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Not crossing the line: Masculinities and homophobic violence in South Africa

Thabo Msibi

abstract

In South Africa, gendered violence, experienced through homophobia, has become common, with 'curative rape' for lesbian women on the increase and gay men being beaten up and verbally harassed. In this briefing I demonstrate how men's understanding of their masculinity is typically caught up in fears related to homophobic violence and exaggerated fears regarding sexual orientation. I argue that an analysis and understanding of masculinities may provide answers to the increasing gendered violence, and that higher education institutions can be key in bringing about change.

keywords

masculinities, homophobia, homophobic violence, gendered violence, South Africa

Introduction

The rights-based approach adopted by South Africa after the collapse of apartheid has provided many freedoms to many groups that were previously marginalised. However, these freedoms have been (and continue to be) limited by various factors, including sexual orientation. The continuing of hate crimes against gay and lesbian people in South Africa is an example of these limitations.

While the recognition of gay and lesbian individuals as citizens deserving of equal rights, for example, was lauded by many in South Africa and abroad, the gay and lesbian community continues to experience some of the most horrific forms of violence – including rape, gay-bashing and even murder. This violence, whether verbal, physical, implied or potential, is largely caught up in notions of masculinity, and is highly gendered.

As Kimmel (2001) notes, violence is often the single most evident marker of manhood. It is a tool used by men to exert their authority and power over women and also over other men. I use a study I conducted at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban to show how, in a particular context, current masculinities are mired in exaggerated fears related to sexual orientation. I argue that such fear together with
Hundreds of activists from the 777 Campaign to end hate (which aims to highlight violence perpetrated against lesbian women – getting its name from the murders of Sizakele Sigasa and Salome Massoa in Soweto on 7 July 2007), LGBT people from neighbouring townships, members of the African National Congress, concerned residents of Kwa-Thema and many NGOs and social movements, bearing symbols of solidarity and calling for ‘justice for Eudy’ attended the court hearing of one of the five men accused of the murder of Eudy Simelane and picketed outside the court.

The visibility of LGBT people and a rights-based post-1994 discourse may explain the increase in homophobic violence. I conclude by outlining how higher education institutions can serve to counter homophobic and gendered violence.

Locating the problem
South Africa is still very much a patriarchal society, with ideas around manhood still deeply entrenched. This may therefore shed some light onto the rising homophobic violence, particularly targeted at lesbian women through ‘curative’ rape, since homophobic violence is largely based on the notion that “effeminate gay men betray the superiority of masculinity, and masculine lesbian women challenge and try to usurp male superiority and therefore these individuals need to be punished for being a threat to the ‘natural’ social order” (Wells, 2006).

In 2007 the rape and murder of two women was attributed to the fact that they were lesbian. In 2008 the rape and murder of Banyana Banyana soccer star, Eudy Simelane, shocked many South Africans (Bucher, 2009). These murders had ‘curative’ intentions, with heterosexual men attempting to put lesbian women in their place.

The continuation and escalation of violence perpetrated against lesbian women and gay men requires attention. However, this has not been forthcoming. Instead, violence and explicit hate speech have become normalised. Reddy (2007) notes that this normalisation maintains a discourse...
which pathologises homosexual behaviour, rendering it unacceptable.

In 2008 Jon Qwelane, a journalist from the Sunday Sun, denigrated the gay community by equating homosexuality with bestiality. He argued that the sanctioning of homosexuality was due to the denigration of values and traditions, and called for “a bunch of politicians [to] muster the balls to rewrite the constitution” (de Vos, 2008). Qwelane is not the only one who feels this way. The State President, President Jacob Zuma, before his election into office stated that same-sex marriages were a “disgrace to the nation and to God,” and that when he was growing up an “ungqinqili” (derogatory for gay man) would not have stood in front of him as he would “knock him out” (The Sunday Times, 23 December 2007).

Despite the Constitution, homophobia and homophobic violence continue to be publicly sanctioned. Hate speech in itself is a form of violence. It is statements like these that sustain homophobia.

Masculinities and violence in post-apartheid South Africa

Posel (2005) notes that “feelings of estrangement and alienation increase men’s vulnerability to violence.” Bhana et al. (2009) also confirm that violence is not only precipitated by unemployment and poverty (for African men), but also the emphasis in the new Constitution on rights, and especially women’s rights. Hearn (1998) notes that “men may resort to violence when men’s power and privilege are challenged or under threat.” This is not to suggest that the mere provision in the Constitution has caused men to react violently, but rather that the perception by men that they are being stripped of their power has troubled traditional notions of masculinity. It is important that we understand how this troubling has arisen.

Prior to 1994, South Africa was unquestionably a male-driven country. The legitimacy and power of men as rulers was inscribed not only in the general social engagements between people, but also in the laws of the country. As Morrell (2001) noted: “In families, both black and white, men made decisions, earned the money, and held power.” It was men who drove the country, and had confidence and unquestioned authority.

However, there were inequalities that existed among black and white men. These inequalities fuelled and positioned men as defensive and prone to violence; white men had to defend their privileges while black men’s emasculation and powerlessness made them live dangerously (ibid). The rights-based approach of the post-1994 dispensation put pressure on men to let go of their privileges and assume equal status with women. This has been a challenging notion for men, since they wanted to keep their privileges.

Men’s perception of emasculation, linked to the country’s history of violence, enhances the likelihood that men will assert their masculinities – and assert them through violence. This emasculation may partially explain the rise in gendered violence. This violence is neither raced nor classed. It is pervasive and has become the norm.

In 2008, queer students were escorted out of the residences by ‘straight male students’ at the University of Zululand, an institution of higher learning, and a place where social norms should be challenged and destabilised. However, the above actions suggest acceptability and normalisation of homophobia. Similarly, an academic from Rhodes University in Grahamstown notes that:

“...our thugs have beaten up gay men, including black gay men, beaten up and raped female students, raped lesbian women to ‘cure’ them, ridiculed and denigrated all homosexual people” (Soudien, 2008: 86).

These sentiments show the extent and pervasive nature of the problem. Universities are seen as places where there is a higher degree of freedom for divergent views and practices, yet
the opposite is happening. Homophobic violence in South Africa pervades race, class and gender, and in some institutions has resulted in death. I maintain that the fear of deviance from normative masculinities drives this violence.

Msibi (2007) found a pervasive fear of the queer. His respondents, students from rural areas, reported that they tried every means possible not to be regarded as gay. This was largely due to the threat that queer men presented to normative forms of masculinity. Equally, the fact that lesbian women are seen to be taking men’s roles troubles normative masculinities (evident in the ‘curative’ rape and murder of lesbian women). Here we see men asserting power and authority to reclaim their supposed roles in society.

In the same study Msibi also found many overt and covert ways in which men were regulated and policed – by themselves and other men – in maintaining traditional and normative masculinities. Men were expected to dress, talk, walk and speak in specific ways that proved their manhood. What was particularly clear among the participants was that there was a line which could not be crossed. This line separated ‘straight’ men from those who were considered gay. The men went out of their way to ensure that their actions did not portray them as gay.

I argue that men are scared of their own deviation from the norm, and try to manoeuvre themselves within that norm. Deviance from normative constructions of masculinity may result in homophobia or homophobic violence directed at those who do not conform.

Looking into the future: Education as a possible method of intervention

Intervention to gendered violence will require addressing the source of the problem – ideas of "masculinity predicated on marked gender hierarchy and sexual entitlement of men" (Bucher, 2009). This will entail an understanding of homophobic violence as part of the manifestation of gendered violence. The Soudien (2008) report reveals that issues related to homophobic violence in higher education institutions have received little or no attention.

In order to address this, institutions will have to take a proactive stance in reforming and destabilising traditional notions of masculinity. This can be done through introducing specific modules dealing with gender awareness and change. Those teaching on these modules would need to be conscious of their own social identities and the environment through which teaching occurs. Very often academics ‘compartmentalise’ their identities by separating the public from the private, therefore ignoring the social contexts of learning. By understanding and challenging our biases as well as committing ourselves holistically to a change agenda, we can ensure that programmes dealing with gendered violence are meaningful and relevant.

Conclusion

I have argued that ending such violence requires challenging the links between masculinity and violence. Higher education institutions can play a proactive role in addressing issues related to gendered violence. This can be done through introducing relevant modules and getting committed individuals to teach on these modules, since change can only come where there is commitment.

References


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