexual rights include the right to liberty and autonomy in the responsible exercise of sexuality...[and]...the right to choose one's sexual partners without discrimination" (1999).

The notion of sexual rights includes the right *not* to be sexually active. Sexual rights are not "new" sets of rights, but are rather based on the application of existing internationally recognised rights within the domain of the sexual body.

Of course, the debate is not just about "sex". Our bodies are our primary means of participating socially, economically, politically, spiritually and creatively in society. They are the beginning point of the practical application of rights; the place in which rights are exercised, and for women in particular, the place where rights are most often violated. Without knowledge of and control over our bodies, including our sexuality, women's rights can be neither fully exercised nor enjoyed. The value of a human rights lens in the debate on sexuality is that it scrutinises state accountability (particularly in terms of state duty

to protect citizens and their rights), and distributes the onus of responsibility for change as a collective rather than an individual project. My use of “rights” here rests not simply on the application of normative legal frameworks, but on the conceptualisation of rights as the outcome of people’s struggles for recognition, respect and the equitable redistribution of resources (Nyamu-Musembi, 2000; McFadden, 2000a).

Embodying rights

There are historical periods in which sexuality is more sharply contested and more overtly politicised. During such periods, the domain of erotic life is renegotiated (Rubin, 1984).

Despite the diversity of Africa’s social and cultural histories, the European colonial project succeeded in enforcing new cultural hegemonies based on prudish and heteronormative discourses of morality. Burton argues that “it was often through reference to sexuality and with an eye to maintaining a certain heterosexual cultural order that the experiments of colonial modernity were attempted” (1999: 1). Discourses of domesticity, predicated on a reproductive, monogamous sexuality were central to this gendering of colonial African geographies (Hansen, 1992; Barnes, 1999), reinforced by the ordering of the colonial state along the public/private divide. Mama (1997) maps the colonial containment of women in the private sphere as a process of systematised violence, one that restricted women to increasingly limited spheres through legislation and the policing of public space.

As many African feminists have argued, womanhood in Africa continues to be framed by narratives of domesticity (see, for example, Mama, 1997; McFadden, 2000; Tamale, 2002). A litany of proverbs, contemporary cultural norms and laws reinforce the idea that the “proper” or “real” African woman is a woman who is heterosexual, married, bears children, and more often than not, pleases her husband sexually.⁴ This construct of the “woman-mother” has also coloured policy and programming concerning women’s health in Africa, where reproductive health and family planning services for married women have been prioritised over services for sexual well-being and health, or the sexual and reproductive health needs of non-heterosexual or unmarried women. The trope of domesticity is also perpetuated in legal frameworks that deal with women’s rights, including the African Charter for Human and People’s Rights. The charter sanctions the [heterosexual] family as the primary unit of society, thereby extending rights to women according to the degree to which they participate in it (Horn, 2005; Onoria, 2002).



What is problematic about this discourse of domesticity is not so much that it supports and reifies motherhood, a status and identity which is desired and enjoyed by many women. Rather, what is problematic is the *limitation* of recognition of women's bodily and other rights to those concerns that support the patriarchal family alone. As McFadden argues, "[d]omesticity has become a controlling ideology that interfaces male/female relationships in the private [domain]. Without sexual health and sexual rights, African women remain within a status quo – mainly in the heterosexual family institution – as the means through which men reproduce themselves socially, culturally and sexually" (2000b).

In this context, African feminists have sought to emphasise sexual rights in order to allow dialogue and activism to grow around identities, desires and needs that fall outside of the limited framings of motherhood and marriage. Feminist interventions on the issue of sexual rights begin by charting an alternative moral geography of the body, mapped by the ethics of autonomous decision-making and the right to self-fulfilment. Some consider sexual rights in the context of the present epidemic of sexual violence and the gendered spread of HIV/AIDS, emphasising rights to freedom from violation (Klugman, 2000). Others focus on "positive" rights to sexual pleasure, fulfilment and choices regarding sexual partners (Bennett, 2000; McFadden, 2000a; Aken'ova, 2004b).

For instance, Dorothy Aken'ova's extensive research and practical experience of sexual health and rights work in northern Nigeria reveals the resonance of these agendas in the communities she works in. While conservative leaders seek to control women's sexual agency as a source of community "disorder", Aken'ova's work reveals that the reverse is true. Lack of pleasure and choice are central concerns for both heterosexual women and sexual minorities, and contribute to destabilising relationships, increased violence and the spread of life-threatening disease (Aken'ova, 2004c, Pressley, 2005).

Elsewhere in Africa, organisations such as Sister Namibia have actively campaigned for lesbian rights as part of a broad and inter-related agenda of women's rights to political participation, an end to violence against women, economic rights and access to safe abortion. Their work is rooted in a mixed constituency of rural and urban women, and puts into practice the concept of the indivisibility of rights (see Rothschild, 2005: 161–174).

The momentum of local activism and African women's claims to ownership and control of their own bodies led to the founding of AMANITARE, the first pan-African network on sexual and reproductive health and rights in 2000.



Although not without controversy, the founding partners agreed to a conceptual framework that included non-discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, and articulated a commitment to challenge normative concepts of culture and tradition where they impinge on the rights of women and girls (Horn, 2003). The Coalition of African Lesbians, founded in 2004, tackles homophobia head-on, framing the struggle for recognition and full citizenship for lesbians in a comprehensive rights framework (Ngubane and Frank, 2005). With members from 14 countries,⁵ the Coalition presents a serious challenge to claims that non-heterosexual practice or identity is “un-African.”

Advocacy at the regional level has succeeded in extending some of these boundaries around normative definitions of womanhood and women’s rights, although full realisation of such rights has not been achieved in the domain of sexual choice. The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, which entered into force in 2005, is a victory for African women’s activism (African Union, 2003). Unsurprisingly perhaps, the Protocol remains heteronormative, and contains no explicit reference to sexual rights or choice. However, the Protocol does include elements of the sexual rights agenda, including the right to freedom from violence and protection against sexually transmitted infections. It also emphasises the indivisibility of rights, the importance of economic rights and the responsibility of states to eliminate discrimination against women. In an important development, the Protocol acknowledges the validity of women’s claims to rights, regardless of marital status (Article 1[f]). It also embraces a dynamic view of culture, acknowledging the need to transform traditions and customs that justify violation of women’s rights, and supporting women’s roles as authors of new cultural frameworks (Article 17).

In articulating feminist agendas concerning the body, the movement for sexual rights has become implicated in a re-conceptualisation of cultural and political identities in Africa, including the gendered meanings attached to community, citizenship, and other narratives and structures of belonging. The sexual rights discourse also exposes points of tension between the demands of African feminists, who find their political roots within local histories of African women’s resistance, and conservative commentators, who see the feminist agenda in Africa as an index of misguided Westernisation, and make “restorationist appeals to implicitly masculine constructions of African culture” (Mama, 2002).



International bodies

The contested history of sexual rights in international declarations and human rights instruments has been exhaustively covered elsewhere (see, for example, Tambiah, 1995; Petchesky, 2000; Correa, 2000). What is interesting for purposes of this debate is not so much the definitions that resulted in the international instruments, as the processes involved. As Ali Miller (2000: 76–78) points out, rulings on sexual rights at the United Nations predate the world conferences of the 1990s. As early as 1904, international agreements sought to safeguard women’s sexuality by protecting women from violations of their “honour” through rape or forced prostitution.⁶ As with colonial legislation, state protection was offered to “good women”, preserving chastity and thus community integrity. The revived discussion on sexual rights at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development and 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women were marked by very different demands. The call – coming from a diverse cross-section of women around the globe – was for recognition of women’s rights to make their *own* choices regarding their sexuality, and an acknowledgment that states were responsible for respecting and enabling, not limiting these choices.



The conservative establishment has been less than warm in its reception of this call to reframe sexual rights. Cynthia Rothschild’s analysis of activist experiences in UN negotiations reveals a systematic attack on the agenda of sexual autonomy and on supporters of women’s rights by representatives of Christian churches, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, conservative governments and associated NGOs. She describes how they have “forged a rhetoric that unites nationalism, traditionalism and religious fundamentalism” (2005: 84), and employ it in sustained attacks on individual activists and the women’s rights agenda as a whole. Her research demonstrates how sexuality, including the naming of women’s rights activists as sexual “deviants” or “unmotherly”, is used to attempt to discredit valid activism and exclude certain people from debate and dialogue. Other tactics have included physical harassment and still more dramatic acts of intolerance – for instance, priests performing exorcisms in a room where a lesbian caucus had met.

African governments have largely sided with conservative “moralists” in discussing and voting on sexual rights. At Beijing, African governments were willing to consider a limited articulation of sexual health and rights in light of the related epidemics of violence against women and HIV/AIDS on the African continent (Klugman, 2000). However, with the exception of South Africa, African

governments voted *en masse* to eliminate any mention of sexual orientation from the final document (Jimenez and Careaga, 2003: 21–22), and have held this position in subsequent negotiations. As Aken’ova comments, these experiences “have confirmed that the context in which [activists] work... promotes the heterosexual male as the uniquely empowered sexual agent” (2004c: 4).

Despite a barrage of criticism and insults, African feminist and lesbian activists⁷ have been vocal in these forums. They have continued to put the full gamut of sexual rights on the agenda, lobbying African states for support, and holding the line against systematic attacks by their governments working in concert with conservative and fundamentalist forces. Thus while international legal instruments and declarations are often portrayed as “foreign” agendas, or as “impositions” on Africa’s indigenous cultural and social sovereignty, they are felt by feminist activists to be incomplete responses to *local* demands for justice.



“But it is against our culture!”

“[W]hen you hear about attacks on minorities, whether sexual or whatever, it is not a good sign, because who is to define who is African? Such behaviour usually leads to the closing down of the cosmopolitan nature of what is African” (Salo, 2003: 26).

Resisting moral corruption from the West is a common motif in the homophobic rhetoric of African leaders. What is bemusing is that moral condemnation and persecution of non-heteronormative behaviour is often supported by allusion to two texts: laws criminalizing “unnatural” sex and the Bible. Both were introduced via the European colonisation of Africa, and in the case of the latter, carried in again by a new wave of US-driven Pentecostal evangelism. Pentecostalism has been quickly absorbed into communities facing the crisis of HIV/AIDS, severe poverty and armed conflict, providing space for communal catharsis while re-entrenching conservative Christian mores. Furthermore, as discussed above, in international negotiations, African states often seek solidarity with conservative Western governments, including the United States and the Vatican, to assert their claims against sexual rights and, in particular, homosexuality. This selective, trans-cultural solidarity suggests that homophobia is less an “African” tradition than a patriarchal tradition that has been hijacked into local cultural discourses.⁸

The assertion that homosexuality is sinful and against the will of God has also been contested by a small but important number of progressive African religious leaders. Drawing on the spiritual principles of respect and love for

others, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, South African Imam Mushin Hendricks, Ugandan Bishop Ssenjonyo (recently excommunicated for his stance), Nigerian Reverend Jide Macaulay and others have called for an end to the persecution of lesbian and gay people. The Metropolitan Community Church, with branches in South Africa and Nigeria, has opened its doors to lesbian and gay worshippers and pastors. Clearly, faith in God does not exclude tolerance of diversity.

In a direct challenge to the “othering” of homosexuality in Africa, there is a growing body of research, documentation and artistic expression by and about same-sex desiring African women. The recently released edited collection *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives* (Morgan and Wieringa, eds. 2005), reviewed in this volume, captures some of these stories from women in East and Southern Africa. Contributions from South Africa and Kenya document the presence of customary marriages between women, despite attempts by colonial rulers and missionary churches to suppress them. This adds to research by Chacha (2003) and others into “traditional” forms of same-sex marriages between women, which are socially recognised and often entail the formal exchange of bride price. Individual narratives also reveal the discovery and creation of new names and new sub-cultures that transgress gendered and sexual norms, affirming women’s roles as authors of culture. It must be borne in mind that in all the contexts under review, women do this amidst the constant policing of their sexuality by friends, family and the public. Appraising the situation in Tanzania, for instance, Sophie Musa Mohammed (2005: 54) points out that contemporary heteronormative culture results not only in social ostracism for lesbians, but that lesbian women’s rights to health, work, education, and meaningful participation in society can be disregarded with impunity. Many women interviewed in her collection assert the need for a right to privacy concerning the intrusion of the state into their personal decisions. This includes the right to choose whether and how to express their sexual identity, and with whom. But such sexual agency is often exercised at a heavy personal cost. There is also little institutional or social support for individuals facing discrimination or simply navigating their own emotions and possible choices.

Needless to say, the extent of the negative attention the issue of sexual choice has received at a legislative level and in popular discussion across Africa suggests the degree of threat it is believed to pose to the functioning of hegemonic societies. Such hegemony endows otherwise subaltern men with a sense of being entitled to police women’s sexuality and commit hate crimes against same-sex desiring women in the name of a so-called collective good.



This hegemony also makes it possible to accuse anyone who unveils the history and presence of other sexualities in our midst of cultural treason. And as hate crimes against lesbians and threats against vocal activists persist, we know that death is often set as the sentence.⁹ It seems clear, then, that the use of “culture” to sanction the erasure of dialogue about alternative sexualities, and to condone homophobia, constitutes a form of cultural *violence*.

Towards the democratisation of belonging

Realising sexual rights, including the right to choice of partner, presents one of the more complicated – yet exciting – challenges for the fulfilment of justice. It is an issue that brings into question the basic application of equality and non-discrimination, the nature of identity and citizenship, and (in the light of Nigeria’s recent legal moves), the right to freedom of thought, expression and association. Yet the issue is conspicuous in its absence from progressive social movement agendas. Within the women’s movement there is still notable antipathy to the inclusion of sexual rights, in particular sexual orientation, as a serious advocacy issue (see, for instance, Tamale, 2003).



The growing visibility of “homophobia from the left”, including on the part of actors in the women’s movement, suggests that there is still a need for education, as well as dialogue, about the links between sexuality, heteronormativity and the broader agenda of women’s equality. Whether we are heterosexual or not, homophobic persecution affects us all. As Phumi Mtetwa argues “the possibility that a woman who transgresses social and cultural norms can be accused of being a lesbian has the effect of paralysing the expression of all women’s sexuality, including that of heterosexual women” (2003: 24). These forms of public baiting seek to reassert the boundaries of “permissible” sexuality, and like traditions of witch-pointing, threaten social death for any woman whose acts or speech threaten the sexual status quo.¹⁰ The task of asserting sexual rights is a difficult one, particularly as the growth of the popular and political influence of conservative religion has re-constricted the moral space in which sexuality is defined and engaged. These monologues of intolerance have also contributed to further misunderstanding and misinformation about same-sex practice and identities.

As stated at the beginning of this article, the agenda of sexual rights is not about creating “new” rights, but rather acknowledging that people have the *same* rights, including the right to make decisions regarding their sexuality and relationships, and to participate and be recognised in the economic, social

and political life of their community with *and beyond* their sexual identities and preferences. By giving voice to the presence and legitimacy of histories of sexual diversity in Africa, we begin to enlarge the boundaries of permissible dialogue, and to lend solidarity to the struggle for the right of all people to live fulfilling lives, free from fear and persecution. I share the activist contention that change, even in the most deep-rooted systems of intolerance, is possible.

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Footnotes

- 1 The author would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments and suggestions on this piece.
- 2 In Nigeria, a conviction for a homosexual act carries a maximum penalty of 14 years imprisonment in civil courts, and death by stoning in Shari'a courts. The new bill proposes a sentence of up to five years for engaging in or presiding over a same-sex marriage ceremony, adopting children as a same-sex couple, forming and registering organisations, or gathering publicly and expressing a same-sex identity.
- 3 A handful of African countries, primarily in Francophone west and central Africa, do not have legislation criminalizing sexual acts between people of the same sex/gender. In some countries, colonial legislation against "unnatural" sexual acts (or "carnal knowledge against the order of nature", as phrased in British colonial laws) has been repealed on the basis that it criminalises forms of heterosexual sex or auto-eroticism.
- 4 I agree with Pereira (2003) that it is unhelpful and inaccurate to argue that African women are uniformly unable to exercise sexual agency, and acknowledge that women's right to sexual pleasure is articulated both in women's sexual counter-

cultures and in hegemonic discourses (e.g., Islamic discourse on the sexual rights of wives). This articulation, however, is invariably framed in the context of heterosexual marriage.

- 5 These include Sierra Leone, Ghana, Nigeria, Liberia, Rwanda, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, South Africa, Mozambique and Namibia.
- 6 Miller (2000: 100, fn 22, 23) mentions anti-“White Slavery” legislation against trafficking in the early 1900s, and the 1949 Geneva Convention, which calls on states to protect women “against any attack on their honour”.
- 7 These include South African lesbian activist Palesa Beverly Ditsie, who presented the statement of the international lesbian caucus to the governmental forum at the Beijing conference in 1995.
- 8 Those who allege that an acceptance of lesbianism is “Western” tend to ignore the fact that there is a long tradition of homophobic sentiment in the global North. Social and political antipathy to lesbian (and other non-heteronormative) existence continues throughout the global North, despite the introduction of equality legislation and visible social movements around sexual orientation.
- 9 There have been a number of tragic homophobic murders of lesbians in recent years, including the murders of Fanny Ann Eddy in Freetown, Sierra Leone in 2004 and South Africans Lorna Mlosana and Zoliswa Nkonyana in 2005 and 2006. Activist groups such as the Forum for the Empowerment of Women (FEW) in South Africa have been working to address rising homophobic rapes of lesbians, often in public and by groups of men.
- 10 Yaba Badoe’s exploration of life stories of women in a witches’ camp in Gambaga, Northern Ghana, is revealing here (*Feminist Africa* 5). Her analysis shows that women are labelled by their community as “witches” when they transgress gender norms by expressing sexual agency or developing economic independence. Such accusations result in a social and economic exile (2005).



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Eros, beauty and crisis: notes from Senegal

Hudita Nura Mustafa

Women have been taught to suspect the erotic urge, the place that is uniquely female. So, just as we tend to reject our blackness because it has been termed inferior, as women we tend to reject our capacity for feeling, our ability to love, to touch the erotic, because it has been devalued. But it is within this that so much lies of our power, our ability to posit, our vision. Because once we know how deeply we can feel, we begin to demand from all of our life pursuits that they be in accordance with these feelings....

I believe in the erotic and I believe in it as an enlightening force within our lives as women. I have become clearer about the distinctions between the erotic and other apparently similar forces. We tend to think of the erotic as an easy, tantalising sexual arousal. I speak of the erotic as the deepest life force, a force which moves us toward living in a fundamental way. And when I say living I mean it as that force which moves us toward what will accomplish real positive change.

Audre Lorde in an interview with Claudia Tate (1983: 100-15).

The first scene of the film, *Karmen Gei* (Ramaka, Senegal 2002; an adaptation of Bizet's opera, *Carmen*), is deceptively familiar. It shows a Senegalese *sabar* or dance, with *griot*¹ drummers and women circled on the sand, clapping and singing joyously. It is night-time, and with the entry of Karmen, a striking, towering, dark-brown woman with long braids, the story begins. Dressed in a sheer, flowing black boubou, Karmen starts to dance with abandoned yet deliberate movements. Each opening of her long legs, like a fan, stirs up and cools down the erotic charge of her presence. The scene could be anywhere in Dakar, where there is no dearth of tall, beautiful women for whom such public events are the turning points of personal and community drama. But from the presence of one seated woman in the audience, we know that the story is particular. Despite this woman's efforts to suppress her response, her breath deepens, her chest rises and falls, her eyes fixate on Karmen, and her

desire is irrepressibly awoken. Yet this is no ordinary gaze of desire, nor even of transgressive lesbian desire, for Angelique, the woman, wears a khaki uniform – she is Karmen’s prison warden. The scene is not a Dakar alley, but a woman’s prison on Goree Island,² and the famous refrain from Bizet’s opera, “Love is like a bird which cannot be tamed/ If you cage it, it will fly away” has special resonance in this case.³

From this scene onwards, the character Karmen Gei does nothing less than disrupt the law in its concrete, institutional and intangible forms. First, with the help of a lovesick Angelique, she escapes from Goree Island, across the liberating sea, back to the spectacle and chaos of urban Dakar. Here, she embarks on a new course of flamboyant disruption: she gatecrashes the wedding of an elite family and seduces the groom, Lamine, a police officer. First she throws the groom her long scarf, which he eagerly sniffs – drawing attention to the power of fabric and fragrance in the erotic repertoire of the Senegalese woman. Next, she provokes his bride into a dance contest which stretches the limits of propriety, as they both hike up their wrappers and dance the fan dance of the hips. Almost exposing her loins as she dances, Karmen’s antagonism becomes anger and she outperforms the bourgeois bride, finally throwing her on the ground with contempt.⁴ Then, having captivated the groom and outraged this “respectable” family, Karmen, as if a *griot*, seizes the stage as if to sing praises, but in this case utters denunciations of the corrupt political elite: “You are all evil! You’ve swallowed up the country, but we’ll eat your guts. You’ve swallowed up the country. But it will stick in your throat.”

Thus Karmen is a woman who not only arouses but incites; she subverts and disrupts politics; she not only escapes from prison (through an inverted version of the heteronormative script in which a hapless man in authority is seduced), she frees herself from the restrictions of normative womanhood. And though she ultimately meets her death at the hands of a resentful male lover, like the typical *femme fatale* of the Western operatic genre, this does not nullify the film’s powerful exploration of the force of female sexuality to contest and disrupt social and political order. Her quest for freedom and love questions the conditions and possibilities for women’s realisation as political, social, cultural and sexual agents. Her story suggests that an outlaw woman may have no other recourse for political intervention than through seduction – of both men and women, of those with repressive power (the prison-guard) and those with social and political power (the bridegroom) – and the erotic power of her body, beauty and sexuality. This power is evocative, if not carnivalesque, of *mokk*



pucc,⁵ the influence which Senegalese women wield through the seduction of patriarchs in their conjugal beds. Such interpretations of the film raise broader questions, to be explored in this piece, of the possibility for self- and social transformation in Senegalese women's cultures of beauty and sexuality, and the opportunities or constraints which African crises engender for relations of interdependence, affect and eroticism amongst women.

In order to explore these issues, I will offer in this article a series of observations and reflections upon relationships among Senegalese women in their roles, capacities and strivings as mothers, friends, rivals and entrepreneurs. These relationships are all, of course, mediated by relations of gender, class, caste and religion. I am therefore taking the concept of "sexual cultures" to mean not only regulated and resistant sexual practice, but erotics, intimacy and intersubjectivity. As Audre Lorde suggests in her Utopian essay, *The Uses of the Erotic*:



The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change.... Of course, women so empowered are dangerous. So we are taught to separate the erotic from most vital areas of our lives other than sex (1984: 53–55).

We must ask to what extent the dynamics of the regulation of female sexuality, so naturalised and valorised in beauty and sexual cultures, are open to enduring contestation or change. What opportunities or constraints do multi-faceted African crises bring for re-ordering relations of interdependence, affect and eroticism among women?

By focusing on relationships among women, I seek to explore the erotics of several arenas in public, private and social life in which women reveal such "empowerment", both at the centre and the margins of dominant heteronormative relationships and social structures.

In particular, I will explore the dynamics of seduction as rehearsed and performed by women among women: how they negotiate the "gaze" of other women and their own reflected needs and desires. The socio-economic crises and the resulting structural reconfigurations of both domestic and public spheres in Senegal have had a gendered impact, and I show that local women have drawn upon innovative strategies in order to negotiate them. Drawing upon my fieldwork in Senegal, I will suggest how a feminist agenda on sexual

cultures might reconsider and theorise material from everyday life that may not seem directly related to heteronormativity, sexual practices and regulation.

Agency, power and beautification

In postcolonial Africa, institutional and normative crises suggest the need for social agents and analysts alike to look to unconventional forms and sites of power for a renewal of self, action and vision. Political and economic crises across the continent have led to socio-cultural and moral disruption, and it is no exaggeration to say that changing gender relations at work and home have resulted in crises of masculinity and femininity. The ramifications of such crises have yet to be fully considered, even if they are suggested in the conditions of sexual health and disease, sexual violence and conflict that all too often prevail across the continent. In particular, the contemporary African trilogy of sex, AIDS and death generates sensational media representations of the distressed bodies of African women – perhaps once beautiful, but now seen as embodying (literally) powerlessness. Yet arguably, even in the most destitute and desperate of conditions, women strive to cultivate an appropriate and attractive *bodily* appearance, be it of propriety, piety or beauty. If, for instance, newspaper reports routinely display the human misery of refugee camps, it must be noted that many refugee women still arrange their headscarves carefully. Similarly, poor urban women invest precious coins on lotions to soften hands roughened by too much housework and harsh cleaning agents. Beauty and beautification are thus, it seems, important aspects of women's strategies for survival.

Senegambian women have a long and rich tradition of cultivation of self in relation to others through ceremonial exchange, expressive culture and the cult of personal beauty. The contemporary practices and debates of local women in Senegal show that beauty is of social, moral and practical consequence, as will be discussed below. Through self-care, care of intimate others and adornment, women reassemble bodies and selves that are jeopardised or threatened by patriarchy and crisis. Also through these processes, women strengthen their commitment and ties to each other. *Teraanga* is the Wolof ethic of hospitality and reciprocity which undergirds Senegambian culture, and prescribes a range of duties in everyday life, from public etiquette, to mutual financial aid, to attention to one's tired husband at the end of the day. This ethic necessitates one's presence, performance and presentation at social events; it motivates the often excessive sartorial display and exchange of gifts that takes place at weddings, naming ceremonies and the like. However, many criticise the "hypocrisy"



of women who appear at such events expensively dressed, but at the cost of deep debt, reneging on their financial obligations to others, or by resorting to theft and sex work.

For the fact is that in contemporary, cosmopolitan Dakar, women now face deepening socio-economic vulnerability, along with new opportunities. According to the scant available research, in contrast to other West African societies, urban Senegalese women's trade activities were limited by Islamic and French colonial ideologies, which prescribed limited mobility and social contact for women in public spaces. As a result, women, mostly of the lowest income or caste groups, engaged in small-scale trade in food markets or from their own back doors (see Grandmaison, 1972; Kane, 1977; Sarr, 2000 on this trajectory of urban women's work). French and Lebanese traders had long dominated the more lucrative trades such as textiles, plastics and light industrial production.



In the 1980s, neo-liberal reform re-opened restricted trade routes, albeit on terms largely unfavourable to Senegal, and structural adjustment and local coping strategies expanded the informal economy (Mustafa, 1998; Dieng, 2000; Coumba Diop, 2002; Simone, 2004). When adjustment programmes dismantled the educational and employment base of the already fragile middle class, many men were financially and socially disempowered. In contrast, middle-class women began to move into tailoring and the cloth trade, opening shops in markets and at home. The Wolof adage that “men are head of the household and women the head of the bedroom” was increasingly challenged, as women became the main breadwinners and men their resentful dependents. By “walking around the city” to “look for money,” women increasingly occupied public space, thereby contesting traditional norms of modesty and propriety. They hired male tailors to work for them, reversing gendered notions of authority in which men usually hold a higher ranking than women. And, as they began in the 1990s to travel to Jeddah, Las Palmas, Gambia and Nigeria to buy fabric, gold, cosmetics or shoes, these women further destabilised norms concerning women's publicity and mobility. Such women strategically linked entrepreneurial, ceremonial and personal networks, possibly even negotiating crises through cosmopolitan personal style and aggressive commercial strategy.

I will advance these claims by closer scrutiny of certain rituals performed by women in both public and private urban Senegalese spaces: the notion of the *dirriankhe*, and the implications of this spectacle as increasingly commercialised and performed for other women; and the erotics of motherhood, as embedded in the grooming rituals carried out within private, all-female spaces.

Seduction and the construction of the public self

It is impossible to think of Dakar without thinking of the *dirriankhe*.⁶ This refers to the corporal, sensory and visual spectacle of mature femininity – a woman in flowing robes that fall underfoot, a voluptuous body polished by lotions and fragrant with incense, clinking waistbeads, and a slow, seductive gait that is performed for public audiences on the streets, in the markets and at social ceremonies in Dakar. Urban lore contends that this sight was known to “drive the Yankees crazy” at their post-World War Two naval bases, hence the word *dirriankhe*. However, an etymology of the word suggests that it refers to the slow gait of the women in question, from the Wolof *dirri*, meaning “to drag”. The anecdotal suggestion that the seductive performance of local women entranced and maddened representatives of an external authority reminds us of Karmen’s manipulation of the hapless Angelique, underscoring the subversive potential of publicly performed beauty.



The air of nonchalance with which the *dirriankhe* is performed belies the great efforts that enable such presentation. The allure of the *dirriankhe* is found, first, in the idealised corpulent body shape of the woman concerned. Next is the sheer quantity of cloth used. African and Afro-Islamic dress styles often use volume, density and ornamentation to signify the prestige of the wearer. The wrapper, a two-metre length of cloth tied around the waist and falling to the ankle, is the foundation of female dress. It is accompanied by a six-metre embroidered tunic or robe (*boubou*) and a two-metre headscarf. The intricate wrapping and layering of these fabrics allows for both concealment and revelation of the body – the *boubou* may slip off the shoulder, the headscarf may slide in a breeze – creating a spectacle at once modest and also alluring or suggestive.

The eroticised and commercialised femininity of the *dirriankhe* is a public expression of the sensual beauty of women previously restricted to the domestic sphere – the household and extended kin. This ideal guides the consumption and display of middle-class women, who perform their gendered identities through elaborate and skillful dress in public ceremonies, primarily for the approval and appreciation of *other women* – to gain friends and peer support among these women, to establish their status, and so on. At events such as weddings and naming ceremonies, there are hardly any male attendees, just close female family or friends. The men present sit in contained groups on the outer edge at these functions, while women occupy the centre. For these women, the moment of entrance to these ceremonies is the one that evokes

the desire, judgement and rivalry of other women. As one woman explained to me, she seeks to enter the mind of anyone who looks at her to the extent that they are maddened (the discourse of powerful enchantment and loss of control once again) by the spectacle of her superior beauty. Women may be discreet as they gaze at and judge other women at these events; there is nevertheless no doubt that when an entourage of well-dressed women enters the ceremonial circle, they are scrutinised and assessed. Women admire each other for their apparent mastery of techniques of dress and self-presentation; they admire the choice of an outfit, and the deportment and grace of the wearer.

It is perhaps not surprising that there is criticism of the importance some women place on their public dress, appearance and performance. Some men complain that their wives dress up to go out, but wear shabby robes at home. Women who lighten their skin with *xeesal*, chemical creams, do so for public viewing. This often means that they have light hands, feet, necks and faces, so that in the intimacy of the bedroom, their husbands are presented with multi-coloured women with dark bodies. By bringing the practices and allure of seduction from the conjugal sphere to public life, it could be argued that *dirriankhes* sometimes solicit and enjoy the public gaze at the expense of their husbands' gaze and desire. This reflects a shift in which women increasingly seek approbation from within public spaces rather than private domestic spaces, and from homosocial scrutiny rather than heterosexual intimacy.

This outward turning of women's beauty is also subject to widespread gendered moralistic discourses concerning "the fall" of women. These claim that traditions of feminine elegance and beauty have become perverted by female narcissism, with its excesses of consumption and self-interest, and a concomitant neglect of women's familial duties. These excesses, or women's public appearance, it is alleged, belie their true financial position. As one of my informants told me, "You see a woman, all dressed in a grand *boubou*, but you go in her house and you will see that the children are eating porridge." Indeed, I did notice stark contrasts between appearance and household standards of living. The new generation of women traders in particular stand accused as agents of this commercialism and the accompanying "moral and cultural degeneration". Their excessive ceremonial expenses, travel and use of *xeesal* are thus the source of community anxiety and, I would argue, envy. Skin-lightening with *xeesal* in particular is condemned by doctors, religious leaders and many others. Women who use *xeesal* are imitated and ridiculed. I saw a tailor friend, who often imitated *dirriankhes* and their regal gait, also



imitating the ritual of applying *xeesal*, scrunching up his face and scrubbing at it with clumsy hands in a parody of the practice. More highly-educated men and women also spoke disdainfully to me about the “know-nothings” who thought they were achieving beauty even as they wrecked their skin with dangerous chemical products.

Such moralistic discourses on women’s beautification practices are part of a broader moral panic concerning the “degradation” of fashion, ceremonial and social life in Senegal. These discourses charge that the domestic sphere has been contaminated by modern, commercial values that prioritise money and status – the values and instruments of the public, global domain – over reciprocity and honour – those of the domestic, African domain. Elsewhere, I argue that such critiques are grounded in cultural anxieties that refer not only to the degrading commercialisation of social life, but also to the challenges which women’s increasing independence poses to patriarchy and elite power (Mustafa, 2002). Both men and women, of all ages, and with varying degrees of intensity, participate in condemnation of female narcissism, thereby conflating women’s complex strategies to ensure social and economic survival with the excesses of a few.



The erotics of motherhood and homosocial intimacy

The display and public performance of beauty is learnt in the most private spaces of the bedroom – familial and domestic spaces generally inhabited by women only. In Senegal, mothers and other central female caregivers inculcate their female children into the practices and cultures of beauty and beautification practically from birth. Beauty practices, objects and images further serve to situate the self in a lineage of women. “Our grandmothers taught us elegance,” I was told, as an introduction to popular histories of the elegant women, known as the *St. Louisienne*, of the Senegambian coast. Their legacy can be traced not to colonial civilising projects, as might be expected, but to the mixed-race *signares*⁷ who consorted with French traders, and had enormous stores of gold and slaves. Today this tradition inspires a range of cultural and commercial practices, from the photographic tradition of poses of languid reclining to the work of costume and fashion designers.

Young Senegalese girls grow up witnessing the women of their families making sacrifices for their children. In this previously matrilineal society, mothers and maternal kin remain very important. Mothers often invoke maternal duty to justify their sacrifices, as they scrape together funds to sustain their

children or as they tolerate a husband's taking of a second wife. At the same time, girls see their mothers invest considerable money and time in dressing themselves. This combination of self-sacrifice and self-care requires a moral balance, acquired through experience and peer support, through the moral economy of *teraanga* considered above.

In an impoverished household that I frequented, everyday support of the baby and young sisters of the family included care of their bodies. From birth, after a warm bath, a baby is massaged nightly with shea butter by her mother, aunts and grandmother. Through such care of the body, the child develops affective bonds with her family, and is also socialised into the prevailing gendered behaviours concerning beauty and presentation of self. For instance, by the time she was one year old, baby Awa had already been present at numerous hair-braiding, grooming and gossiping sessions with her mother's friends in the central courtyard of their modest home. Sitting in the warmth of her mother's lap, I saw her gleefully imitate the gestures which her mother performed on her and others, stroking along the hairline with oil.



There is thus a clear duty to pamper and train a baby or child's body, and thus to shape her nascent, gendered sense of self. But women continue these activities long after childhood, and in so doing foster solidarity and hierarchy among themselves. Dressing is one of the central activities through which this happens, and through which women break up the drudgery and tedium of household chores. The pleasure of dressing up begins not when a woman steps out of her home onto the street, but when she is in the intimacy of her room with other women, before the public moment. This was made apparent to me on one occasion in Dakar, when I went to a female friend's house before a ceremony.

When I arrived, her room filled with cousins – about four women at the height of the two-hour long dressing-up session, in a furnished room measuring 10 by 12 feet – and her cupboard was filled with the carefully folded *boubous* of the cousins closest to her in age. The women politely took turns bathing, dressing and making themselves up. But it was also a collaborative effort: my friend lifted a *grand boubou*, six metres of cloth, over the head of her younger cousin and arranged it carefully on her shoulders; another cousin helped her sister to perfect her headtie and so on. The conversation among the women focused on the dressing and preparations for the outing:

"Did I put on too much blue?"

"Do I look like a gaudy *griot*?"

"My braids are too old, should I wear a scarf?"

The responses were carefully reassuring and supportive; comments about issues such as weight (such as “too heavy” or “too light”) were never made, for instance.

At such moments, these women are building their skill in self-cultivation and self-presentation, revealing and concealing themselves through adjustments of cloth, judging and learning what is considered excessive as opposed to tasteful display. They are learning this with and through other women, through the intimacy of the shared space. The attention, care and encouragement that comes from dressing up with kin or friends after a long day of cooking, trading or boredom builds up spirits for the planned outing. The constant touching, arrangement and approval-seeking builds tactile and emotional relationships between adult women who, in fact, rarely expect or rely on such fulfilment from adult men in the strictly hierarchical patriarchal network of relations that dictate heterosocial contact.

Other moments in these intimate spaces and exchanges emphasise dependence and reveal complex webs of formal relationships rather than simple camaraderie between women. For example, mothers or aunts lend jewelry to young girls who are first beginning to dress up. In one case I witnessed, Nabou, an adopted child in a fairly affluent family, was not at the centre of family investment as were the “real” biological daughters of the family. As I waited to attend a ceremony with them, I saw that Nabou barely had time after her lunch duties to dress. Yet the final step of her preparations saw her kneeling in front of her adoptive mother, who placed a chain around her bowed neck. Elements of discipline, duty and gratitude were inscribed and reproduced within this private exchange and maternal moment. Through it, a mother and child reinforced their mutual affections for and obligations towards one another, performing all the while according to gendered scripts of beauty, maturity and age hierarchies. Similarly, younger women render beauty services to older women in their family by braiding their hair; another example of how women rely upon each other, within the intimacy of the home or family, to cultivate a beautiful self.



Conclusion

As Lorde (1984) reminds us, it is crucial to think about erotic power outside the limits of sexual practice. In Senegal, as the institutional and economic structures of heteronormative domesticity collapse, women’s social networks provide multiple social and financial supports. At the same time, increasing economic hardship reinforces the sense that for many younger women, their

body and physical presentation remain their only currency. Conversations with young women revealed increasing disillusion with the prospect of heterosexual fulfilment or even financial security through marriage. Some spoke to me of wishing to find a male partner who was dignified and did not sleep until noon. Another woman described the way she coaxed money out of an older man as her own way of “eating before being eaten”.

Many Senegalese lament the moral decay in their society that is said to be epitomised by young women of good families prostituting themselves. For women in their twenties, relationships with men are commercial enterprises that generate money, cloth, fleeting social status, and possibly some emotional fulfilment, but rarely marriage. Courtship is thus often conflated with prostitution (see also Chipu Hungwe’s article elsewhere in this issue, and Charmaine Pereira’s article “*Zina* and transgressive heterosexuality in northern Nigeria” in *Feminist Africa* 5). Marriage is no longer a reliable or viable centre to women’s lives or aspirations. As the institution of marriage virtually collapses, and with growing strain in polygamous families or households of transnational traders, women expect little but conflict from male company.

It is in such a context that beauty, an arena in which pleasure and politics are deeply entangled, becomes very important. The disciplining of women’s bodies and selves through gendered norms and conventions of personal beauty is part of many societies. But the extreme attention paid to beauty and self-presentation by women in Senegal, with each other’s support, service and judgement, suggests that heteronormative regulation does not adequately explain women’s motivations for subscribing to such norms and practices, or the effects of beauty practices.

As in the presentation of Karmen’s story, Senegalese women continue to nurture their potential to disrupt social, legal and cultural norms through the transformative and subversive powers of their beauty, as well as their ability to *perform* this beauty according to social convention. At the same time, grooming and dressing rituals shared between women, and passed on from one generation to the next, clearly offer embattled women a degree of support, tactile warmth and reinforcement.

So women negotiate patriarchal regulations of the body while establishing their own agency through the aesthetic cultivation of the body, in a collective of women. These notes from fieldwork done in Senegal show how women’s cultivation of beauty generates an erotics of self and interdependence that far exceeds beauty’s service to the patriarchal social order of dignity and male desire.



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Footnotes

- 1 A *griot* is usually a wandering singer, poet or story-teller; they often act as praise-singers.
- 2 Ile de Goree, a small island off the Dakar coast, was a trading enclave of Portuguese and French Creole African cultures from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries. It then gained infamy as a slave embarkation port for the Atlantic slave trade. Today it is a tourist centre and site of heritage pilgrimages by African-Americans. With this history, it has symbolic status as a place of both incarceration and encounter.
- 3 In the context of national reconstruction, another continent-wide process, it is worth mentioning another film based on the story of Carmen, set in a Cape Town township: *U-Carmen e-Khayelitsha* (Dornford-May, 2005). Shot as an opera in Xhosa, with mostly untrained actors from and in the townships, it shows that self-realisation is on the cultural agenda in this post-apartheid society. As a metaphor for the emergence of the new nation, Carmen's erotic persona challenges repressive histories of political, legal and gendered orders as they intersect with both the toughness of life and women's personal agendas in townships.
- 4 Senegambian societies are organised through oppositions of caste and nobility. In the pre-colonial period, castes were hereditary artisanal groups such as weavers,

praise-singers and leatherworkers. Although labour is no longer organised in this way, casted persons still face prejudice and stereotyping. Casted persons are seen by nobles (the middle classes) as being less restrained, and therefore more publicly performative, morally lax and greedy. Women of caste are said to be sexually lax, while noble women are supposedly dignified and restrained. It is noteworthy that the actress who portrayed Karmen Gei so spectacularly claimed that she never learned to dance before playing this role, thereby distancing herself from the casted figure she plays.

- 5 *Mokk pucc* is a set of practices of self-presentation and seduction, involving beautifying the body for husbands, preparing a room with incense and clean sheets, and massaging a partner.
- 6 This term refers to both the “performer” and the “performance” of the *dirriankhe*.
- 7 This term, taken from the Portuguese *senhoras*, refers to the mistresses of the European traders, who were famous for their beauty, and who wielded significant influence in Dakar society.



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Putting them in their place: “respectable” and “unrespectable” women in Zimbabwean gender struggles



Chipo Hungwe

Introduction

In this article, I consider how women in the former colony of Southern Rhodesia and contemporary Zimbabwe were and still are defined as “respectable” or “unrespectable”. These terms carry different meanings, but for purposes of this discussion, a “respectable” woman in Zimbabwean society is one who is treated with deferential esteem, and who is perceived as an honourable and dignified member of her community or society. An “unrespectable” woman, however, is seen as dishonourable and lacking in dignity; she will attract social opprobrium and her behaviour may not be emulated.

I go on to draw out the implications of such definitions of respectability for gender struggles in Zimbabwe. Occasional parallels are drawn with other post-colonial African states. This discussion encompasses three phases of Zimbabwean history: the colonial era (from about 1890 to the early 1960s); the liberation struggle period (late 1960s to independence in 1980); and the postcolonial and contemporary situation (1980 to the present). The role of women in the public and private spheres during these three phases is considered in order to show how definitions of respectability have shifted over time, with certain women gaining or losing respectability.

I focus on the term “prostitute” and the ways in which it is used not only to describe sex workers, but as a marker to denote any supposedly “unrespectable” woman, particularly those who move into space that is considered to be male territory (Gaidzanwa, 1995). This “branding” is carried out by both men and women.

Colonial notions of “respectability” and “unrespectability”

In this section, I discuss the status of women in rural areas in Southern Rhodesia, and how notions of respectability were created for them to inhabit. Women could garner respect through marriage, bearing children within

wedlock and earning money for the patriarchal family unit. Generally, respectable women (of all races) were expected to be virgins before marriage and chaste within marriage. This reflects the anxieties about patrilineage found in most patriarchal societies; women who did not fit this mould separated sex from procreation for the lineage (White, 1990: 120). Unmarried women who had children (especially if they did so after visiting or moving to the towns) earned the wrath of their elders in rural areas, and were branded as prostitutes.

The early colonial era, roughly up to the 1920s, was characterised by the same notions of respectability that had existed during pre-colonial times. At that time, respectable women were those who were fertile, who rejected any methods of controlling their fertility (through abortion, for instance), and who participated in laborious agricultural activities and other duties for their natal and matrimonial families. Women in polygamous marriages were respected, as were those wives who stayed in rural areas and remained chaste when their men migrated to towns. However, wives who followed their husbands were not deemed respectable, largely because they were effectively abandoning duties, such as farming, which were important for rural patriarchal familial structures. However, with the influence of missionaries and the development of the capitalist colonial economy, more and more women flocked to towns during the later period of colonial domination, and definitions of respectability shifted to incorporate these changes.



African women in towns

Many Zimbabwean women saw towns as places of freedom from restrictive parents or in-laws, husbands who were often violent, and the drudgery of agricultural work. They therefore migrated to towns, becoming receptionists, secretaries, telephone operators, housemaids, nannies, vegetable vendors, sex workers, dressmakers and “shebeen queens” (brewers of home-made beer). A few, however, who lived with their husbands, assumed the role of the stay-at-home housewife, and were respected as such. Most became “*mapoto* women”, meaning that they lived with men for whom they performed domestic and conjugal duties, sometimes bearing them children, without any bridewealth having been paid for them by these men. The presence of women in towns is thus as old as Southern African colonialism itself (Barnes and Win, 1992).

This situation is comparable to that of Uganda in the early 1940s, where Obbo notes that women migrated to towns to “increase their options and opportunities for self improvement, even though the unskilled and unschooled had no

illusions about their chances of obtaining wage employment in the urban areas.... It was not so much the money they made but the fact that they controlled the fruits of their labour which counted" (1986: 122). However, this female migration was strongly resisted by both colonial officials and rural elders.

The increase in the female population in colonial towns such as Salisbury [renamed Harare after independence] and Bulawayo meant a shift in gender relations coupled with an increase in branding women as prostitutes. Married women who had moved to towns to live with their husbands wished to create a new kind of respectability by differentiating themselves from "unrespectable" women – "the prostitutes". This term rapidly came to encompass both women who were unmarried and earned independent incomes, and those engaged in *mapoto* arrangements. Women in the latter positions were often more independent or less encumbered than married women, and thus attracted envy.

The fear that their husbands might be "snatched away" by single women or "prostitutes" also made married women eager to become increasingly domesticated as a means of fighting off possible competition from more independent women. This led to Western-style ritualising of marital and domestic arrangements, as married women sought to consolidate and reify their domestic position as wives and mothers. They did so by turning to "European" weddings, along with the accompanying church ceremonies, Western wedding garments, bridal attendants and so on, insisting on marriage certificates, and on being called by their married titles and names – Mrs [husband's name].

They also honed their domestic and social skills through membership of women's clubs and church meetings, where feminine domesticity was reinforced. One example was the Sakubva Homecraft Club in Salisbury, which taught women, among other things, how to bake scones. A list of official women's clubs that existed in Salisbury by 1958 included the Runyararo Club (40 members), the Helping Hand Club (125 members), the Salisbury and District Club (56 members), the Radio Homecraft Club (58 members) and the Women's Institute (24 members) (Barnes and Win, 1992: 152). Married women would attend these clubs in order to learn or re-learn domestic skills such as knitting and cooking. Such clubs "facilitated displays of middle-class domestic splendour" (Barnes, 1999: 152).

By grouping together into clubs, and insisting on formal and public tokens of marriage, such as the payment of *lobola* and marriage certificates, married women were able to segregate themselves from those who were unmarried. These women viewed their unmarried peers with scorn, and occasionally



meted out communal punishments to those caught “prostituting”. Among the unmarried women targeted for punishment were those who lived in female hostels such as Carter House in Salisbury. These women were usually divorced, widowed or unmarried, and engaged in various trades, including childminding, teaching, hospital and factory work, religious activities and domestic work. They were financially independent enough to be able to afford to rent rooms in women’s hostels. So the increasingly segregated definitions of respectability at this time saw urban black women pitted against each other – the married versus the unmarried.

The married women who lived with their husbands in towns also had to maintain a delicately balanced social network by visiting the rural areas every rainy season to work in the fields, thus shuttling between the urban and rural areas. This acted as an important signifier that they had not yet been “corrupted” by the city, as well as an indication that they remained loyal to their husbands and their husbands’ families through their willingness to engage in “hard labour” for the patrilineage.



Female migration to urban centres was opposed by colonial authorities largely through urban policies that governed migration in general. Barnes and Win point out that until the 1940s, cities such as Salisbury were officially designated for white residents and black migrant workers (1992: 25). Urban and government policy allowed black workers, male and female, into the major towns only for as long as the white residents, manufacturers and industrialists needed their services. This was typical of colonial urban planning of the time. In his study of the Copperbelt in Zambia, Mitchell noted that towns were viewed as areas “in which Europeans lived by right and followed their way of life... in which Africans were by definition temporary sojourners in the same way that Africans in the tribal area lived their own lives and white men in those areas were but temporary visitors. This thinking was incorporated into the legal administrative structure from the earliest days of settlement” (cited in Obbo, 1986: 148).

The presence of rural women posed a problem for white colonial administration in towns. This was because black male workers in urban areas were generally provided with bachelor accommodation only, which cut the cost of providing housing for African employees. The presence of wives and children was seen as distracting. Moreover, it was considered more profitable for women to remain in the rural areas, as their husbands could then be paid “bachelor’s wages” rather than salaries that could support their families. The presence of

African women therefore had unsettling economic implications for colonial employers. A vivid example of this was the 1948 general strike by the Bulawayo African Workers Union and the Bulawayo Municipal Workers Union, which demanded higher wages for married men, more “married accommodation” and the provision of food rations for wives (Barnes, 1999: 109). This, of course, was not new; apartheid legislation in neighbouring South Africa followed the same gendering principles (Slater, 2000: 39). The policy of influx control sanctioned the presence of limited numbers of African male labourers in urban areas, but not their wives or families.

On Southern Rhodesian mines, meanwhile, management hostility towards the presence of African women was expressed through the infamous *bheura* practice. This gave doctors (invariably white and male) the legal right to forcibly inspect all women in mine compounds (such as Shurugwi and Zvishavane) for sexually transmitted diseases. Ostensibly begun as an anti-venereal disease campaign, it had the effect of degrading and humiliating not only the women singled out for inspection, but their peers as well. Men were not subject to similar treatment, based on the assumption that “unclean” diseases originated and resided in the bodies of “unrespectable” women.

Women in urban areas presented colonial administrators with another headache: many of them brewed “illegal” beer, often as a means of financial survival. Their sales of beer, however, competed with the colonial beer halls, thus posing a threat to state revenue. It is therefore hardly surprising that women who brewed beer in the towns were rapidly identified as “unrespectable” and branded as “prostitutes” by the colonial administration. The argument was that illicit beer sales not only diverted a source of income that would otherwise have been sent to rural patriarchs in the form of bride-wealth (*lobola*); such sales also deprived the state of clients who no longer visited the state-sponsored beer halls, preferring to purchase home-brewed beer sold by “shebeen queens”. The state criminalised home-brewing by means of the Kaffir Beer Ordinance, and consequently branded the women who brewed beer as deviant. In addition, the state gained an extra source of revenue through the subsequent extraction of fines and bribes (Lovett, 1994).

It is clear that when it came to controlling women, the various patriarchies (colonial, rural, missionary and indigenous) often collaborated across racial lines. Examples from Zimbabwe, South Africa and Kenya suggest that African male elders were prepared to collaborate with white colonial officers in order to control the mobility of “unrespectable” women.





In the rural areas, patriarchal elders profited from maintaining control over young women and their movements. Younger men gained some degree of economic independence from their elders as they migrated to the urban areas to take up waged work. If the elders wanted to retain economic control over these young men, they needed to control those young women whom they could offer as wives to the young African labouring classes. This ensured that they would continue to be paid *lobola* by young men working in the towns, retain control over young husbands' remittances, and entrench the role they played in brokering and managing marriage negotiations. It therefore served the interests of both the rural male gerontocracy and the white colonial administrators to exercise control over black women. This was managed in part by categorising them as either "respectable" or "unrespectable". "Respectable" women were those who remained in the rural areas and submitted to the guidance and control of the elders, or who returned intermittently to the rural areas; "unrespectable" women were those who "ran away" to the relative freedom of urban areas. Methods of mobility were also subject to patriarchal scrutiny; Barnes and Win note that even women who rode bicycles were at risk of being labelled as "prostitutes" (1992: 119).

A similar example can be drawn from Kenya's colonial history. During the 1930s, sex workers among the Kikuyu in rural Dangaroni did not court social disapproval; no blame was attached to this practice, which was seen as a legitimate means by which women could earn money for their families (White, 1990: 120). This was as long as they replenished family livestock herds that had been depleted through drought. However, women who prostituted themselves in order to earn an independent income, rather than for the good of the patriarchal family, incurred disapproval. Those who established themselves as household heads, rejected family ties and created new lineages were invariably branded as "unrespectable".

Although colonial administrators and rural patriarchs were both invested in controlling women's movements, their earning ability and sexuality, it would be naïve to assume that total agreement existed between these two patriarchies. Colonial patriarchs also feared the prospect of erotic contact between black male colonial subjects and "their" white women. It was therefore in their interests to tolerate the presence of a few black female workers in towns, even if this disturbed rural elders. Moreover, while the latter called for young black women to return to rural villages and lands, the colonial administration needed some black women to work as domestic workers in towns in order to

replace their male counterparts. This was also partly driven by the colonial anxiety about the possibility of sexual liaisons between black domestic servants (such as gardeners and “houseboys”) and their white “madams”. According to Samasuwo, this was “a result of simple fantasy on the part of the white settler community [which] became an ideological tool consciously and unconsciously used to build white supremacy” (1994: 03).

“Respectability” and race in colonial towns

Colonial notions of sexual morality and feminine respectability were also informed by racial boundaries. For white women, being respectable meant strictly avoiding any possibility of “contaminating” contact with black “house-boys” and “garden-boys” and sometimes teaching black women hygiene and other forms of domesticity associated with Western cultural habits. Those few white sex workers, such as Maude Cotte and Ann Guiney, who worked in Salisbury and included black men among their clients were said to “be guilty of unmentionable practices” and there were calls to drive them out of the colony. White women who had sexual liaisons with black men were considered “unrespectable”, and those who invited such sexual contacts were punished. White women whose relationships with black men were discovered were sometimes obliged to claim rape in order to salvage their respectability.



The categorising of women as either “respectable” or “unrespectable” also hardened and legitimised racial discrimination against women. In South Africa, many white officials regarded African women as morally corrupted by their contact with the industrial conurbation of Johannesburg and therefore in need of restraint (Gaitskell, 1979: 45). Thus the shepherding of young girls into mission schools was not only a means of trying to preserve purity, but also an effort to resubordinate young African women into new forms of domesticity and femininity that marked them as racially inferior. Missionaries taught home economics skills, such as flower-arranging and sewing, as well as Western patriarchal notions of what it meant to be good wives – “angels of the house” providing a safe haven for men and children.

Notions of “respectability” and “unrespectability” during the liberation struggle

Zimbabwe’s liberation war, which began in the early 1960s and ended in 1979/80, presented women with opportunities to blur the boundaries between “respectable” and “unrespectable” femininity. However, this was not easily

achieved; even during the war, a distinction was made between activities that were considered respectable for women and those that were not.

The war was characterised by guerrilla warfare tactics, in which insurgents had to enlist the support of the black population both for recruitment purposes, and to ensure adequate food supplies and efficient communication systems for gathering information. This new context opened up fresh opportunities for women who wished to participate in the struggle. This entailed performing “male roles”, and many female soldiers hoped to earn respect this way. However, women’s involvement in the guerrilla war did not fundamentally change gender inequalities in society after liberation, nor did it transform definitions of “respectable” and “unrespectable” women (Nhongo-Simbanegavi, 2000). Nhongo-Simbanegavi notes that the wartime slogan for women was “Forward with the cooking stick!” and points to other sayings that continued to enshrine the nurturing or maternal roles of women even during the liberation war (2000: 19).



However, Gaidzanwa points out that there was a functional redefinition of socially acceptable behaviours during the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe; mobile women were no longer referred to as “prostitutes”, but were now encouraged to leave their families to join the liberation forces and to move around within and outside the rural areas (1995). This female mobility was essential to guerrillas, who used these “travelling” women to obtain and pass on information. Young girls either joined the army (as porters, nurses and political commissars in liberated and semi-liberated zones) or became female civilian aides. Their roles, especially those of the latter, remained highly feminised. Women were encouraged to provide cooked food, warm water for washing, and laundry services to guerrillas.

Such activities highlighted the split, even during the war, between “respectable” and “unrespectable” women. Women who performed domestic chores and provided support for male guerrillas were considered “respectable”, while those women fighters who had children by their male counterparts were viewed as “unrespectable”. Sexual activity was generally discouraged by elders and spiritual advisors who had given their stamp of approval to the guerrilla movement. However, young fighters of both sexes challenged the traditional authority of elders by cohabiting without parental approval, especially while in hiding in the “bush”. Women who “transgressed” this way (but not their male partners) were often insulted and declared to be prostitutes by their male leaders. One male member of the ZANU-PF high command allegedly said to some of his female

cohorts: “You are not real ZANU members. You are public prostitutes and I am going to take pictures of you to send them to the masses of Zimbabwe to see” (Nhongo-Simbanegavi, 2000: 51). However, many women who had performed “respectable” tasks during the war (cooking, laundry, carrying information, and similar tasks) did not escape the social stigma of “unrespectable” femininity. They were abandoned after the war by their soldier husbands, who divorced them in favour of educated and commercially employed women. Their husbands argued that “women from the bush are a problem” (Nhongo-Simbanegavi, 2000: 146).

A similar situation arose in Kenya during the Mau Mau revolt. During this period, sex workers were accorded a dubious legitimacy by male leaders for reasons of political expediency. Some of these women were enlisted to “lay tender traps” for those African policemen (*askaris*) who defended colonial interests. Female sex workers thus sometimes played a role in the abduction and even murder of such men, suffocating them in order to steal their guns (White, 1990: 205). Women were therefore allowed some specious freedoms during the revolt without risking social ostracism, as long as their transgressive behaviour remained under patriarchal control or furthered male interests. However, in the postcolonial state, such definitions shifted once again, and sex work by women was once more relegated to “disgraceful” status.



Notions of “respectability” and “unrespectability” after independence

After the war of liberation, definitions of female respectability changed once more, as the citizens of the new Zimbabwean state concentrated on building the economy through education and industry. Women who had been mobile or active as fighters during the war were now expected to return home and take up traditional domestic chores such as childcare and housework. If they wished to work outside the home, they were expected to take low-income jobs that were demarcated as “respectable” – in secretarial, teaching and nursing fields, for example. Those who defied these boundaries of mobility, particularly through cross-border trading, were targeted as “unrespectable”. The Shona word *pfambi*, which literally means “one who walks”, was used in the pre-colonial and early colonial periods to describe female prostitutes. It is still used as a derogatory term for female cross-border traders (it is not used to describe men, even those who travel or wander freely). So while male mobility was normalised, women’s mobility was once again branded as “unrespectable”.

One reason for this branding is the fear that mobile women might marry foreigners, who would threaten the status of local men. Another reason is that cross-border female traders redefine the role and functions of international mobility laid down by men, as well as supplying market niches that male-dominated state policies have tried to eliminate (Cheater and Gaidzanwa, 1996: 199). These mobile women continue to be seen as rebellious and promiscuous, because they are perceived as undermining Zimbabwean ideological constructions of womanhood, premised on female dependency upon males.

As mentioned earlier, in contemporary Zimbabwe, the term “prostitute” does not only refer to women who sell sexual services, but is used broadly to insult and censure any woman who is physically located beyond male control or who is behaving in ways that men disapprove of (Gaidzanwa, 1995). *Mapoto* women (those who live with male partners without payment of bride-wealth) continue to be seen as “prostitutes” because men have relatively little control over them. The “ideal” Zimbabwean (Shona or Ndebele) woman, however, is seen to be self-effacing, restrained in her public behaviour, family-oriented and caring towards her male partner and relatives. At work, she is not expected to aspire to the same professional status as men. If she does, she is immediately branded as “unrespectable”.

This categorisation of women into “respectable” and “unrespectable” put many at risk of gender-based violence. Stigmatisation, marginalisation of and violence against women are condoned and normalised through categorising them as “prostitutes”. Public education pamphlets on HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe sometimes give the impression that the deadly virus resides in female prostitutes only, while male prostitutes, who are equally visible at tourist centres, are not similarly targeted. This has led to the victimisation and harassment of women by the state; for instance, in the form of “clean-up” campaigns in which unaccompanied and “under-dressed” women are rounded up and arrested for “prostitution”.

In political crises such as those that exist in contemporary Zimbabwe, women find themselves targeted as scapegoats for wider frustrations and tragedies. What is alarming is that such scapegoating and violence is all too often determined and driven by the binary poles of respectability and unrespectability. This has been seen elsewhere; as in present-day Zimbabwe, Nigerian wives who did not spend “enough time at home” because of their activities in the labour market as petty traders, were targeted by the military for supposedly hoarding essential goods. Single women were accused of “tempting” men, with some of



them forced to marry as a result (Halvorsen, 1991: 13). Full participation in the Zimbabwe economy thus becomes a difficult task for women in a polity where female wage-earners run the risk of being described as “lazy, gossipy, incompetent and morally depraved workers who have failed to maintain the good quiet life of rural areas” (Fatton, 1994: 60). Such accusations are appealing to males in poor and subordinate classes and thus in competition for scarce resources; they also maintain a male hegemony that thrives on such stereotypes. The discourse on “respectability” and “unrespectability” thus performs the function of legitimising state and male violence against women.

Zimbabwean women in postcolonial politics

If we define democratisation as a process where people struggle individually or in groups in order to secure and effect inclusion and participation in the governance and management of their societies and communities (Parpart, 1986), then the discrimination against Zimbabwean women through stigmatisation and violence prevents them from fully participating in this process. Such efforts at participation are undermined by a discourse of “unrespectability” that is sufficiently far-reaching to include even female politicians, and delineate them as “prostitutes”. Women may therefore be reluctant to engage in politics; or, when they do, they serve conservative and patriarchal agendas. Obbo notes that at a 1972 conference of the All Africa Women’s Organisation in Dar es Salaam, 200 women leaders from 41 countries spent much valuable time discussing the foreign “menace of miniskirts and hot pants” instead of addressing political issues that affected their female constituencies. This she attributes to women’s fear of not “playing the right game in a man’s world” (1986: 158).

It is commonly held that politics in Zimbabwe is a “dirty game”, but especially so for women. The following remark, cited by Obbo, succinctly summarises how female participation in either university or national politics is regarded: “A progressive and intelligent woman who participates in politics is regarded as a hooligan. She is said to have every possible fault, bad behaviour and so on. She isn’t worth anything; she is finished” (1986: 159).

Gaidzanwa (1995) shows how the term “prostitute” in Zimbabwe is mobilised against women in the political arena in order to delegitimise women’s initiatives to democratise private and public life. For example, women such as Shuvai Mahofa and Margaret Dongo have been branded as prostitutes. However, Zimbabwean feminists such as Win (2004) and Kwinje (2004) offer a counter-narrative, viewing these women as respectable precisely because they



pursue democratisation. These feminists vehemently opposed the election of Joyce Mujuru (in November 2004) into Zimbabwe's presidium because she represented patriarchal interests. Win further notes that feminists in Zimbabwe have no common interests with "women who trade on their biology [and who] ... at every other time in their lives forget they are one of us, only to remember their [femininity] when it suits them" (2004: 2). Win's censure is hardly surprising, given that Joyce Mujuru stated in 1998 that "there is nothing like equality [between men and women]. Those who call for equality are failures in life" (Win, 2004: 1). Mujuru is thus viewed as a politician eager to create a "femocracy" in Zimbabwe without questioning underlying unequal gender relations in society. It is claimed that she is content to mobilise women simply as another support base for a ruling regime that is sexist and seeks its own consolidation and legitimation (Kwinje, 2004).



"Respectable" and "unrespectable" women in academia

Generally, universities are viewed as institutions that support diversity, where all members of the community are accepted or at least tolerated in the name of academic freedom or freedom of expression. However, such freedom of expression has not yet been extended to female university students in Zimbabwe. The female student is still trapped in the traditional discourses of respectability, in which students strive to earn such approbation (for example, by shunning courses on gender studies, performing domestic chores for their boyfriends, and agreeing to having unprotected sex with their partners). "Unrespectable" translates as "unmarriageable", and those who fly in the face of tacit campus standards of appropriate feminine conduct are seen as inviting problems such as sexual harassment, rape and ostracism (Gaidzanwa, 2001).

However, such an understanding not only makes it difficult to study gender and feminism, it also hampers gender mainstreaming within university curricula. Women researchers tend to shun "controversial areas of research", concentrating instead on topics likely to get sponsorship or funding, and are more "respectable" (Mama, 1996: 85). Women who engage in politically or socially radical research projects are branded as stubborn and "unrespectable".

Concluding thoughts

In this article, I have argued that the distinction made between "respectability" and "unrespectability" serves a patriarchal agenda. This distinction muffles and legitimates the social and political inequality between men and women that

persists in the Zimbabwean polity. As long as women occupy space allocated to them, they remain “respectable”, but once they start redefining public and private terrain, they run the risk of being judged as depraved and “unrespectable” in the eyes of society.

What is more, it can be argued that some women actively participate in this form of policing. As is usually the case in patriarchal social structures, women who oppress, demonise and marginalise other women usually have some small amount of power or authority bestowed upon them by patriarchal structures; or they benefit from certain patriarchal practices, as in the case of those older women throughout Africa who earn an income by performing female genital cutting or mutilation. In contemporary Zimbabwe, it is usually married women who actively define *mapoto* women or unmarried women as prostitutes. During the colonial era, it was hostel matrons who used their positions of authority and respectability to help perpetuate the belief that female hostel residents were prostitutes; for example, by locking out residents who came home after a 9pm curfew (Barnes, 1999).

Whether consciously or unconsciously, there is no doubt that some women participate in defining and bestowing respectability. One of the ways in which patriarchy has been entrenched in Zimbabwean society is by dividing women, offering them limited power and social approval in exchange for behaviour strictly policed along binary lines. Women who are thus divided, and who label and insult each other continue to service patriarchal structures. Using Lasswell’s definition of politics as the determination of who gets what when and how (1953), it is clear that women with genuinely democratic and transformative agendas are blocked from access to political power and resources. However, women who sing the patriarchal tune are presented as champions of women’s causes, at the same time that they serve their masters’ cause. These are the “respectable” women, the ones who know their “rightful position”. Thus the distinction between “respectable” and “unrespectable” women in terms of age, class, race, and marital status has the lasting effect of ensuring that women “carry their burdens with strength” and do not present a united front as women in Zimbabwean gender struggles.



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Ruling masculinity and sexuality¹

Kopano Ratele

Jacob Zuma and “a better life for all”

It may well be that the High Court of South Africa will return a verdict of not guilty at the end of the corruption trial of ex-deputy president Jacob Gedleyihlekisa Zuma due to take place towards the end of 2006.² Mr Zuma may yet reach the heights of South African political life, as he himself has suggested. Perhaps, too, he will prove to be the one to lead the country to the promised “better life for all”.

“A better life for all” is a slogan of the former national liberation movement and current ruling party in South Africa, the African National Congress, that at worst, is employed with ever more frequency during election periods, and at best, is meant to epitomise the centrality and seriousness of development in the party’s policies. In its manifesto for the first inclusive democratic national elections, the ANC maintained:

South Africa’s first democratic elections are about our common yearning for freedom, peace and a better life for all. They are about a past of oppression and despair and a future of hope and democracy (1994).

Ten years on, during the national elections in 2004, in his party presidential message, Thabo Mbeki said:

Our First Ten Years of Freedom have been ten years of growing unity in action; ten years of peace and stability; ten years of increasingly making resources in the hands of the state available to uplift disadvantaged South Africans; ten years of expanding opportunities to build a better life for all (2004).

And in a speech given at the congress of the National Union of Mineworkers, the ANC’s deputy-president, Zuma, asked:

Can we strengthen this alliance on the same principles that it was founded and ensure that it takes our struggle forward as we try to build a better life for all and to reverse the legacy of apartheid and of poverty? (2005).

Promises of “a better life for all” notwithstanding, should Zuma become president of the country, there is cause to suspect that he will be hard-put to inspire hope or confidence in many sections of the population of South Africa. This lack of faith in the possibility of a better life that might be brought to fruition by Zuma stems in part from the events of a second and notorious legal case. The 64-year-old man stood accused of raping a 31-year-old family friend and national liberation struggle comrade – who even during her grueling cross-examination referred to him as *umalume* [uncle]. The theatre around that particular case, including the intimidation of the plaintiff by the declared supporters of Zuma, suggests grounds for wariness (see Hlongwa and Msomi, 2006; Ndebele, 2006; Zulu and Msomi, 2006). About the public spectacle and theatrics that transfixed a nation, Njabulo Ndebele wrote:

At issue here are webs of social and political relationships that may bedevil professional conduct. It is how Zuma resolves such conflicting loyalties that may explain his apparent disregard for the broad public in his dramatic appearances before his supporters immediately after two recent court appearances on the rape charges. He just seems unaware of the rest of us. His single-minded focus is his political home: the ANC and the “broad alliance”.

...In this battle the rest of us are an anonymous mass, despite strong notions of public morality in this country. It is the force of this morality that has many of us wanting to see even faint signs of pain on the face of a public figure facing a charge of rape.

...The conflicting loyalties to family and to a constitutional public result in a psychological blind spot in which the public is invoked only to embarrass opponents, not because it is itself seen as aggrieved. The ability to see the public as aggrieved would almost certainly have resulted in different strategies and tactics. Instead, this blind spot, accentuated by the personal nightmare of his fall from grace, has distorted Zuma’s judgment (2006: 19).

The political drama around the case, and the aggressive tactics pursued by the defendant’s side and supporters in that case notwithstanding, there was no saying at any point that the High Court would acquit Zuma on this charge. Nevertheless, on Monday, 8 May 2006, Zuma was found not guilty by Judge Willem van der Merwe. South African criminal law and the acquittal of Zuma are not the main concerns of this article (for a discussion of these matters, see, for example, Govender, 2006). What is of concern is the public psychopolitical theatre, and what this tells us about sexualities, gender and, in particular, masculinities in contemporary South Africa.



A range of moments from the rape trial of Zuma point to the links between sexualities and a ruling masculinity. These moments include the fact that Zuma, who was at one time tasked with leading the anti-HIV and Aids campaign, knowingly had unprotected sex with a woman he knew to be HIV-positive; that he stated in court that he had sex even though no condoms were available because in his culture, a man could be accused of rape for leaving a woman sexually aroused; and that he testified that he had taken a shower after the incident because he believed this would reduce the risk of infection (see News24.com, 2006b).

However, given the import of the idea of “a better life for all”, and with the intention of thinking of development beyond political sloganeering and electioneering, at the same time as assessing the events that continue to take place around Zuma in particular and other African political leaders more generally, what is called for is considered reflection on the question of the use of politics for human betterment. I wish to look at this question of a better life for all as it relates to sexual and gender life. In this reflection, research from pro-feminist studies of men and masculinity will be drawn on, with the arguments informed by discourse analysis.



In this article, it is therefore not the rape trial of Zuma, or even his corruption trial, but rather a less publicised moment to which I would like to draw attention – in order to think about the interconnections between sexualities, masculine power, and the notion of “a better life”. It is at this moment that Zuma’s discursive political and psychological practices reveal themselves as unable to inspire confidence in some sections of South African society.³

“Wrong” sex, the Bill of Rights, and discursive political acts

The moment of concern came in response to a question about oral sex put to Zuma as the then deputy-president of South Africa during a debate in the national parliament of South Africa. At issue was whether or not oral sex is “right”.

Zuma’s answer during a debate was that oral sex is wrong, unnatural. He also said it was a subject he was not prepared to talk about. Of some significance is the fact that at the time he uttered these words, Zuma was featuring in a national media campaign to encourage people to talk openly about sexuality as part of the larger project to stem the spread of HIV/Aids. His exact words were:

I can't answer on wrong things that people do that are unnatural. I can't talk about that.... I don't know really whether I should have an opinion on

some of the things ... because I don't understand what do they mean [sic]. We are talking about education about sex, not other things that are not sex. I wouldn't be able to have an opinion on that one (Maclennan, 2002; also see *Mail & Guardian* online 2002a, 2002b).

Forty years of discourse studies have taught us the productivity of discourse and the immanence of sexual and gender power in talk and text. To fully appreciate the impact of this particular utterance, Zuma's words should be juxtaposed against the Bill of Rights of South Africa. In contrast to Zuma's expressed sentiments, the Bill of Rights makes it very clear that the state may not unfairly discriminate, directly or indirectly, against anyone on the grounds of belief, culture, language, birth, gender, sex and sexual orientation. Why then was the second most powerful political actor in government contradicting the spirit, if not the letter, of a developing constitutional and human rights culture? While for some, a contradiction like this one was hardly surprising, and something we have come to expect from African politicians, for others it holds some instructive lessons, beyond crying out for vigorous challenge.



Zuma's Constitution-contradicting discursive move means, firstly, that serious contemplation of the meaning of "a better life" suggests that those concerned with development ought to simultaneously appreciate the need to strengthen human rights generally and sexual rights specifically. Secondly, the ANC's deputy-president's words suggest that there is a need to maintain vigilance on issues of sexual and gender equality, particularly when dealing with what are at first glance non-sexual matters – for instance, poverty, income-generation projects, displacement or famine. This latter political lesson derives also from nearly forty years of feminist thinking and activity around the politics of sex.

What the deputy-president of the country and chair of the South African National Aids Council did in the response under discussion was to constitute a psychology, politics and culture unsupportive of sexual practices other than those acceptable to what can be called a historically ruling masculinity. Research shows that the ruling masculinity in South Africa, as in other parts of the world, has as some of its constituent elements assertive heterosexuality, control of economic decisions within (and outside) the home, political authority, cultural ascendancy, and support for male promiscuity. This is reflected in the words of several of the subjects in Mankayi's study of male soldiers:

Daniel: [Men] want a lot of it. For a man sex ... generally [is about] the more, the better. If we had our own way, we'd just like to have sex with a woman. Then two or more nights later ... have sex with another woman.

Tulani: We go to girls having this mind and we tell our minds, if she can arrive here on the base, I will kiss her, have sex with her.

Mtobeli: You see a woman ... you start having feelings for a woman. Even if you know that you have your own partner ... I think it's something natural ... I think it's natural.

Jeff: She might have a great butt, she might have a great pair of breasts, but she's got it and you've noticed it ... compliment her. She's got it, why not ... if it attracts your eye, it's like a good painting, it's there, I mean, and if that feeling of yours become way stronger then, ja, it does (2005).

Similar connections between ruling masculinity and heterosexuality are revealed by my own study examining talk by professional men on the meanings they attach to their gendered and racial identities. For example, one of the men, Ricky, said:



And then, no, as to promiscuity, it's a no-no, see. You can't go on and be promiscuous, while saying you have a thing with me as a girl. But at the same time, me, I do accept that you must understand, if you do catch me, that I'm promiscuous, say no, it's a man's thing, see [translation from *is'camtho*, one of the hybrid street languages spoken in South Africa] (Ratele, 2001).

In a recent study on masculinity focusing on boys from several high schools around the Western Cape, similar thinking was evident. Firstly, in response to the question "What is a man?", some of the boys answered that a man is "always considered ... the head of the household while women are subordinate to men. Therefore a woman is not allowed to [be equal to] her husband when it comes to household decision-making." In regard to the question of sexuality, a boy said "the problem with abstinence is that you might go crazy, if you are a man" (Ratele et al, in press). From discussion on gay and lesbian identities in that study, it was also clear that "a real man" does not behave in ways that are "unmanly" and does not have sex with another man. As a boy in one group said, "like some gays you can't even tell that they're gay ... among themselves they don't parade around with it. I don't mind if they're like that, but I mean if they walk around going like 'hello doll' and that little kiss thingy..." [he doesn't need to finish his idea]. Another boy at a different school, in reference to men looking after children, said "when you look after a child, you also have to put on an apron which makes you look like a *moffie*"⁴ (Ratele et al, in press).

Because of his political power, however, Zuma was doing more than merely telling us the truth about his psyche and own self. Because of his cultural

authority (inferred from his positioning as an older, well-off Zulu man with authority), he was doing more than simply articulating a certain political discourse. Because of his social position, he also drew a bold line between South African citizens who view him as the embodiment of the true masculine, and others whose practices do not fit that which he suggests are “naturally” right.

Over and above his claims on the truth of social (as opposed to self-) identity, beyond his culture-authorising articulation, and past his boundary-drawing game, Zuma chose to speak against the rights of equality, privacy and sexual orientation contained in the Constitution he had sworn to uphold. Equally baffling, he also effectively discouraged open discussion of “these other things that are not sex”. This was baffling because Zuma and other political and social celebrities, as key actors in a national campaign to curb the spread of HIV/Aids, were supposed to encourage open talk of sexuality. Yet here he decided to go against one of the strategies thought to be most important in the campaign.

What this speech act demonstrates, therefore, is that even when legal and constitutional battles have been won, there is a real risk of residual aversion (even prospects of backlash) to the rights of sexual minorities on the part of those charged with guarding those rights. When Zuma said he “can’t answer on wrong things that people do that are unnatural”, as a powerfully positioned figure within government, he compromised the sexual choices and happiness of individual men and women and subjects of the state which he serves, and which has declared its duty to protect certain basic rights.

Furthermore, if, in a place such as South Africa, where the rights to equality and sexual orientation are part of the foundational law, a politician demonstrates that we cannot trust even those entrusted with defending these rights, then society must be defended (see Foucault, 2003). However, it is not the “people who do wrong things ... that are unnatural” against whom society must be defended. Newly democratic societies are in need of defence from those who have more power – those who might believe “they are above or outside of the law”. Thus, one way to defend society is for policies and projects that speak of “a better life” to give due consideration to the right to a better sexual and gender life in addition to a better economic life.

Given this discursive move by Zuma, it is of interest that he was at one point married to four women. But the fact of Zuma’s polygamous status is pointed out here to illuminate the connections and contradictions among sexualities, sexual rights, development and masculinities.



Zuma’s marital history is common knowledge. And it should be made clear that South African law permits polygamous marriages – embodied in the Recognition of Customary Marriages Act, No. 120 of 1998 (Republic of South Africa, 1998). During the same year that this the legislation was enacted, the South African Demographic and Health Survey (1998) reported that between one in six and one in five married women aged between 30 and 49 years were married to a man with more than one wife (see Table 1). This Act might be considered progressive, given the culturally racist legal history of South Africa, as it gives some legal standing to African women in particular.

Table 1: Percentage of married women in a polygamous union in South Africa, by age and selected background characteristics⁵



	Ages						
	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	All ages
Residence							
Urban	6,7	10,7	11,9	8,5	8,4	8,7	9,6
Non-urban	12,5	10,5	19,8	15,8	24,0	8,3	16,8
Education							
No education	*	(23,1)	25,3	29,1	32,1	18,9	26,3
Sub A – Std 3	(17,3)	15,2	27,9	17,1	16,2	20,4	19,1
Std 4 – Std 5	11,2	7,8	11,5	15,0	18,8	11,2	13,1
Std 6 – Std 9	10,4	13,1	14,8	6,9	8,1	9,5	10,9
Std 10	3,2	5,9	9,2	3,3	7,2	(0,0)	5,8
Higher	*	1,3	1,8	2,6	4,3	(1,7)	2,2
Population group							
African	10,7	12,9	20,1	14,8	19,3	17,5	16,3
African urban	7,8	14,3	18,4	12,4	12,1	14,6	14,0
African non-urban	13,0	11,5	21,9	17,2	27,8	20,0	18,5
Coloured	(2,6)	7,7	5,3	3,3	4,0	1,4	4,5
White	*	2,9	0,8	1,2	0,7	2,3	1,7
Asian	*	(0,0)	0,0	5,6	(6,8)	(2,5)	3,1
Total	9.5	10.6	14.9	11.3	14.1	12.4	12.5

(Source: South African Demographic and Health Survey, 1998)

Until not too long ago, the practice of polygamy was treated as inferior to white heterosexual marriage and governed by administrative laws exclusively formulated for blacks.⁶ Anyone whose marital and sexual practices were formerly marginalised under apartheid law, and nevertheless presents oral sex as “unnatural” thus reveals a striking insensitivity to those whose present sexual practices are

marginalised. At the same time, even though polygamous marriages are now equal to other forms of legal marriages, it can be argued that they are potentially inimical to the freedoms and advancement of women, as well as presenting a challenge to gender equity. It should also be noted that Article 6 of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa encourages "monogamy ... as the preferred form of marriage" (African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, 2003). However, where polygamy exists, the Protocol seeks to promote and protect the rights of women, and calls for both women and men to be regarded as equal partners in marriage. The Protocol is silent on alternative non-heterosexual lives and relationships, as is the African Charter.

Here, then, is another lesson: irrespective of the cultural status of a practice, when looking at a traditional practice (such as polygamy), development thinkers and critical citizens must strive to relate it to increasing choices. It is no coincidence that polygamy most often occurs in rural, under-developed areas, and that it usually takes place between a socially powerful man and women who have very little social power. The majority of women in polygamous unions in South Africa, for instance, have little or no education and are between the ages of 40 and 44 (an age when their opportunities to improve their status are decreasing). It must be added that education, including sexuality, gender and human rights education, remains one of the major arenas of intervention for the empowerment of girls and women, just as it is important for national development; yet this is the arena where economic chances and the available choices regarding one's body are starkly limited.



The organisation of sexual life and the role of ruling masculinity

Having deployed masculinity to explain Zuma's discursive practice, it is important to make some remarks about this concept, especially the idea of *ruling* masculinity. Once again, I wish to demonstrate how ruling masculinity is linked to sexuality and to human and sexual rights. A ruling masculinity is powerfully capable of organising ideas on sexuality and human rights. The same association holds between masculinity and development: the notion of masculinity can and does shape ideas on development.

Masculinity has achieved an enviable standing among social scientific concepts, indeed attaining disciplinary status. Even among those who do not directly study men and masculinity, the construct has been deployed in attempts to explain varied conditions, characterisations and conventions: from social and

family relations in rural spaces to urban life, risk-taking and mining, and from violence and national liberation struggles to international politics and culture (see, for example, Ouzgane and Morrell, 2005; Reid and Walker, 2005). In brief, masculinity has reconfigured judgements on relations within the world of men, the world between men and women and children, and the world per se.

This fetishising of the concept of masculinity has its downside, however. In particular, one notes the lack of precision in use and loose conception by many of those who employ it. It is therefore useful to indicate that there are different – and not necessarily helpful – understandings of the idea and place of masculinity in analysing social, political and economic worlds (for example, Meintjies, 1991; Clare, 2000; Dobson, 2002). It should be noted that it is not only masculinist thinking on gender relations that is troubled by lack of clear definitions of masculinity. Development scholars and practitioners also need to concern themselves with the definitional aspects of the concept – as indeed scholars of masculinity have done for some time.



One outcome of the debate on the concept of masculinity and its utility is the importance that some thinkers have accorded to talking about men's social and material practices and relations – “what men do or think or feel” (Hearn, 1996: 214). Ruling masculinity indicates a design of practices, relations, and supportive cognitive and affective discourses that seek to have us believe in the naturalness of men's power over women, other men, and children.

Another outcome of the debate is a preference for using masculinities in the plural rather than the singular form. In tandem with this thinking is the contention that masculinity is not one single thing; that there are a variety of masculinities, a position persuaded by the fact that masculinities intersect with and co-produce one another in relation to poverty, wealth and inequality, with ethnicity and sexualities, with race, space in a country, and location on the globe. I am thus distinguishing between what might be called sympathetic and critical conceptions of masculinity.

Prompted by such loose deployment of masculinity as an explanatory framework, as well as some insightful criticisms of the concept of hegemonic masculinity, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) recently revisited the latter. In the same way that ruling masculinity is employed here, these authors stress that hegemonic masculinity is intended to convey something more than simply a focus on men's biologies. Hegemonic masculinity is not an identity, not a set of role expectations, and not only about practices. Masculinities in general and dominant ones specifically, are fundamentally about discursive material

power, as well as resistance practices that shape relations men have in and to the world. These relations cover those arrangements men and women have to institutions, structures, laws and policies over and above males' relations to their own bodies, bodies of other males, and female bodies.

Ruling heterosexual masculinity's relation to "a better life" in post-apartheid South Africa

The itinerary of a man's practices and the idea of heterosexual masculinity might overlap one another at a particular moment, but more often than not, they tend to veer away from each other. Males are usually in pursuit of, or negotiating with or for a minority, trying to radically change the ruling masculinity.

Men are not naturally heterosexual and "masculine". This is supported on the one hand by the fact that there are (for the purpose of pleasure, among other reasons) men who dress up in women's clothes, men who enjoy sex with men, men who have sex with men and women, women whose sexual preference is for women, and women who have sex with both women and men.

In addition, this observation is strengthened by the fact that Zuma is neither the only African government incumbent, nor politician in the world whose discursive or material practices around sexual life deserve close attention. This points to the continuing dominance of a certain configuration of being sexual – *being a woman or being a man*.

Heterosexual masculinity is not only about what a male says or does about sex, but equally about the techniques of power. And so politicians in Nigeria, Latvia, Poland, Uganda, the United States, Zimbabwe, China and India, as some of many examples (see Human Rights Watch, 2004, 2005a, 2005b and Jessica Horn's article in this issue), have either inveighed against "unnatural vices" (Epprecht, 1998), or have gone along with discrimination against sexualities and sexual relations other than heterosexual ones. In these cases, the fist of the ruling heterosexual masculinity emerges to crush those men and women whose practices are regarded as queer.

For example, in 2005, the Latvian president, Vaira Vike-Freiberga signed into law a constitutional amendment defining marriage as the union of a man and a woman. In Africa, the presidents of Uganda, Zimbabwe, Namibia and Nigeria have not only made homophobic pronouncements, they have pursued homophobic policies. A constitutional amendment (stating that "marriage is lawful only if entered into between a man and a woman," and that "it is unlawful for same-sex couples to marry") was approved by the Ugandan



parliament, with the law proscribing same-sex marriage signed by President Yoweri Museveni – who has pronounced against homosexuality on several occasions. Since 1990, the maximum penalty in Uganda for the offence of “carnal knowledge against the order of nature” has been life imprisonment, with a maximum of seven years’ imprisonment for “attempts” at homosexual activity (see Human Rights Watch, July 12, 2005).

It needs to be spelled out that even in these cases of sexual discrimination, where a form of masculinity, supported by political power, aggressively reasserts its ascendancy over other forms, the undeniable fact is that gay masculinities exist, as do women who do not desire men sexually. It is the challenge posed by this reality that convulses rulers (ruling masculinities?) into a rage. This, contradictorily, is an indication of the resistance practices in different locales that subsequently shape the relations that (ruling?) men (those with more power) have with other men, with women, and with the social and material world.



National, social and cultural development: sexual war zones

Queer women’s and men’s rights and sexual desire were imperilled by Zuma’s utterance in Parliament,⁷ just as many women and men are failed by the notion of “a better life for all” if this philosophy remains deaf and blind to the significance of sexuality, and sexual rights in particular, to their personal freedom, development and happiness. Hence, as needful of attention as the practices of powerful figures, are the omissions to be found in governmental, regional and continental development policies (as much as in their languages as their aims). Whereas a framework such as the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (2001) has as one of its objectives accelerating the empowerment of women and thus reducing poverty, the lack of attention to sexuality is disturbing, especially where scholarship and activism in the arena of sexuality has shown that it implicates and is implicated in politics, economics and society (Tamale, 2006). Surely this reticence and blindness is as intolerable and dangerous as the trafficking in girls and women, female genital cutting, sexual slavery, the use of rape as weapon of war, and forced pregnancy and marriage that continue apace throughout the continent (and indeed the globe): crimes and violations that go to the heart of the social, economic and political power of men over children and women. Surely it must be clear that gender and sexually-based violence is an outrage against the rights to the bodily integrity and life of women and sexual minorities, just as it violates and denies choice and desire (Jolly and Cornwall, 2004). Considerations of sexual rights

cannot be divorced from the struggles around equality, justice and democracy (see, for instance, Petchesky, 2001). A development policy that remains quiet on the subject of sexual rights is likely to compromise its stated aims – including those of eradicating poverty, creating sustainable growth, and fully and beneficially integrating into the global economy.

The examples of sexual discrimination referred to earlier further illustrate the way that the development of nations or cultures is imagined, arranged and regulated. Part of the regulating imagination is the need to “protect” the nation or culture from “wrongdoers”, “abnormalities” and “perversion”. However, it is clear that nations, societies and cultures are continually contested and contesting – just as sexual conduct and relations are not “natural” entities, so masculinities and sexual identities and rights are fields of power. A point that needs to be emphasised is how sexuality is a site of this imagination and contestation, the ground whereon a nation or culture fashions and reforms itself, develops or stunts the whole or parts of the whole, moves forward or regresses.

Worded differently, if the former deputy-president of South Africa had spoken only for himself, if he was merely constituting a psycho-moral self and universe against which he, as a private citizen, opposed others whose practices he has a right to believe are immoral and unnatural, there would be less of a problem. But it must now be obvious, from his case and other such instances around the world, that there is a seething struggle going on. Difference, and dissidence from ruling masculinity, can be literally deadly. Recent news stories from South Africa, such as the battering and murder of 19-year-old Zoliswa Nkonyana by a mob of males for the “crime” of being a lesbian, attest to the intensity and seriousness of this struggle (Huisman, 2006; see also Orford, in this issue). More significantly, it must now be keenly appreciated that around the world there is a heterosexual masculine culture, which encourages violence, and which is centrally embedded in national and state arrangements of power. All these cases are to be read as striking associations of sexuality and masculinity on one side (often riddled with paradox), and nation, society or culture on the other side. It must also be noted that there is a mutually formative configuration between these various elements.

Thus, when an individual occupies a privileged political and social position, his or her speech acts have a denunciatory capacity that works to inhibit the rights and choices of those against whom the words are directed. These “othered” people in this particular case include those who have non-coital sex, including lesbians and young people trying to avoid pregnancy and sexually



transmitted infections. But they extend to cover those who do not always prefer heterosexual penile-vaginal intercourse (a preference which is being presumed and naturalised here), including bisexuals, gays and transgender persons.

Ruling men with political, economic, social or cultural power who publically repudiate oral and other “wrong” sexual practices silence other men and women with less political voice, less education, and less cultural and economic power. In societies and cultures where women and men are unequal, the sexual rights, choices, desires and pleasure of women and marginal men are likely to be curtailed by the words of such powerful men.

Conclusion



This article has shown that the events around Zuma are symptomatic and instructive of how the idea of “a better life” is deeply troubled by sexual politics, gendered power and cultural hegemonies. Following Charmaine Pereira’s recent contribution on *zina* in *Feminist Africa* 5 (2005), this article has tried to show that power both defines and shields the transgressions of those who wield authority in society, sexuality being as much a matter of political and religious sanction as it is a private affair. The events around Zuma have here been held up for scrutiny to reveal that “a good life” holds different meanings for African women as opposed to men, for queers as opposed to non-queers, for *iziduna* (headmen) as opposed to commoners, and for “100% Zulu-boys”⁸ (see, for example, Moya, 2006) as opposed to less than fully-fledged Zulu-boys and Zulu-girls.

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Footnotes

- 1 A version of this paper was first presented on 6 April 2006 at the International Workshop on Sexuality, Sexual Rights and Development organised by the Expert Group on Development Issues of the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It has been reworked and presented here with their kind permission.
- 2 In September 2006, the judge threw the Zuma corruption case out of court, ruling that the prosecution had not proved it had grounds to proceed.
- 3 Charmaine Pereira's argument concerning how power relations and status shield the sexual improprieties of the powerful is applicable here (*Feminist Africa* 5).

- 4 A slang South African term used to indicate an effete, usually homosexual man.
- 5 There were too few cases (73) of married women in the 15–19 age-group to show these separately. Parentheses indicate that a figure is based on 25–49 respondents. An asterisk indicates that a figure is based on fewer than 25 respondents and has been suppressed.
- 6 I wish to thank Raymond Suttner for clarifying this point for me, as well as for reading and commenting on the article. I also wish to thank Helen Moffett and the anonymous reviewers who commented on the article.
- 7 It is not only those whose sexual desires were formerly marginalised under apartheid law that were imperilled; oral sex is part of the sexual repertoire of many heterosexuals. It is also sometimes the only form of intimate sexual contact possible for disabled people, whether gay or straight.
- 8 This slogan appeared on T-shirts worn by Zuma supporters at his rape trial.



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Disability and desire: journey of a filmmaker

Shelly Barry



In 1996, at the age of 24, I found myself in hospital, with empty walls and broken dreams colouring my days. My partner at the time, Janine Clayton, and I were caught up in local taxi violence in Cape Town, South Africa, with members of rival taxi organisations firing at each other. The driver of the taxi we were in died, and my spine was severed by a bullet. My body told me long before doctors had the courage to admit it. I was paralysed from the chest down. During those endless afternoons with little else than my mind to entertain me, I contemplated the extent of my loss. Perhaps what struck me deepest at the time was my conviction that I would never be desired or loved again. I felt that my body had become damaged goods, my sexuality erased.

As time went by, I began to dismantle my perceptions by analysing their origins. I recognised that my mental picture of a person with a disability was that of someone in need of care, someone to be pitied, someone who certainly had no real claim to love or any kind of fulfilling life. The basis of my beliefs was largely informed by society's consensus on people with disabilities ... these were people who were mostly invisible, unless as beggars on the street or patients in hospital. The reflection of this invisibility was entrenched by the media.

My political consciousness grew within the disability rights movement. I began to acknowledge that it was society that had placed my body in a box with a label and stuck it away on a dusty shelf. I had a different body, yes. Not a damaged one. The process of reclaiming my body was an exceptionally powerful and liberating experience. I understood desire and sensuality from a completely different perspective. I realised that passion is something that everyone can access (it is not reserved for the young and the able-bodied), and it can suffuse through every aspect of our lives. I recognised the importance of self-love as opposed to requiring affirmation from others in order to love myself.

I felt pride. I even dared to feel beautiful. I cruised around on my wheels feeling that I had every right to be in the world, as much as anyone else did. And I began to live with a passion and fervour that fundamentally changed the course of my life.

My spiritual explorations into Eastern philosophy also came back to me with more force and power. I had always made a distinction between the body and the spirit, and this period gave that belief more clarity. For me, the body houses the spirit and is merely a vehicle. This does not mean that one does not honour the body – quite the opposite!

I truly believe in the power of a positive mind – something we can all access, and which begins with awareness of your thoughts. Our thoughts are energy, and energy manifests itself. It is amazing how much thought dictates outcome! Last year, I finally took the plunge and became a committed Buddhist.

After years in the disability rights movement, I returned to my dreams of becoming a filmmaker. I was fortunate enough to receive a scholarship to film school from the Ford Foundation. At 32, I became a full-time student again. In my first writing class at Temple University in Philadelphia, my professor told us, “Write about something because you HAVE to write about it. Write from your soul.” My first film birthed itself with this honesty. “Whole – A Trinity of Being”, a visual doc-poem of three short films, explores my spiritual journey of embracing and celebrating my body. The first segment, “Pin Pricks”, tells the tale of how the fabric of my life was torn apart and the revelations that took me beyond this loss: “I chose not to wear that garment of bitterness so easily fitted to the wounded body.”

The next segment deals with my second disability – my dependency on a tube that fits into a hole in my throat, allowing me to breathe and speak. In the film, I declare: “I celebrate this hole. The breath and speech it gives is my life force. So, I decorate it with jewellery, different handmade beads and trinkets because scars should also be crowned. Even if they’re not neat or pretty or hard to look at sometimes.”

For me, the power of this film came from the vulnerability involved in openly showing, on screen, the gaping wound in my throat. It had always been very difficult for me to look at it. By making a film about it, I hoped to encourage other women to feel beautiful, scars and all. Our scars are often imposed on us, yet we carry their shame. We are warriors because we have survived those scars, and live to tell their and our tales. I adorn my scar not to hide it, but to protect it and to celebrate it. This holds vital lessons for so-called able-bodied women as well – many have C-section scars, mastectomy scars and other injuries, but are taught to be ashamed of these and to hide them.

The last film of the trilogy is a sequence of images, snapshots of life in a wheelchair – not traditional snapshots, but those that dare to claim a strong



sense of sexuality and desire. One of the hardest scenes I did was a shot of my wheelchair next to me in the bath, cutting to a shot of my hands travelling over my body, in a gesture of masturbation. Doing this scene was not at all gratuitous. I made a political decision to present a picture of a disabled woman who has an active sexual relationship with herself. This was because the notion that women with disabilities might claim their sexuality or be sexually active is mostly absent, if not downright taboo, in all spheres of art, media and society in general. Black disabled women are the most invisible of all in this respect. Our cultures teach us to hide our sexuality, to not lay claim to our bodies, to wait demurely for a man to want us enough. Unless we begin to challenge those perceptions by inserting ourselves in this absence, this blank space, the status quo will continue.

In another scene, I depict my partner and myself in a loving embrace. This was difficult to do, because it meant exposing my personal life and relationships on screen, to an audience of strangers. Yet the necessity far outweighed the difficulty. I felt it was important to show that we should not only openly lay claim to loving ourselves, but claim the pleasure of being loved and loving others – in ways that are sensual, intimate and playful.

The film ends with a declaration of discovery: “I know about this dance of living. This dance is not with the feet. This dance is with the heart. And when I dance with the heart, music comes through me. Music is me. And then all that I am, is the dance.”

It has been two years since making that first film. To date, it has won four international film awards, much to my surprise! My work has continued to focus on re-envisaging a media that makes people with disabilities visible, not only as sexual beings, but as people in the fullness of human experience. I am juggling various stages of post-production on other films and hope to send them off into the world within the next few months. I am also working on the cinematic aesthetics of shooting films from a wheelchair. Unless we as people with disabilities, as women, as black people, as lesbians, become the makers of own images, our lives will constantly be depicted on the basis of assumptions that others hold about who we are, how we live, and how we love.



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Challenging sexual stereotypes: is cross-dressing “un-African”?

Jessie Kabwira Kapasula

Introduction

In Malawi, the year 2005 saw a significant increase in public media debates on issues such as homosexuality, cross-dressing and transvestitism. The media – print and radio especially, for television is a relatively new form and not widely available – treats these three issues differently. Homosexuality is the most hotly debated, with debate focusing on its “morality”. Opposition to homosexuality is usually couched in terms of religion and culture. Transvestitism is rarely discussed, while cross-dressing,¹ interestingly enough, is seldom linked to homosexuality or transvestitism.

The representation of transvestitism and cross-dressing in the Malawian media suggests that the former does not exist in Malawi, while the latter is present and acceptable as a form of entertainment. Examples of cross-dressing as entertainment that receive media coverage are those seen in traditional dances and in commercial music culture. For instance, Television Malawi (TVM) has shown documentaries on boys who dress like women to entertain. There are several popular musicians who use female names and give commercial justifications for so doing, arguing that this helps increase their popularity and creates intrigue and suspense among their audience.

The media also covers events at which men dress like women and vice versa (at weddings and even funerals for certain ethnic groups), but this is not investigated as a practice indicative of sexual “deviance” or homosexual tendencies; rather, such acts are represented as “cultural” practices.

In contrast to such benign presentations of cross-dressing, the media treats homosexuality as a “new” menace, an “alien sin” that needs to be swiftly rooted out before it spreads. The media discussions spilled over to online discussion forums of the University of Malawi, specifically, the Chanco-Alumni lists, to which I subscribe. What I found poignant was that many contributors dismissed practices such as homosexuality on the basis that they are not African, but “vile” foreign imports. In this brief standpoint, I wish to note that not only homosexuality, but cross-dressing has been observed in a variety of African cultures for centuries.

Brief notes on the history of homosexuality and cross-dressing in Africa

The history of homosexuality and cross-dressing on the African continent needs to be noted so that these two issues cannot be dismissed as a foreign phenomenon. According to the *Gay, Bisexual, Lesbian, Transgendered, Queer (GBLTQ) Encyclopaedia*, African traditional art provides evidence of homosexual expression throughout the African continent. The entry by Frederick Lamp documents evidence of what we now call male-to-male and female-to-female relationships:

The Meru ritual leaders called *mugawe* among the Meru of Kenya, dress as women routinely and sometimes even marry other men. Coptic monks in the sixth or seventh century whose work included the painting of sacred manuscripts apparently were known for their homosexuality, judging by a man's wedding vow on papyrus that promises "never to take another wife, never to fornicate, nor consort with wandering monks."

Among the Dagara of Burkina Faso, the homosexual man is said to be well integrated into the community, occupying a performance role of intermediary between this world and the other world, as a sort of "gatekeeper".

Carlos Estermann found that among the Ambo of Angola a special order of diviner, called *omasenge*, dressed as women, did women's work, and contracted marriage with other men who might also be married to women. An *esenge* [sing. of *omasenge*] is essentially a man who has been possessed since childhood by a spirit of female sex, which has been drawing out of him, little by little, the taste for everything that is masculine and virile.

[In] the case of the Zande of the Central African Republic, sex between a man and a boy was said to benefit the diviner, and would take place before the consultation of oracles, when sex with women would be taboo. But as Evans-Prichard reported, the Zande went on to allow that the reason was not simply ritual prohibition, but also "just because they like [boys]" (2002).

Ancient Egyptian art also exhibits homosexuality: The Saqqara from Dynasty V shows the close embrace of two powerful male court officials. Further south, an ivory carving from the Vili of Congo shows two men with their hands on the genitals of adjacent men, two men holding a phallic staff, and one man holding his own erection. The GBLTQ encyclopaedia also documents evidence of woman-to-woman relationships in art from Zambia and Sierra Leone. The creation of an artificial penis has been documented among the Ovimbundu of Zanzibar; in 1937, Wilfred Hambley mentioned that "a woman has been known to make an artificial penis for use with another woman" (2002–2006).



Frederick Lamp's entry also features the Yoruba of Nigeria. Their male priests always dress as women with braided hair. They operate in the ritual context in which the god is said to "mount" the priest in spirit possession, as a male animal mounts a female in intercourse. The Gabra of Ethiopia and Kenya even have a symbolic gender transformation, in which men become women and women become men.

Cross-dressing is also seen in traditional African masked dances. A good example is the Baga dance from the Guinea coast of Africa, in which a group of men dress as women and imitate their movement erotically, undulating their hips and sometimes suggesting sexual intercourse with male bystanders.

Modern African cross-dressing in fiction and reality



I found it refreshing that Benjamin Kwakye's *The Sun By Night*, winner of the Commonwealth Literary Prize for the best novel in 2006, featured cross-dressing as an African phenomenon, in an African setting and context. Set in Ghana, it is hardly a neutral treatment of cross-dressing – the anti-hero, a young man who likes to wear women's clothing and make-up, is also responsible for the murder of a prostitute. Nevertheless, there are moving scenes that show the clash between a modern urban African youth and his more traditional father, when the latter discovers his son wearing women's clothing. The first time this happens, the teenage boy is "caught" wearing his mother's dress, high-heeled shoes, rouge and lipstick. He is shame-faced and stammering, while his father delivers the traditional authoritarian lecture of the paterfamilias. But the second time is quite different. Kubi, the son, is found "admiring himself" (150) in a navy-blue dress, with his face adorned with make-up. When his father sees him like this, he is too shocked to speak, but this time Kubi shows no shame. He laughs, and explains that he bought the dress, and sees nothing wrong with wearing it; that it is harmless. The father is baffled, alienated and even disgusted; yet he accepts that he is powerless. This time he can only shake his head in pity and acknowledge that he does not understand his son. The narrative of cross-dressing has shifted from one of Freudian transgression to one in which the right to self-expression trumps the patriarchal arbiter of gender roles.

Shifting to the story of a cross-dresser in South Africa, Donald Donham features the real-life story of young man who enjoyed wearing female attire. Linda (a common male name in Zulu) was a black man who died of Aids in Soweto in 1993. He was the founding member of the Gay and Lesbian Organisation of the Witwatersrand (GLOW), and was a drag queen.² At his funeral, his father, an

independent Zionist church member, explained that his son was a good person who worked hard in the household. However, he went on to say the following:

There was just one thing about my son's life that bothered me.... So let me tell you, if you're a man, wear men's clothes. If you're coloured, act coloured. Above all, if you're black, don't wear Indian clothes. If you do this, how will our ancestors recognise [and protect] you? (1998)

Like the fictional father in Kwakye's novel, it seems that cross-dressing is not associated with sexual transgression so much as a blurring of the borders of identity; a blurring that older men and those who espouse traditional values find particularly disturbing.

Challenging binary thinking

The behaviour of these two sons, Kubi and Linda, challenges the binary thinking that strongly differentiates between masculine and feminine behaviour. The fictional and the real characters do not reject their biological sex; rather, they enjoy exploring aspects of feminine identity performance. The notion that men can explore an inter-gendered space, laying claim to feminine practices, is unfathomable to their fathers. However, it is this space that the sons use to frame their identity, even though this contests the societal norms and gendered dress codes to which their fathers subscribe.

This seems to bear out Stuart Hall's assertion that "Identity is formed at the unstable point where the 'unspeakable' stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture" (quoted in Donham, 1998: 1).

What is interesting is that neither in the Ghanaian novel, nor in Linda's lived experience, is there any suggestion that the cross-dressing they enjoy is the result of foreign or Western influences. If an aetiology of their behaviour is sought, it can be found only in local childhood practices. In *The Sun By Night*, Kubi's mother tells how she and a neighbour who had a girl the same age as Kubi used to swop the children's clothing and dress their son and daughter up in the other's clothes.

Linda, the drag queen from Soweto, had similar experiences as a child: in an interview, he said: "I used to wear girls' clothes at home. My mother dressed me up. In fact, I grew up wearing girls' clothes" (quoted in McLean and Ngcobo, 1994: 170).

Whether the cross-dressing of adult men can be attributed to cross-gendered ways in which their parents dressed them as children is open to debate. However, what remains is that some adult black African men choose to wear women's clothing, and derive pleasure from this – without any evidence that these choices are the result of "foreign" or "non-African" influences or "corruption".



Conclusion

Whatever one's personal attitude to cross-dressing or homosexuality, what is clear is that both have history and precedence in Africa. To demonstrate this, this brief article has attempted to parallel literary and real-life examples of cross-dressing in African contexts. Encyclopaedic evidence has also been presented to underline the point that there is clear evidence of homosexuality in African history. The intention here is neither to advocate nor oppose gay rights or cross-dressing. Rather, it is to deconstruct the view that homosexuality, cross-dressing and transvestitism are foreign imports, and to thus encourage Africans to take informed positions on these issues. Cross-dressers and homosexuals may be in the minority in our societies, but in this age of spiralling gender-based violence and HIV/Aids, we need to encourage informed discussion and investigation of all forms of sexuality if we are to curb sexual violence and the transmission of a cruel disease.



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Footnotes

- 1 Cross-dressing is the act of wearing clothing commonly associated with another gender within a particular society.
- 2 A male-bodied person who performs, often in nightclubs and at parties, as an exaggeratedly feminine character, in an elaborate costume usually consisting of a flamboyant dress and high-heeled shoes, heavy make-up and a wig.

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The 50th anniversary of the 1956 Women's March: a personal recollection

Elinor Sisulu



“Now that you have tampered with the women, you have struck a rock.”

Fifty years ago, this was the rallying cry for 20 000 South African women protesting the apartheid regime's imposition of hated laws requiring black women to carry passes in urban areas. On that extraordinary day, 20 000 women from all over South Africa watched their chosen representatives Lilian Ngoyi, Rahima Moosa, Helen Joseph and Sophie Williams deposit thousands of petitions to the Minister of Native Affairs at the Union Building, the seat of the apartheid government. For a full thirty minutes, 20 000 women stood in silence in the forecourt of the building, before addressing the then South African prime minister J. G. Strijdom in song: “Strijdom, you have tampered with the women, you have struck a rock!” They then dispersed with quiet dignity, conscious that they had made history. The image of the event was burned into the consciousness of millions of women and men. It inspired future generations of women to celebrate 9 August every year as South African Women's Day.

Fifty years later, on 9 August 2006, thousands of South African women gathered in Pretoria to recreate that historic march from Strijdom Square in central Pretoria (to be fittingly renamed Lilian Ngoyi Square after the legendary leader) to the Union Building, now the seat of the democratically elected African National Congress government. I was privileged to be one of those women. Sandwiched between the Limpopo government delegation, a Palestinian solidarity group and a contingent of young professional women from an investment company, I could not help marvelling at the contrast between the two marches, and feeling profoundly moved.

The 1956 march was a serious affair in which the marchers walked with grim determination, many of them having literally risked life and limb to get to Pretoria. My mother-in-law, Albertina Sisulu, recounts how she started her day at 2am distributing train tickets to women who were leaving from Phefeni station in Soweto. Many women paid their own way, some even selling their furniture to raise funds for the journey. I recalled with pride and deep affection

Ruth Mompati's account of how in the planning stages, some male leaders in the ANC had resisted the idea of the march, arguing that the women did not have the capacity to embark on such a huge undertaking. Walter Sisulu, then ANC Secretary-General, stepped in and said with confidence that the women would succeed. It is not easy for generations who have not lived under apartheid to have a sense of what a dangerous and forbidding place Pretoria was for black people at the time; the courage it took to gather at the citadel of apartheid was truly astounding.

Those walking in the footsteps of those brave women did so with a sense of joy that many of their dreams and aspirations had come to fruition. South Africa is a world leader when it comes to representation of women at the highest levels of government. Today, women make up a third of the country's parliamentarians, and 43% of President Thabo Mbeki's cabinet, holding key government posts such as Foreign Affairs and Minerals and Mining. The deputy-president, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, is a woman, as are more than 50% of the country's ambassadors, 44% of provincial premiers, 33% of Cabinet members, and more than 25% of local councillors. In 1997, the governing African National Congress (ANC) resolved that 33% of its electoral candidates would be women. Today, with women constituting 55% of the national electorate, the ANC is pressing for 50% female representation in local government elections later this year. South Africa's new Constitution itself guarantees the equality of women before the law. Most importantly, the dreaded pass laws have been relegated to the distant past; the daughters of the 1956 veterans can move freely across the length and breadth of the country, have the legal right to live anywhere they like, and enjoy freedom of speech unrivalled on the African continent.

In the week preceding 9 August, I received a call from the South African Revenue Services (SARS). I reacted the way most normal people would on hearing from the tax office – I was shaking in my boots. Trepidation turned to amused surprise when I was invited to speak at the SARS Women's Day celebrations to be held on 8 August. It turned out to be a memorable and educational experience. Sitting in the huge marquee set up for the event, I could not think of any other country where hundreds of tax officials and workers would dedicate time to watching a large-screen documentary on the historic march. The audience dissolved into laughter at the image of the feisty veteran Frances Baard proclaiming: "We had to protest the pass laws. After all, what is a pass? It can't sweep the floors. It can't clean the house. It can't go out to work and support the family. It is just a piece of rubbish!" They sat in awe as tribute was paid to



the leader of the march, the legendary Lilian Ngoyi, with one of the veterans commenting: “That woman had no fear, she was afraid of no-one.”

In my address, I was able to comment on SARS’ comprehensive set of strategies to facilitate the career progression of women in the organisation, especially at executive and senior management levels. Overall representation of women in SARS stands at 65%. Strictly speaking, we should be talking about the “tax woman” rather than the “tax man”! I added a cautionary note, however: the considerable achievements of equality before the law and greater representation of women in government, civil society and the corporate world cannot overshadow the realities of disturbing levels of violence against women, the impact of the HIV/Aids pandemic on women’s lives, and the grinding poverty which continues to characterise and circumscribe the lives of the majority of women in South Africa.

The placards displayed at the commemorative march gave an idea of the struggles in which women are still engaged – struggles for treatment for Aids sufferers, the battles against violence (especially rape) and poverty. But nothing could dampen the celebratory mood, and the festive atmosphere persisted as we entered the grounds of the Union Building. Women relaxed on rugs or deck chairs, opened food baskets, and enjoyed the music of the singer Nothembi, wearing colourful Ndebele garb.

Unfortunately my enjoyment of the event was abruptly brought to an end by the realisation that the Vice-President of Zimbabwe, Joyce Mujuru, was one of the guests of honour. I was profoundly distressed that this woman, a central figure in a government that has refused to take responsibility for or address the untold damage and destruction of Operation Murambatsvina, should be rubbing shoulders with some of the great veterans of the 1956 march. Throughout this horrifying government blitz, euphemistically referred to by its proponents as “Operation Clean Up”, this woman showed no concern or mercy for the plight of over 700 000 people, mostly women, who lost their homes and businesses. She did not even protest the bulldozing of an orphanage in Hatcliffe settlement on the outskirts of Harare. She has done nothing to prevent the ongoing harassment of women vendors in the informal sector, and the ongoing destruction of homes by the police and army unity. She has supported the denial of basic freedoms to women throughout her political career, and has vehemently and publicly opposed the principle of women’s equality to men. Her presence as a guest of honour at the 9 August celebration stands as an affront not only to all those women who lost their homes (and in some



cases, their lives) as a result of Operation Murambatsvina; it is an affront to the memory of those brave veterans of the 1956 march – a march that would have been illegal and subject to brutal repression had it been attempted in present-day Zimbabwe. Regardless of their gender, leaders whose actions have caused untold harm and suffering to the poorest and most vulnerable women in their countries should be held accountable, not feted as guests of honour.

I left the celebration in disgust and decided to console myself by paying tribute to the courageous women of Zimbabwe who struggle daily for the basic freedoms that South African women enjoy as a matter of course. To those who saw fit to invite Joyce Mujuru to South Africa as an honoured “sister”, spare a thought for award-winning human rights lawyer, Beatrice Mtetwa, a petite yet powerful dynamo who fearlessly continued to defend human rights activities and victims and survivors of state-sanctioned violence even after she herself was assaulted by police. Spare a thought for Trudi Stevensen, the MDC member of parliament who, in the parliamentary debate on Operation Murambatsvina, poured scorn on claims by her ruling party counterparts that the purpose of the blitz was to restore dignity to the people. In a fiery speech, she passionately outlined the extreme suffering inflicted on the people of her constituency caused by the destruction of their homes and businesses.

Spare a thought for the countless women displaced by the operation, desperately trying to eke out a living in remote rural areas in Zimbabwe, or as illegal immigrants in neighbouring countries. Finally, spare a thought for Sheba Dube, a great Zimbabwean heroine who died tragically in February this year. Sheba was one of the few women with the courage to speak out about the rape that she experienced at the hands of Zimbabwe government soldiers during the Gukurahundi campaign of torture and murder in the 1980s. Sheba overcame this trauma by throwing herself into a life of community activism. At the time of her death, she was running a support programme for orphans through the Providence Orphan’s Project. Sheba is a heroine in the mould of the great women who led the 1956 march. Wherever you are, my sister Sheba, you are the wind beneath our wings. It is women like you whom we should be honouring at this momentous moment in the history of the struggle for women’s rights in Africa. *Igama lamakhosikazi, malibongwe.*



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The deadly cost of breaking the silence: a tribute to Lorna Mlosana¹

Margie Orford



The struggle to roll out treatment to the millions of HIV-positive South Africans continues. Equally disturbing are the incidents in which women are beaten or murdered for being brave and responsible enough to disclose their status.

On 13 December 2003, a group of young Khayelitsha women were in the mood for a party. Lorna Mlosana and her friends Nomfundo Dubula and Nomava Mangisa were all 20-something volunteers and HIV activists with the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC). They were keen to carry on the festivities after the organisation – led by the charismatic Nobel Peace Prize nominee Zackie Achmat – wound up its end-of-year party. The women planned to go to the beach, but when it began to rain, Lorna and Nomava decided to hang out at the shebeen near Lorna's home instead.

Lorna, who was openly HIV-positive and healthy thanks to anti-retrovirals, never returned home. That night, she was killed by a vicious cocktail of misogyny, violence and fear.

Orphaned as a baby, she had come to Cape Town from the Transkei in 2000. She dreamt of becoming a lawyer, but these ambitions were shattered when she fell pregnant and a test revealed that she was HIV-positive. Now she was dead.

What happened that night? Reports are conflicting, but at some stage during the evening Lorna left the shebeen. "Maybe she was on her way home," says her sister, Nonkuhuleko Sotshononda, "maybe she went to the toilet? I don't know. But she was cornered by eight men and she was gang-raped." Lorna, whom friends describe as "gentle", endured the ghastly attack. Afterwards she said to them: "I am HIV positive. How could you do this to me?"

Nonkuhuleko thinks the men became enraged when they thought they had been infected with the virus and vented their anger on her sister. "The rapists asked Nomava if what Lorna said was true and then they began to beat her". When Nomava tried to intervene, one of the men grabbed her head and bashed it repeatedly against the bonnet of a car. "They wanted to kill both of them,"

says Nonkuhuleko. “An ambulance arrived – that is what saved Nomava – but it was too late for Lorna. She died on the way to the hospital.”

The TAC has shaken the world of HIV/Aids activism since its launch in 1998. Its campaigns for greater access to treatment, and crusades against the view that HIV/Aids is a “death sentence” with the uncompromising *action directe* tactics of 20th-century revolutionaries. But this can be very dangerous at times, especially when those activists are young women.

Lorna’s fate was appalling, the violence she endured extreme. But is it unusual? Marta Darder, a Spanish doctor with Médecins Sans Frontiers, who worked with Lorna (and gave treatment support at MSF) in Khayelitsha and knew her well, had this to say: “Sadly, I cannot say that Lorna’s death is unique or exceptional. It was not just a reaction to her HIV status but also to her vulnerability as a woman. It’s very, very hard to be a woman here. Gang rape is an everyday event.”



One-third of the rape cases reported to the police in the Western Cape are committed by more than one perpetrator. About eight per cent of rapes end in murder. “Our experience at Rape Crisis is that gang rape does not typically result in murder, although we are painfully aware of cases like Lorna’s,” says Sam Waterhouse, Advocacy Co-ordinator for Rape Crisis. “Rape and especially gang rape is an extreme expression of male sexual entitlement over women and is used to control women either directly or indirectly. The threat of gang rape is sent out to other women in the community, strengthening the control of the rapists over all the women in the community. Gang rape is used to punish a woman for not conforming to the expectations placed on her.”

Lorna did not conform, nor was she silenced by her brutal experience of gang rape. She spoke out challengingly and disclosed her HIV status – only to be murdered in a public place in a densely populated area.

Those close to Lorna do not believe that poverty, frustration or sexism were the prime factors that led to her death. Her friend and fellow TAC activist, Nomfundo Dubula, believes that Lorna was murdered for one reason and one reason only – her HIV status. “We believe that Lorna was discriminated against. If she hadn’t told them about her positive status, then maybe they would have just injured her,” Nomfundo told me in the weeks after the incident. Her fears are backed by recent studies that show that HIV-positive women are nearly three times more likely than HIV-negative women to experience violence at the hands of their current partner.

When Lorna’s family heard what had happened, they were appalled by

the ring of silence that was drawn around the assault – nobody at the busy shebeen was willing to admit that they had witnessed anything. Outraged, her brother phoned the TAC, and they took up her case by organising a march to the shebeen. Three men were eventually arrested and refused bail.

“We were very shocked that no one helped Lorna,” says Nonkuhuleko (Lorna’s sister). “They knew! The people in the shebeen and the neighbours knew what was happening, but they did nothing. Why? No one wants to witness what happened. There are individuals who support these rapists, these criminals.” She alleges that Nomava Mangisa, who survived the assault and was a witness to Lorna’s murder, was intimidated and threatened by community members in an effort to silence her.

“I fetched Nomava from the hospital when she had recovered enough from her very serious head injuries,” says Dr Marta Darder. “She was still in a terrible state of shock. She alleged then that a woman who worked in the shebeen had said that Lorna should be beaten more strongly because she had HIV – that she deserved it because she had HIV. Other people said that one of the attackers had been her boyfriend. It’s hard to say exactly what happened, but must a woman be murdered for having HIV?” Nomava Mangisa never recovered. She died a few months after the assault (her family has not disclosed the cause of death).

Lorna is not the first South African woman to be murdered upon disclosing her HIV status. In 1998, Gugu Dlamini was knifed to death by a group of neighbours three weeks after disclosing that she was HIV-positive. In August 2000, a high-school teacher shot his wife, Mpho Motlaung, and placed a note on her body that said “HIV positive”. He then shot her parents before killing himself.

But Nathan Geffen of the TAC feels that South Africa has come a long way nonetheless in the destigmatisation of HIV/Aids. “People have become very open about living with HIV since the opening of TAC branches. Lorna, it should be remembered, was murdered by notorious thugs at a shebeen.”

It has been suggested that in shebeens in urban South African townships, there is a tacit acceptance that women who are raped or physically attacked in that environment are not entitled to receive aid from others. Some also believe that women who accept drinks from men owe them sexual favours. The boundaries of where violence against women ends and discrimination against those with HIV/Aids begins become very blurred in a context where women’s power to negotiate their own freedom of movement, their own pleasure, their right to bodily integrity, is so profoundly compromised.



Nomfundo believes that the way to break the cycle of violence against women like Lorna is to get men to take action. “We need men who have HIV to speak out. By speaking out they would show that it is not just a woman’s problem. Women get tested when they are pregnant – that is when many are diagnosed – so HIV is associated with women. Men think that it is women who carry the disease, because women are always the first to know. Men don’t test because they see it as a woman’s problem and they only seek treatment when they are very sick,” she says.

Nathan Geffen agrees that more needs to be done about the way in which HIV/Aids affects women socially and economically. “If we had more time, we could pay more attention to this, and also to the links between violence against women and HIV. Unfortunately our energy is being sapped by an irrational debate spearheaded by the Minister of Health and the President of South Africa,” he says.



So how do we make sure that what happened to Lorna Mlofana never happens again? “All rape must be condemned by our society and by the criminal justice system,” says Sam Waterhouse of Rape Crisis. “We need to ensure that perpetrators take responsibility for their actions – something that happens extremely rarely – and the existing climate of tolerance towards many forms of rape must be addressed. There are many people who believe that women are liable for their own rapes. The criminal justice system must respond effectively to violent rape perpetrated by strangers and gang rapes. Emphasis must be placed on the identification of the suspects, early arrest and detailed investigation. Bail should be denied. Community participation would make investigation easier and would put perpetrators behind bars. In all our communities, we need to openly discuss sexuality, issues of choice, self-respect and mutual respect with children if the cycle is to be broken.”

Lorna’s absence is a continuous source of pain to her family and friends. The most effective way of honouring her would be to make sure that she did not die for nothing. “My nephew, Lorna’s son, asks us so often: ‘Where is my mum? When is she coming home?’ I want her to be honoured. She was so kind to everybody,” says her sister. “I want 13 December to be a special day, a public day that commemorates her life and honours her death.”

Lorna’s case came up several times at the Khayelitsha Magistrate’s Court. In October 2004, it was referred to the High Court in Cape Town. Three of the

alleged eight perpetrators were arrested. But two were granted bail and remain at large. Lorna's family was not even informed about the hearing. According to Dr Marta Darder, the perpetrators had every expectation that the case would simply "go away".

It was only after lawyers were retained by TAC that Lorna Mlofana's family were informed so that they could be present at the bail hearings. The TAC campaigned relentlessly for two years to keep Lorna's case in the public eye. Their work paid off. "The successful prosecution of Lorna's attackers came about due to the efforts of Prosecutor Badenhorst, Khayelitsha Police Commander Jacobs, Inspector Nash and Inspector Sass," says Mandla Majola, TAC co-ordinator at Khayelitsha. Ncedile Ntumbukane (20) was found guilty of murder and rape. Vuyelwa Dlova, the female shebeen patron who allegedly said to the dying Lorna, "You bitch, you are spreading Aids," was found guilty of attempted murder.

It won't bring them back to life, but this time some form of justice was done for Lorna, for Nomava, and for the other victims of gender-based violence.

Nevertheless, hate crimes against HIV-positive women continue. Shortly after the verdict, it was reported that another TAC member, Nandipha Matyeke, was raped and murdered in Harare, Khayelitsha, outside Cape Town. She was only 18 years old, and in grade 10 at Luxolo High School

Mandla Majola explains why Lorna will never be forgotten: "We commemorate Lorna Mlofana's death every year and are working to put her vision into practice. Her dream was to work with educare centres to educate teachers about HIV/Aids. Lorna believed that many children who are HIV-positive are discriminated against and she wished to put a stop to this. We work with a large number of educare centres now. We have also established the Lorna Mlofana Support Group. It works with rape survivors, especially children, and people who are HIV positive. Through this group and in other ways, TAC has taken up the issue of abuse of women in Khayelitsha. We have a group called Positive Women. They tackle domestic violence by working with the police and MSF to confront cases of domestic violence and educate people about the services available to rape survivors and children who are abused. Police figures show that the incidence of rape is slowly coming down."



If you would like to contribute or participate, you can contact Mandla Majola, TAC Co-ordinator at Khayelitsha on 021 364 5489 or 072 424 7181.

Footnotes

- 1 This piece appeared in a slightly different form in the Southern African edition of the magazine *Marie Claire*. *Feminist Africa* is grateful to the author and to Kate Wilson, the editor of *Marie Claire*, for permission to reprint.



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Sister Namibia: Fighting for all human rights for all women

Liz Frank and Elizabeth /Khaxas



Sister Namibia (sister@iafrica.com.na), a feminist women's rights organisation based in Windhoek, Namibia, was founded in 1989 on the eve of national independence to give women a voice in the building of a democratic post-colonial society. For the first ten years, the main activity of the organisation was the production of *Sister Namibia* magazine. From 1999 onwards, we began to broaden our scope. We now engage in the fields of media, education, research, advocacy and cultural activity in order to promote women's human rights and full equality in a world free from violence, discrimination and oppression.

Through our bi-monthly *Sister Namibia* magazine we raise awareness among women, men and young people of the ways in which political, social, cultural, legal and economic systems of power control girls and women. We also profile women leaders in all fields of society, advocate for and inform about gender-related law reform, and oppose and challenge all forms of sexism, racism, homophobia and other discourses and practices that oppress and divide people. We print 10 000 copies of each edition and distribute them nationally through NGO networks, as well as to subscribers and libraries around the world. A website and electronic newsletter are currently being developed to further our information-sharing activities.

Following research on women's political participation undertaken in 1998, we developed the 50/50 Campaign for Women's Political Empowerment, based on the Namibian Women's Manifesto. This document was developed collaboratively with women in government, political parties and NGOs in preparation for the 1999 National Assembly elections. Our aim of uniting women across party lines through this manifesto was thwarted when leading women from the ruling SWAPO party withdrew their support on the grounds that we had included respect for the rights of lesbian women in this document. These were the women who had lobbied hard to keep references to lesbian rights out of the Beijing Platform for Action, insisting that this was not a gender issue. The story of how Sister Namibia mainstreamed lesbian rights into the 50/50 Campaign

and gained the support of many ruling party members at national, regional and local levels, in spite of regular homophobic attacks by government leaders, is documented in a number of publications, including a case study, *Written out: How sexuality is used to attack women's organizing* (Rothschild, 2005). We ran the campaign for six years, from one national election to the next, and were able to maintain support from both our NGO partners and women in communities across the country to keep the reference to lesbian rights in the revised Namibian Women's Manifesto of 2004.

Through our networking around the 50/50 Campaign, Sister Namibia has become the lead agency for those NGOs working together as the gender sector of the Namibian NGO Forum (NANGOF). We have initiated many public activities to get women's voices heard on gender-related law reform, including the Children's Status Bill currently before parliament.



The current focus of Sister Namibia's work is on helping women to survive the Aids pandemic. Over the past years, more than 40% of pregnant women have tested HIV-positive during routine testing in Caprivi region, the hardest hit area of our country. Young women are twice as likely to be infected as young men. For a new campaign on women's rights to sexual autonomy and choice, we are developing a *Sexuality Resource Book for Girls and Women*. This will target women and girls with information about the biological aspects of conception, contraception, abortion and so forth, as well as uncovering some of the socio-cultural discourses concerning questions such as "What is a woman?" and "Who owns a woman's body?" This resource will be based on field research on sexual norms, values and practices conducted by us in Damara, Owambo and Caprivi communities. The book will be translated into the major Namibian languages, and we will use it in workshops targeting other NGOs, teachers, youth workers and social workers, as well as women and girls across Namibia.

In partnership with the Women's Leadership Centre (wlc@mweb.com.na), a new organisation started in 2004 by Elizabeth /Khaxas, we have conducted writing workshops for women living with and affected by HIV and Aids, to begin to break the taboos and silences around the many patriarchal cultural practices that deny girls and women sexual autonomy and choice. The Centre's core activity is women's writing as a form of resistance, with the aim of developing feminist analysis and activism in Namibia. Later this year, the Centre will publish a book of women's writings, examining the intersections of culture, poverty, violence and HIV/AIDS as they affect women and girls in

the different Namibian communities. The book will call on readers to take on the challenge of cultural resistance and transformation regarding the human rights of women and girls. This will be the second publication by the Women's Leadership Centre, following the publication in 2005 of *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow: Writings by Namibian Women*, which brought together stories and poetry dealing more broadly with women's oppression through patriarchal cultures (/Khaxas, 2005).

In Sister Namibia's Lesbian Support Programme, we have run local and national workshops and outreach activities for women with alternative sexual and gender identities. Critical feminist analysis is used to understand and challenge the discrimination against and oppression of sexual minorities, and in particular of women, as part of patriarchal culture and rule. In response to the hate speech and public expressions of homophobia orchestrated by senior government leaders, including the former state president, Sister Namibia was instrumental in establishing the Rainbow Project (TRP) in 1997. This is a human rights organisation that defends the rights of LGBT people in Namibia. Together we have conducted annual LGBT awareness weeks, including panel discussions, film festivals, and storytelling evenings. We have organised marches for "All Human Rights for All", and entrenched the rights of LGBT people in the human rights discourse of Namibia. And possibly most important of all, we have nurtured a new generation of young lesbian women who are prepared to speak publicly for their rights.



Sister Namibia has also been instrumental in the revival of Katutura Community Radio (KCR), targeting audiences in the townships of Katutura and Khomasdal, through which we have created space for alternative voices. In 2004 KCR won two awards for best community media, and the winning programme, produced by TRP, was on being transgender in Namibia!

At the regional level, Sister Namibia and TRP were involved in a major research project on same-sex practices among women in seven southern African countries. This research was presented at the "Sex and Secrecy Conference" of the International Association for the Study of Sexuality and Culture in Johannesburg in June 2003, and led to the publication *Tommy boys, lesbian men and ancestral wives* (Morgan and Wieringa, 2005), reviewed elsewhere in this issue.

This research project also gave birth to the African Lesbian Alliance, later renamed Coalition of African Lesbians (CAL), which was initiated by Elizabeth /Khaxas among the women who had participated in the project. In August 2004,

Sister Namibia, in collaboration with the Women's Leadership Centre and the Rainbow Project, organised a strategic planning week, which was held in Windhoek with women from 13 African countries. The organisation was officially launched during the first seven-day Lesbian Leadership Institute held in March 2005 in Windhoek, with coalition members from Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe. Sadly, Sierra Leone was not represented, following the brutal murder of Fanny Ann Eddy. This took place shortly after her attendance at the CAL strategic planning, where she had been elected onto the Steering Committee, and we still grieve her loss. The organisation she started continues to be a member of CAL, whose other steering committee members hail from Namibia, Rwanda, South Africa and Zimbabwe. The director of Sister Namibia is the Chairperson of the CAL Steering Committee and is currently engaged in fundraising for the organisation.



The overall goal of CAL is to work towards the creation of equality for African lesbian women in all spheres of life, to be achieved through the following strategies:

- advocacy and lobbying for the political, legal, economic, cultural and sexual rights of African lesbians by engaging strategically with African and international structures and allies;
- building and strengthening the voice and visibility of African lesbians through research, media and cultural activities, and through participation in local and international forums;
- building the capacity of African lesbians and their organisations to use African radical feminist analysis to uncover the intersectionality of their oppression and identify strategies and partners in their struggle for dignity and equality;
- building a strong and sustainable lesbian coalition supporting the development of national organisations working on lesbian issues in every country in Africa;
- supporting the work of these national organisations in all the foregoing areas, including the facilitation of the personal growth of African lesbians and the building of capacity within their organisations.

During 2006-7, CAL plans to hold three more African Lesbian Leadership Institutes, conduct research and documentation on the lived realities of lesbian women in the 11 member countries of the coalition, and produce a variety of electronic and print media to support our lobbying and advocacy work and promote the visibility of lesbian women in Africa.

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Liz Frank

is the current director of Sister Namibia.

Elizabeth /Khaxas

a former director of Sister Namibia, now heads the Women's Leadership Centre.



SWEAT (Sex Worker Education and Advocacy Taskforce)

Jayne Arnott

Who are we?

SWEAT is a South African non-profit organisation, based in Cape Town, that engages with sex workers on issues of health and human rights. We are a small, dynamic and flexible organisation with seven full-time staff and three work programmes: training and support; advocacy and lobbying; and research.

Our primary goal is to achieve a legal adult sex work industry in South Africa, in which the human rights of sex workers are realised and where sex work is acknowledged as work. As such our work with adult sex workers focuses on:

- Organising sex workers to claim their rights, including setting the standards for fair and safe working conditions;
- Decriminalisation of adult sex work in South Africa;
- Access to health, legal and social services;
- Promoting safer sex practices and sex workers' health and well-being.

What do we do?

SWEAT has been in existence for over ten years and has been able to reach sex workers and employers in the industry through outreach work that is non-intrusive and non-judgemental. We go out to where people are working, at times when they are working. We are available to those who want our services while ensuring minimal disruption to their work; and we respect those who do not want our services. We give out condoms and educational materials, and use every opportunity available to engage in conversation regarding health and safety issues. We are responsive to any issue or need that we encounter and where we cannot assist, we will provide a referral to someone we think or know can help.

We are also engaged in more in-depth work around safer sex through workshops with sex workers collectively in brothels, as well as with groups of sex workers that we have organised outdoors. The focus is on working with people

collectively and using these spaces to promote thinking and acting on issues. Similarly, we are supporting the beginnings of a national “movement” of sex workers launched by participants at a national meeting in 2003. At present we support quarterly meetings of a national leadership core, as well as monthly local meetings of persons involved in this “movement”.

Our direct work with sex workers and others in the sex work industry in Cape Town informs our work directions in an ongoing way concerning health and safety issues, as well as our work around law reform.

The advocacy and lobbying programme campaigns for the decriminalisation of adult sex work, addresses local legislation that impacts on sex workers and engages in issues relating to regulation and working conditions with sex workers.

Our research programme began in 2003. We are developing a credible information base that will assist us in our work directions, as well as enabling us to act in the interests of sex workers.



Challenges

There is an ongoing tension concerning the need to do more for more sex workers. We experience pressure from external stakeholders to counsel, provide more services around HIV and Aids, to rehabilitate and to rescue. There are pressing concerns about children entering into sex work, about drug abuse, about coercion into the industry and the exploitation of women.

SWEAT remains focused on broader health and safety issues and on changing the law. We need to stay focused on trying to achieve change that will reach the most people. This often means paying less attention to individual needs and more attention to collective actions that will have a broader impact.

Of course we are deeply concerned about issues such as children entering sex work, exploitative working conditions, and individuals in crisis. However, we are not the most appropriate organisation to address these issues. We do network with other service-rendering organisations, refer and follow up.

We are guided and informed by the people that we interact with. The majority of sex workers are concerned about making a living and staying safe. They are not concerned about issues of exploitation or objectification, as has been the focus of some feminist movements.

Moving on

SWEAT is not always understood or very popular and we have had to work hard at developing allies. We sometimes receive “lip service” support from other

organisations. We recognise that overtly supporting the right to sell sex and to treat sex work as a form of work requires a shift of thinking that goes against much feminist ideology and work towards women's rights. We too are often caught up in serious reflection on these issues when we encounter the oppression and hardships sex workers – who are largely women – face daily.

Change to the legal framework can work towards a climate whereby those in the industry have more space and options. It can also create more opportunities for people involved in sex work to take control of their working lives and take more collective action. Ultimately, changes to the law will open up more choices for sex workers, as well as allowing sex workers to become more involved in issues that directly affect them.



Jane Arnott

is the Director of SWEAT.

Pumla Dineo Gqola speaks with Wendy Isaack



Wendy Isaack is an activist, human rights lawyer, writer and public intellectual who previously worked as the Legal Advisor at the Lesbian and Gay Equality Project in Yeoville, Johannesburg. She has worked tirelessly to fulfil the mandate of the Equality Project to bring South African legislation in line with the Constitutional protection of full rights to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTi) communities and individuals. At the same time, she has contributed to coalition-building and campaigns with activists from other African countries and beyond, in an effort to bring about greater legal protection and politico-social recognition of LGBTi individuals and communities.

Pumla Dineo Gqola: Not every feminist lesbian directs her activist and professional efforts so pointedly towards a more equitable country for people in same-sex relationships, and for a genuinely LGBTi-friendly society. Take me through your process.

Wendy Isaack: Precisely because I am a feminist lesbian and a black working-class woman, my life has taken this course; there was no other alternative. When one grows up and lives in a society where being black and female arouses such hatred, there is no option but to take a position, especially when one does not have the economic resources to fit into some protected society or subculture. Growing up in rural KwaZulu-Natal, I constantly sensed that my sexuality offended many people, if not the entire community in which I lived. I was young at the time, so I could not understand why this was so. I spent a lot of time wondering why I was treated differently in public and educational spaces, why my attempts to access the legal profession through the normal route were unsuccessful, and why I was consistently intimidated into conforming to feminine gender roles and standards that were alien to me.

PDG: What were your initial responses to that?

WI: First, it was terrifying; second, it did a lot of damage to my self-confidence and self-esteem. Yet at the same time, it gave me courage and strength, something I can appreciate only in retrospect. I reckoned there had to be

objective standards by which to measure and judge established norms that were not biased with regard to class/socio-economic status, gender, race or sexual orientation. So I decided to study law because I believed the law to be the mechanism for change, and in that regard I had to be the agent for change.

PDG: How did law help you in your activism?

WI: I was fortunate in that by the time I got involved in lesbian and gay activism in 2000, much of the foundational work had already been done. The powerful language of rights, particularly human rights law, and the legal developments in the South Africa since 1994 were empowering tools, both for the work that I did and on a personal level. While the acquisition and language of rights were not the only solutions for ending the oppression of working-class lesbian and gay people, it was an important tactic in the legal arena because it offered a recognised vocabulary to frame political and social wrongs. Applying a human rights approach to sexuality showed that incorporating sexual minority issues into human rights practice was a revolutionary and evolutionary process, which itself would provide new ideas and identify unsuspected obstacles at each step.



My multiple and intersecting identities ensured that the focus of my work would be to promote access to justice for black working-class sexual minorities. In the course of this work, I was able to engage with the broader struggle for gender equality by grounding the oppression of black lesbian and transgender women within the gender-based violence discourse. Inevitably, the approach was multi-faceted because everywhere I looked there were multiple forms of identity-based oppression. As a person who experienced discrimination at almost every turn, I was acutely aware that I could not argue for the rights for lesbian and gay people without challenging the persistent legal discrimination, social inequality and socio-economic conditions in our African communities and the racialised society within which we live. Although the focus was on legal reform for lesbian and gay people, the idea was and continues to be an endeavour to contribute to a just South African society.

PDG: Some feminists have noted – you and Mary Hames most vocally in South Africa, Sylvia Tamale in Uganda – that you're struck by the silence among feminists when it comes to issues of lesbian, or same-sex sexuality. How do you make sense of that?

WI: There is no logic here, yet feminists are not immune to social prejudices. It seems to me that many feminists' preoccupation with heterosexual sexuality, the binaries of sex and gender, their political project linked with viewing

women as an already established and constituted entity and men (or patriarchy) as the problem is one cause for the silence. These are issues of particular concern to some feminists – others take it a step further and consider the relationships between gender, race, class, ethnicity and religion – yet are reluctant to deal with sexual differences between women. The pervasive nature of homophobia and prejudice against anyone who does not conform to the idea of what a woman/feminist should be, remains present in feminist discourses and analyses.

PDG: Are you saying that such feminists remain quiet because heterosexual privilege is the only status they have?

WI: Homophobia, like patriarchy and many other social evils and exclusions, is supported and justified in the name of religion, culture and tradition. Homophobia is also institutionalised in the economic system of capitalism. I can only speculate on the root cause of this prejudice and homophobia; people generally seem to have difficulties with concepts and ideas which are fundamentally different from their own – or which challenge heterosexist hegemony.



In our black communities, homosexuality is still seen as a white phenomenon, un-African, an aberration, contrary to dominant religious beliefs and systems. I am not suggesting that only black people are homophobic, because this is not true – in any society or community where there are strong religious or traditional beliefs, you will find some elements of homophobic prejudice. In many communities of all races, lesbian and gay people are seen as threatening the social order: women because they seek to exercise autonomy over their bodies, while men are seen as traitors to masculine privilege because they are perceived to be adopting “feminine roles”. And transgender people call into question the traditional assumption that all humankind must fall irrevocably into one of two gender categories. Defiance of the “heterosexual norm” provokes moral condemnation, exclusion and violence.

PDG: That *does* make sense. In an incredibly powerful article on the danger that black lesbians (especially) live under in South Africa, you’ve spoken of a current state of emergency. Can you explain your thinking in this regard?

WI: I am aware that it might seem surprising to speak of a state of emergency, especially considering South Africa’s apartheid past. However, the high incidence of hate crimes against black lesbians and transgender women in South Africa warranted a “positive” declaration of a state of emergency, a recognition by the state that things were out of control, and that democracy and freedom had very little value for a certain group of people. I argued that what black

lesbian and transgender women were experiencing amounted to torture as envisaged in international law. What is more, this victimisation has not been confined to private actors; some members of the police, who are mandated to protect the vulnerable in society, have been perpetrators of secondary victimisation. In some cases where the human rights of black lesbian and transgender people have been blatantly violated, the state response has been silence and omission. Reports of sexual violence weren't investigated, dockets miraculously disappeared, known suspects were not arrested, and accused persons who had been released on bail intimidated and in some instances re-victimised the complainants.

So in spite of the rights guaranteed in the Constitution, particularly section 12(1) – which provides that everyone has the right to freedom and security of the person, including the right to be free from all forms of violence, and the guarantee of bodily and psychological integrity – black lesbian and transgender women continue to be systematically violated and abused; and the state, through its actors or by omission, continues to sponsor homophobic attacks. At the time of writing that article, I was dealing with numerous cases where lesbians and transgender women were regularly harassed, repeatedly sexually violated, intimidated and abused, simply because of their real or perceived sexual orientation and/or gender identity. There were other responses.

PDG: Such as?

WI: The Forum for the Empowerment of Women (FEW) initiated a campaign, the Rose has Thorns Campaign, which was intended to deal with this issue of hate crimes against black lesbian and transgender women. “Curative rape” of black lesbian and transgender women is a term used to describe the sexual violence perpetrated against this group of people for the purpose of “curing them” of their real or perceived homosexual orientation and/or gender identity.

Black lesbian and transgender women face violence at home, in schools, communities and various social spaces. For many, this violence has become a way of life. This systematic and institutionalised violence hurts bodies, minds and families because it is kept invisible. Many South Africans are homophobic, and this leads to a perpetuation of myths and stereotypes about lesbian and gay people. More importantly, it leads to the creation of an environment in which we, as black lesbian and transgender women, feel unsafe.

PDG: Compounding the situation in a country where women of different sexual orientations feel besieged, lesbian and transgender women are multiply-vulnerable.



WI: Such an environment has devastating consequences. Many young lesbian and transgender people are kicked out of their homes and schools, and are sexually violated by men in their communities and families. Worse still, many survivors become infected with HIV/Aids. In considering access to treatment, the gender, race and socio-economic status of this group, coupled with homophobia within the service provision sector, make this group of people particularly vulnerable.

Now it could be argued that these events do not pose a nationwide threat. However, I suggest that these violent attacks on black lesbians and transgender women, together with the high incidence of rape generally in South Africa (and considering that the Sexual Offences Bill has still not been promulgated), threatens the society envisaged by the Constitution – a society based on values of human dignity, equality and freedom, where no-one need live in constant fear for their lives, a non-sexist and non-racist society.

PDG: South Africa has these paradoxes. On the one hand, we have this progressive Constitution that we take enormous pride in. But on the other, homophobia is openly expressed in newspapers, radio, work contexts, and other settings. What is going on?

WI: This is interesting – what you basically are asking is, what is the value of a Bill of Rights in a Constitution? How can these guarantees of equality and non-discrimination be translated into reality for people whose rights may be violated? The Constitution sets norms and values – but cannot achieve an egalitarian society on its own.

If we are to implement the Constitution, civil society and human rights groups, specifically lesbian and gay organisations, must conduct public education, engage in advocacy initiatives, and consistently work within communities to challenge homophobic prejudices. In respect of private corporations or any entity controlled by the state, we can always rely on the equality clause in the Constitution read together with the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, to seek relief from our courts.

PDG: You believe in the ability of the law to transform and enable, and yet society lags behind the legal machinery. You were part of the team that basically transformed the remaining discriminatory legislation against same-sex partnerships. How does it feel to have chosen to be part of that?

WI: The work of the Lesbian and Gay Equality Project, particularly the people I worked with, meant that this was probably the most rewarding time in life. Being a part of a team initiating and advocating for change in so many arenas



was a learning curve for me, as well as an opportunity to do what I had set out to do many years ago. We acknowledged the capacity of the law as a catalyst for change as well as its limitations. As a result, the work of the organisation constituted law and policy reform coupled with public education and awareness. It was very challenging, but also rewarding.

PDG: As someone who has worked with LGBTi organisations and communities regionally, continentally and beyond, what do you think are our biggest challenges for the future?

WI: In South Africa our legal rights are guaranteed by the Constitution and other progressive legislation, yet few lesbian and gay people can access these rights. Socio-economic status hinders access to justice in a fundamental way. Also, within the lesbian and gay community, we have not fully recognised that different forms of oppression are linked and inter-related. Racism and class oppression are frighteningly prevalent. We're preoccupied with dealing with sexual orientation and gender identity issues, and so fail to appreciate the links we can create with other broader struggles for equality in the country, regionally and continentally – be they around HIV/Aids, poverty, or the Western imperialist attitudes of lesbian and gay organisations in Europe and America. When we do convene as a region or continent, we are wrapped up in our sexuality and fail to be strategic in the work that we do.

PDG: Some of your work, and Fikile Vilakazi's, at the Equality Project, provided a home-space for varied isolated lesbian and gay people, as well as trans and bisexuals. This is obviously important and highly needed. Do you have concerns about the fact that the Equality Project has closed down, or are there similar spaces?

WI: Although the Equality Project was the only organisation with a mandate to ensure the legal and social equality of LGBTi people, it was certainly not the only organisation in the country working on sexual minority issues. There are other groups that may provide this space. Yet the closure has left a huge vacuum in that the Equality Project, and formerly the National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality, was the only legal, advocacy and political voice for lesbian and gay people in the country. Failure of this sector to recognise that the aims and objectives of the organisation have not yet been fulfilled may have devastating consequences. The law reform success must be accompanied by access to justice and substantive equality, and this is the area in which the continued existence of the Equality Project would have been crucial.

PDG: How has the closure affected you personally?



WI: It has left me with more questions than answers. I do not believe that we provided this much-needed space adequately; I must interrogate my work and myself in this regard. In doing this, I must ask myself some really hard questions.

PDG: Such as?

WI: Well, to begin with, how much responsibility must I assume for the silence and inaction in respect of the events that led to the closure? Did I fulfil the mandate of ensuring social equality for lesbian and gay people, or was the focus so legalistic that many members of this constituency fell through the cracks?

As far as the future goes, is there still a need for the Equality Project? If so, what shape and form should it take? How can we mobilise our energies to create an environment that allows for engaging with the very issues that crippled the organisation – the underlying racism and racist policies, the class distinctions, and most importantly, the consistent discrimination against lesbian and transgender women? Finally, and most importantly, how do we ensure transparency, democratic governance and local ownership of the projects of the organisation?

PDG: All of those are really difficult questions. To move on, why is same-sex marriage so contentious across such diverse political constituencies? I am thinking that a lot of people will acknowledge LGBTi, partake in Pride events, defend some same-sex partnership rights, and yet come unstuck on marriage. What are your thoughts?

WI: There are various arguments against same-sex marriage coming from different sectors of the state and civil society. What they have in common is the prejudice and homophobia on which they are based.

Procreation is the most commonly used argument; that marriage is created for the purposes of procreation, and since lesbian and gay people have no prospect of producing offspring through sexual relations with one another, they cannot be allowed to marry. This is obviously neither true nor logical – South African law recognises marriages between heterosexual people even if the partners are unable or unwilling to procreate. In addition, lesbian and gay people have children all the time, through adoption and/or artificial insemination.

Once opponents of same-sex marriage realise this, they shift to the issue of welfare of the children. Statements such as “lesbian and gay people cannot be allowed to marry and raise children because children need a mother and a father, they need the nurturing of a mother and discipline of a father and they need gender role models” are common. This is also untrue; among African people, women-headed or single-parent households are a majority. The



most important parenting needs of children are love, adequate care, nutrition, shelter, clothing and emotional support. Besides, the Constitutional Court has stated that the only consideration in respect of children is what is in the best interest of the child, not the sexual orientation of the parents.

An additional argument is “that to allow same-sex marriage would lead to the loss of traditional family values and the disintegration of the moral fibre in society”. In Southern Africa, the notion of “a family based on a husband, his wife and two children” is the exception rather than the rule. Families have taken on different forms and continue to develop. South African family law, derived from Roman-Dutch law, accepted marriage laws as defined by the secular courts, but was influenced by the Reformed Churches. Along with African, Muslim and Hindu families, the family life of lesbian and gay people was deemed to offend the morals of the Dutch Reformed Church. Furthermore, the destruction of black family life, marriages and relationships was central to apartheid rule.



PDG: Exactly. These arguments are quite ridiculous, but they obviously hold a lot of power, legally invalid as they are. Are there more legally slippery arguments?

WI: Yes, it has also been argued before the Constitutional Court that to change the definition of marriage to include same-sex life partners would amount both to unfair discrimination against persons who regard their marriage vows as sacred and of divine origin.

But the Court found that public opinion alone could not determine the constitutionality of legislation. In any event, the issue is not whether society or the lesbian and gay community is in favour of the legal recognition of same-sex marriages, but rather whether the Constitution permits the legal prohibition of those marriages, given that this prohibition cannot be reconciled with the guarantee of inter-related rights to equality, dignity and privacy.

Few are aware that at its 50th Annual Congress, the ruling African National Congress recognised that lesbian and gay people should be afforded the full legal right to marry. In addition, the Bill of Rights in our Constitution prohibits unfair discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. The arguments based on religion and culture must be measured against the non-discrimination clause in the Bill of Rights. Very simply, there is deliberate confusion supported by homophobic and prejudiced sentiments in arguing against same-sex marriages.

PDG: My next question is a bit unfair since you were out of the country at the time of the latest ruling (December 2005) on marriage by the Constitutional Court, stating that the decision should be placed on hold for a year while

Parliament scrutinised the implications. My sense was that the responses were mixed. Some LGBTi commentators felt that the ruling should be celebrated. At the same time, others were unimpressed by the non-decision this ruling entailed. Perhaps I was drawn to this latter argument because it reflects my own irritation and disappointment. I cannot understand why Parliament needs a year to make a decision on how to proceed.

WI: On World Aids Day, the Constitutional Court delivered its judgment on the legal right of lesbian and gay people to marry. In my opinion, this was timed to coincide with a day on which the media and the majority of South Africans (lesbian and gay people included) would be occupied elsewhere. Or maybe that is just my paranoia.

In any event, noting the public significance of the matter, the sensitivities involved, and the importance of establishing a firm foundation for the achievement of equality in the area of family law, the Court felt that there was no reason to fear that Parliament would not be able to make a decision within a year. In the event that Parliament fails to cure the legal defect within 12 months, the words “or spouse” will automatically be read into the Marriage Act and in this way, the heterosexual marriage institution will become accessible to lesbian and gay couples. However, Parliament has the power to pass Civil Unions or Registered Partnerships legislation that will accommodate same-sex couples, but maintain the problematic principle of separate but equal.

In any case, it must be noted that the Court was unanimous on the merits of the case, stating that the exclusion of same-sex couples from the benefits and responsibilities of marriage was not a small and tangential inconvenience resulting from a few surviving relics of societal prejudice. It represented a harsh, if oblique, statement that same-sex couples are seen as outsiders, and that their need for their intimate relations to be affirmed and protected is somehow valued as less than that of heterosexual couples. The intangible damage to same-sex couples is as severe as material deprivation. They are not entitled to celebrate their commitment to each other in a joyous public event recognised by the law. They are obliged to live in a state of legal blankness in which their unions remain unmarked by the showering of presents and the commemoration of anniversaries so celebrated in our culture.

In a separate and impressive judgment, Justice O’Regan agreed with the findings on the merits, but dissented on the remedy. She stated that the Constitutional Court should develop the common-law rule, and at the same time read into section 30 of the Act words that would with immediate effect



permit gays and lesbians to be married by civil marriage officers (and religious marriage officers who did not consider such marriages to fall outside the tenets of their religion). Such an order would simply mean that there would be gay and lesbian married couples at common law, and these marriages would have to be regulated by any new marital regime the legislature chooses to adopt. Justice O'Regan concluded that the power and duty to protect Constitutional rights is conferred upon the courts, and courts should not shrink from that duty. The legitimacy of the Court's order does not flow from the status of the institution itself, but from the fact that it gives effect to the provisions of our Constitution. Permitting those who have been excluded from marrying to marry can only foster a society based on respect for human dignity and human difference.



Interestingly enough, I believe that Justice O'Regan was not present in court on the day the judgment was delivered. In any event, more than a decade after democracy, lesbian and gay people still have to wait another 12 months to be informed, most likely, that regardless of what the Constitution says about equality and human dignity, they will never be equal (socially) to heterosexual people. The implications of this are profound – legally equal but separate; the law will recognise our relationships, but in the eyes of our families and communities, we will never be equal members of society. On the other hand, Parliament may just surprise us all and draft an inclusive Marriage Act.

PDG: I know that the importance of your work is not always acknowledged or affirmed. What strategies have you developed to deal with more hostile, dismissive, or superficial responses? How do you cope with burnout?

WI: It was never my intention to be acknowledged for the work I was doing – it had to be done and I was committed to doing it. But yes, there have been moments in the past five years when I just wanted to pack it all in, to go to a dark place and hide. So I suppose I have burnt out – that is why I am in Northern Ireland getting some rest.

PDQ: Thank you very much, Wendy. I hope you get some well-deserved rest, as busy as your schedule in Northern Ireland is, and come back home re-energised.

Review

Margaret Orr

Killing a Virus with Stones? Research on the Implementation of Policies Against Sexual Harassment in Southern African Higher Education. Jane Bennett ed. African Gender Institute, University of Cape Town, 2005.



I was sent this book to review as an unexpected *quid pro quo* for a request on my part for a response to a collection of women's writing. The rationale from the editor of the journal was that I "would have read it anyway". Well, no, I wouldn't have.

As a so-called "survivor" of sexual harassment, after a brief joyless spurt of reading and perusing research in an attempt to put some kind of epistemological structure around the incoherence and conflict of the experience (and in a less scholarly effort to find some practical "how-to's"), I have tended to live more comfortably in a space of denial and repression, avoiding all writing and discussion on the topic. In one sense this has been profound emotional cowardice; in another, I feared above all that I would find myself becoming a raving feminist virago, obsessed – like Ahab and the white whale – with a single topic, fixed in a monocular vision that would have me end my days in bitter, mutilated vigilante-ism, and (worse!) as a terminal bore at dinner parties.

So I approached the task of reading and reviewing this text with more than a little apprehension and reluctance, and a fair degree of skepticism about the value and relevance of "Policies Against Sexual Harassment" in having any real meaning for anyone other than university administrators.

Jane Bennett's thoughtful and scholarly introduction addresses this issue head-on. In reflecting on the metaphor in the title ("killing a virus with stones") she notes that "[t]he image exposes the crudity of the assumption that formal regulation of social behaviour can simultaneously transform it" (4) and later persuasively argues that "where behaviour experienced as impossibly destructive by survivors is discursively protected ... the work of voicing resistance and planning redress and change needs long-term, intricately strategised theorisation" (5). In her conclusion she comments that engagement with the arenas of sexual harassment (dealing with complainants or "perpetrators",

sitting on committees, drafting policy, developing training initiatives, conducting research) “presents a set of theoretical challenges whose questions on justice, citizenship, credibility and trauma perplex, test the intelligence and demand sophisticated levels of discipline, moral fibre, and acuity” (212).

The book is an important contribution to this kind of theorisation, and meets the challenges Bennett outlines with audacious and rigorous reflective scrutiny. Bennett has framed the three case studies (of the Universities of Stellenbosch, the Western Cape, and Botswana) with a thorough theoretical background, an exposition of the research methodology and process (including a useful and painfully honest explication of the ethical dilemmas surrounding this kind of research), and a concluding chapter which both summarises and weaves together the very complex variety of themes and issues arising out of the case studies.



In the discussion on research methodology, and reflecting on the institutional anxieties surrounding research into policy and practice on sexual harassment, Bennett offers the insight that “in this position of anxiety, the university itself becomes ‘feminised’, fearful of stigma and ‘lost honour’” (44), in a discomfiting parallel to the common and debilitating syndrome of spoiled identity or damaged reputation experienced by sexual harassment survivors. Given the ego-penetrative impact of issues of sexuality and sexual violence, the honesty and courage of the research, and of the three participating institutions needs to be acknowledged.

The three case studies make for fascinating reading. Each is slightly different in focus and approach, but all tackle the highly complex research issue of testing the implementation of policy in the Byzantine ecology of the academe (in what at least one researcher describes as a “schizoid university” (187) – which one could argue is tautologous – it applies to most universities of our experience). All arrive at recommendations as to immediate interventions and steps towards solutions to some of the challenges identified. (Not quite the easy “how to’s” that I yearn for, but gratifyingly specific and actionable, nevertheless.) I would perhaps have wanted sight of the actual policy and procedure documents of the various institutions, not necessarily as that dreaded business shibboleth – “best practice” – but as a reserve that my institution, and others, could perhaps draw from. Such a consolidated resource may well exist on a website somewhere, but a pointer to this would be useful.

Bennett refers to policy as “a would-be syntax” (199) and notes that this research project does not yet constitute a concentrated exploration, but rather a “translation”. And I was struck by how issues of language abound throughout the case studies. There is the concern as to what “official” language the sexual

harassment policy documents are written in (English? Afrikaans? isi-Xhosa? Setswana? Maintenance workers at the University of Botswana, for instance, feel that the policy does not concern them, because it is written in English).

Some policies are critiqued for the inaccessibility and impenetrability (!) of the documentation and language. Definitions are alternately contested or celebrated. Survivors battle to “language” their experiences. Students grapple with labelling what is and isn’t sexually harassing behaviour. “Perpetrators” find words for their behaviour which “normalize” it, placing them firmly on the OK end of the spectrum. There is a common thread of institutional or individual silence, which narrows the range of what people are prepared to commit to words (either spoken or written). Issues of “naming” are tackled – what does one do with anonymous complaints? Whose identities need protecting, and how? (And I noted the power of my own name, which still jolts me when put out there, albeit in a footnote, as a case in point.) What is the force of putting into public text the plot and outcomes (for unnamed protagonists) of sexual harassment cases, as UWC does? Does a written policy document have a voice if it is not talked about in forums and meetings?



Let it be said. It is important to speak out into the silence and to put a vocabulary and a grammar into the mouths of our students and staff and our institutions (that epiphenomenon, that ghost in the machine that is somehow both more – and less – than the sum of its constituent parts). It is easy to feel overwhelmed by the force and intransigence of the cultural virus that is sexual harassment. It is tempting to lapse into fretful railing about the futile flimsiness of paper (whether a policy document or a research report) against such a powerful form of violence. Gouws, Kritzinger and Wenhold, writing about their research at the University of Stellenbosch, conclude that “the long years spent in ratifying this policy were not wasted; they simply constitute phase one of an on-going, rigorous, epistemological and political struggle to bring the full meaning of gender into campus life” (112). Bennett says that “policy remains just that: an opportunity” (212). I would argue that the same is true for this book. It is phase one; an opportunity. Let us hope that the readers – some of whom, we hope, have the power and will to change institutions, and to be changed themselves – use this opportunity well.

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Review

Sara Matchett

Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives: Female same-sex practices in Africa.
Ruth Morgan and Saskia Wieringa, eds.
Jacana Media, Johannesburg, 2005

The title of this book evoked paradoxical images that made me want to discover what lay between its covers. The provocative title is accompanied by one of Zanele Mubholi's striking images; these also serve to mark each chapter of the book. A lesbian myself, I was curious to discover what being a "lesbian man" entailed. I easily related to the idea of "tommy boys", having been identified as one as a young girl growing up. The notion of "ancestral wives" is also one I had encountered before.

Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives: Female same-sex practices in Africa is a culmination of a much longer process – the African Women's Life Story Project – that involved editors Ruth Morgan and Saskia Wieringa working with a group of nine lesbian activists from six countries in Southern and East Africa. The women attended an initial workshop in Johannesburg in March 2003, where they were trained in ethnographic research methodologies, including collecting personal narratives, using audio-taped recordings and photography. After the training, the women went back to their countries where they carried out research into female same-sex practices. Three months later, they returned to Johannesburg for the second workshop. This involved writing up their presentations for the International Association for the Study of Sexuality, Culture and Society (IASSCS) conference, themed "Sex and Secrecy". Morgan and Wieringa later edited eight of the presentations into book format. The ninth presentation, from Botswana, had too little material to be included in this publication (14). Even though the back cover notes that the book documents female same-sexuality in East and Southern Africa, my perfectionist self would have liked the title of the book to be more specific about this location. Africa is a large continent and when I first looked at the front cover, I thought the book would deal with the continent in its entirety. A tall order, I admit, but nevertheless, I felt the editors should have been more careful in titling the book. Will the next project extend into West, Central and North Africa?

The African Women's Life Story Project was initiated around Ruth Morgan's kitchen table as a forerunner to the 2003 IASSCS conference, held in Johannesburg (11). One can understand why the editors felt that hosting a forum on female same-sex practices in Africa would be a vital inclusion in the conference that was being hosted by an African city. I also agree with Morgan and Wieringa's claim that African lesbians are doubly oppressed (11). In a continent that has produced homophobic leaders such as Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Sam Nujoma of Namibia, former Kenyan President, Daniel Arap Moi, Winnie Mandela, Ruth Mompati and others of South Africa,¹ all of whom have been vocal in their declaration of same-sex relations as a crime and un-African, one can clearly see how lesbians in Africa are subjected to patriarchal prejudices that render them marginalised and voiceless.

The leaders listed above have all clearly adopted colonialist discourses in their public discussion of same-sex practices in Africa. By declaring it an un-African import from the West (11), these leaders have ironically fallen into the trap of their colonial predecessors. They conveniently ignore the strong history of sanctioned same-sex relations between women in certain communities in Africa (see Chapter Nine of the book) and fail to see that they are merely "perpetuating colonial policies in denouncing same-sex relations" (13). By breaking this particular silence, *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives*, and indeed the broader African Women's Life Story Project, are instrumental in starting to reclaim and entrench an identity for lesbians in Africa. Chapter Nine, which comprises historical reflections, notes that in the past, research in this arena has been conducted by researchers from outside the local context. This book, however, is the first of its kind in that it integrally involves African lesbians as researchers.

The book is divided into ten chapters. The first eight are co-authored by either Wieringa or Morgan and each of the researchers/activists. The last two are by Morgan and Wieringa. Chapter Nine, as has been indicated, deals with historical reflections on previous research; and Chapter Ten supplies the conclusions of the study.

While I found this book to be important, pioneering and timely, I felt that each chapter was too similar in its findings. While it could be argued that lesbians in Southern and East Africa experience very similar challenges (and I am sure to some extent they do), the formulaic nature of the documentation could also be attributed to the training that preceded the actual fieldwork. Given the diverse contexts of the countries involved, it seems plausible that the latter could be the case.



Without wanting to undermine the African Women's Life Story Project, or the processes that led to the participants collecting their research material, it seems to me that the subtle nuances of each specific context eluded the contributors. Perhaps the first training workshop needed to focus more specifically on enabling the participants to generate interview questions that were relevant to their particular contexts. I offer this as a strategy because the formulaic responses suggest that the researchers/activists were presented with or decided on a generic set of questions to take into the field. I stand to be corrected.

The second aspect that concerned me, given that I have extensive experience in facilitating processes that involve women accessing their personal narratives, was the apparent lack of thought and planning involved in sending the researchers out with stills cameras and audio recorders. The editors, with hindsight, state that these technologies became an obstacle for the researchers (16). I would suggest that if the African Women's Life Story Project continues, more training into ethnographic research methodologies should be conducted, and that particular focus should be given to exploring the creative arts as alternative participatory research methods.

I also felt that exploration into the women-identified respondents' gendered identities while growing up was lacking, while much attention was paid to the male-identified respondents' gendered identities in childhood. However, the editors themselves noted that this was "one of the silences in the interview material" (311).

Among the highlights of this book were Zanele Muholi's photographs, which accompanied each chapter. Her work has the ability to evoke a story in the body of the viewer, who responds viscerally, and this in turn elicits an emotional response. I found these photographs, though disturbing at times, powerful visual accompaniments to the written material. I was therefore perturbed to note that apart from the photo credits attached to each photograph, nothing is mentioned about the important activist work Muholi is engaged in as a photographer. Perhaps she could have been included at the end of the section on the authors?

Having been present at the original conference presentations, I was delighted to learn that a publication had resulted. A project of this nature is important on many levels, but the most important achievement for me is that this work begins to provide a platform from which marginalised voices can claim their right to be heard. A book like this expands this platform, enabling these voices to claim their spaces within mainstream academia and activism.



Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives: Female same-sex practices in Africa is an immensely important read, and I hope that it leads to further work and publications initiated by the African Women's Life Story Project and other like-minded organisations.

Footnotes

- 1 According to *Tribute*, a glossy magazine aimed at a black middle-class readership, "South African political leaders such as Winnie Mandela, Ruth Mompathi, Strini Moodley, and Bennie Alexander have openly stated that homosexuality is not part of African culture. They have argued and implied that homosexuality is a cultural import from affluent white Western cultures and a kind of disease that should be cured and a spin-off of the capitalist system" (August 1994, 54).



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Review

A. C. Fick

Performing Queer: Shaping Sexualities 1994–2004, Volume 1.
Mikki van Zyl and Melissa Steyn. eds. Kwela, Cape Town, 2005.

Human sexualities in representation require our serious, uncomfortable critical attention; the local articulations of such identity formations in contemporary South Africa seem to beg analytical research and theoretical explication, given events at the current historical moment. In this volume from the Social Identities South Africa (SISA) series, Mikki van Zyl and Melissa Steyn have made an admirable attempt to bring together a collection of essays which aim to do exactly this.

Framed by Van Zyl's introductory chapter (which relies heavily on Judith Butler's work on gender as performance, as it attempts to trace the contours of the current historical moment in South Africa both diachronically and synchronically), the various essays are situated in a variety of social science disciplines ranging from psychology to law. Van Zyl places the debates about sexuality both within the framework of the South African Constitution as well as the context of similar debates within the greater African context. However, given the brevity of these remarks, the effect is largely rhetorical and polemical, doing little to illuminate exactly what effects the African social, political, economic and scientific context(s) in particular might have on a re-reading of South African sexualities.

Many of the contributions also seem to wish to interrogate the boundaries of genre by merging autobiography with criticism, sometimes with uneven results. The work of Bernadette Muthien ("playing on the pavements of identities") constitutes an attempt to situate subjectivity interstitially; this essay, which merges auto/biography and criticism, is ambitious in its attempt to both articulate and interrogate the existing constructions of identity in various critical theoretical traditions. However, as with Van Zyl's introduction, as well as her own contribution ("fat like the sun"), there is a discomforting assumption of a self-knowing subject at odds with the post-structuralist feminist discourse invoked through figures like Butler. The description of lives by the subjects themselves is often taken at face value, thus seldom really analysed or

interrogated, with the result that inconsistencies of term usage go unremarked upon. However, it may be that the theoretical framework chosen does not easily accommodate the admirable political aims of the projects: the reclamation of individuated selfhood cannot be easily effected through analyses that seem gesturally situated within post-structuralist debates in late twentieth-century feminist theory on subjectivity. This problematic is unsatisfactorily unresolved in both the Van Zyl and Muthien pieces, and is further complicated by the inconsistency of term usage in the discussion of the engendering of subjectivity through discourses of class, “race” and sexuality, among others.

Certainly, the personal is political, but one is often unsure to what extent the reader is required to suspend interrogation of work presented in a manner that suggests the authors have suspended interrogation of their subjects. Oliver Phillips’ work on the lives of ten white men through the epochal political and social changes in South Africa suffers from similar problems. Opening with self-description, he goes on to “chart ... the broad articulation of racial, economic, gendered and sexual identities in the [thirteen] men’s lives over the period of constitutional transition” (156). However, it is never articulated beyond nomenclature what Phillips understands the whiteness of his subjects (or his own self) to be, other than the formulaic “structural advantage” mentioned; the relationship between “race”, gender, class and sexuality, therefore, while central to the concern of his work, remains vague in the overwhelming mass of self-narration and salvation narratives. In contrast, Muthien is at pains to demonstrate how “race”, gender and class are mutually constitutive of one another, and largely inextricable from performative sexualities. This could merely be the result of disciplinary distinctions between the two authors, although one would have hoped for some pre-publication dialogue between authors whose work was to appear in a collection with the politically committed project of this one.

Early in her work, Van Zyl is keen to explore the politics of representation of sexualities, problematising the essentialist logic that binds human practice with theoretical insight. However, what is never raised by her introduction is the need for fine, nuanced criticism in lucid, well-constructed prose; the already muddled understandings of sexualities which abound in the public domain cannot be clarified in bad writing, as evidenced by much recent media discussion on these topics.

In this regard, Rachele Chadwick and Don Foster’s examination of a Rape Crisis volunteer’s representation of her sexuality in terms of her work with rape survivors, is to be commended for its careful attempt to renegotiate the terms



we use in speaking of sexualities, and the idiom they deploy for the critical exploration of representations of such. Whether their experimental work on Rape Crisis (as a space in which to articulate the coming to terms with identity) succeeds is not really at issue, given their larger project. They also grant their subject the right to articulate a conception of herself as *sujet en proces*¹ without necessarily leaving her construction of self uninterrogated.

Sylvester Charles Rankhota's contribution on "how black [sic] men involved in same-sex relationships construct their masculinities" is perhaps emblematic of much of the collection. Overly descriptive, the work relies on complex critical theory emerging from the "Occident" to explain sometimes very fraught local articulations of identity, when it is not entirely clear that the problematics of the "Western" theory have been adequately negotiated. At times irritatingly anecdotal, Rankhota's subjects are described as "gay Zulu men involved in same-sex relationships in the Pietermaritzburg area", though none of these descriptors are read as discursive constructions, and so are never unpacked. Similarly, notions of "a dominant version of patriarchal masculinity" loom indistinctly in the background, and the respondents' testimony is often taken as "truth". Despite this potential flaw, valuable material is still dealt with in this chapter; it is slightly odd, though, that the subjects in the study come across as little more than "native informants".

William Leap's material on the ways in which understandings of sexuality can be spatialised also tends to be too descriptive. Examining visual representations by several subjects of "gay Cape Town", Leap shows how various queer identities map the city differently, thus exploding the (self-constructed and self-serving?) myth of Cape Town as a "gay haven". However, perhaps Leap's own transient familiarity with the particular history of the oldest colonial settlement in the country accounts for his inability to probe thoroughly into the ways in which the sexual economies of colonialism and apartheid continue to have effects in a divided city increasingly implicated in the neo-liberal capitalist global economy.

Cheryl Potgieter's chapter on black South African lesbians is perhaps the most sophisticated and nuanced analysis in the collection. The analysis demonstrates a finely balanced critical reading of subjects' responses, and is able to work interrogatively with the status of narrative evidence without denying the validity of subjects' self-construction. Potgieter's work is also the only piece which adequately demonstrates an understanding of "race" (in this case Blackness – note the capital) as social construction rather than as phenotypical



reality. The essay's sophistication lies in its ability to analyse human experience in the light of theoretical framing, but also to show how being human is infinitely complex and cannot merely be accounted for by recourse to social science or critical theory. Similarly, Craig Lind's examination of how current debates on and conceptions of sexuality in South Africa demonstrate the confluence of discourses of law, politics and human science, is admirably skilled in its exposition of theoretical complexity without arcane abstraction. It is fitting that the collection closes with his lucidly written piece.

Altogether, this collection is certainly worth acquiring, in spite of its methodological and theoretical shortcomings. It seems the problem with all such anthologies in contemporary South African social science is that they reflect the different levels of competence and the varying facilities with prose current in our institutions. In the attempt to reflect the range of work done within certain fields, researchers with varying levels of expertise and experience are often brought together within the same collections. Moreover, some of the chapters clearly emerge from long-standing and thorough research at the centre of the authors' professional lives; other papers seem more provisional, as if they were parts of graduate research work. This collection certainly contributes to the growing body of scholarship on gay, lesbian, transgender and bisexual (LGBTi) identities in South Africa. However, we need to move beyond the descriptive aspect of LGBTi identities to a more considered analytical engagement in this field. Cheryl Potgieter's nuanced article in this collection is illustrative of the direction such scholarship should take in future.



Footnotes

- 1 This phrase of Julia Kristeva's refers to the process of coming to subjectivity, and negotiating subjectivity in linguistic and other acts. The literal translation into English ("subject in process") loses the multiple senses of the original French, with its play on the legal, linguistic and psychoanalytic senses of the subject.

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