

Abstract

This thesis explores discourses on gender and gender based violence produced in the 16 Days of Activism Against Women Abuse campaign 2007 in Khayelitsha, Cape Town. The public awareness campaign united a number of local, community based organisations that work in the overlapping fields of HIV/AIDS and gender based violence. For the purpose of this study, three of the most vocal organisations in this campaign were chosen as research participants; The local branch of the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) Khayelitsha, the Rape Survivors Centre Simelela, and the youth drama group Masibambisane. Assuming that discourses are embedded in unequal relations of power, this study adopts a discourse analytical approach to the 'gendering' of HIV/AIDS to reveal how knowledge and meanings are produced, reproduced and contested between more powerful institutions and a marginalised community.

The thesis first explores dominant discourses on HIV/AIDS and gender in development discourse and social and biomedical research, and uncovers how HIV/AIDS risks are mostly related to women's lack of power and inherent vulnerability to violence. Such hegemonic discourses are then also found in international and national guidelines and policy frameworks that address the 'gendered' risks of HIV and AIDS, while at the same time these frameworks also promote approaches to HIV/AIDS that acknowledge contextual and societal factors that shape vulnerability. Eventually, a review of international and national frameworks that address the 'dual epidemics' shows how the so called 'community sector' is often highlighted as a crucial partner in multi-sectoral approaches to HIV/AIDS.

The empirical study then aims at locating such discourses in a localised, South African context, and explores the ways in which dominant discourses are reproduced, contested, and redefined by community activists. Empirical data is collected through participant observation with the organisations coordinating the campaign, recording of speeches delivered during the public events, and semi-structured, qualitative interviews with five key members of the organisations.

A discursive analysis of the data reveals that femininity and masculinity are mainly constructed in rather conservative ways, portraying women as inherently vulnerable and men as either perpetrators of violence, or protectors of women and children. These constructions of gender are based in a patriarchal, hegemonic notion of masculinity as powerful and responsible for the suffering or salvation of weak and vulnerable women. However, within these hegemonic gender notions, women speakers simultaneously contest their victimhood status by claiming their rights as citizens of South Africa, by relocating power in their collective struggle, and by re-framing their vulnerabilities as embedded in intersecting inequalities of gender, class and race, and as members of a community largely marginalised by the state. The multitude of discourses at play in the public campaign point at the necessity for a re-reading of the intersections of HIV/AIDS, gender inequality and gender based violence beyond victim-agent dualisms.