

Sexual Violence Against Lesbian Women in South Africa

Masters Thesis in African Studies

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South Africa was the first state worldwide that placed sexual orientation under the protection of constitutional law. The constitution grants gender equality, gender equity and democratic rights such as the immunity of every individual. Yet there's a wide gulf between theory and practise. When attempting to demand equal treatment, women in particular are faced with an alarming inclination towards violence. It seems, that historical and cultural circumstances and normative pressure from society support a certain legitimisation of violence.

Even though the visibility of lesbian women in South Africa is on the increase due to their recognition by law, they are especially faced with discrimination, violent attacks and sexual violence. In my thesis I aim to look at sexual violence inflicted on women in South Africa in general, and lesbian women specifically, identifying causes and outlining differences depending on the population group they belong to. I further look into forms sexual violence inflicted on lesbian women can take, what consequences it can have on them, how far women are affected differently in the multiethnic society of South Africa and address the significant role cultural dynamics play in this context.

Following a further definition of the group of people that constitutes the subject of this research, the thesis provides a summary overview of the socio-political environment of South Africa. It deals particularly with aspects of the current legal status of homosexuality and its social acceptance as well as with gender relations, their historical foundations and their effects on the contemporary heteronormative structure of society.

Subsequently, the thesis investigates diverse sources of violence. It shows how the propensity to violence appears to grow in post-Apartheid South Africa, and how both population and state appear to accept structures of violence increasingly and systematically. Rape as a form of sexual and gender-based violence is given special attention. There is also room made for the discussion of sexual violence in lesbian relationships – a topic that has rarely been the subject of scholarly debate in South Africa.

Firstly, it discusses the significant appearance of gender-based violence. South African gender activists associate gender-based violence - which is significantly on the rise - with socio-economic aspects and regard it as only one element of complex parameters, such as culture, traditions, globalisation and modern African society. This is due to the country's history and the process of political reconstruction that takes place in a context of female emancipation. The changes in the structures of South African society imply the transformation of gender hierarchies as well as of traditional gender roles and gender constructions. Through the resulting insecurities from those changes the potential for violence increases enormously, as the new situation forces every South African to develop her or his own strategy for survival and domination in the gender hierarchy.

Secondly, the thesis deals with the topic of hate crime - violent crime motivated by hatred and prejudice - discussing it particularly in its relation to sexual orientation. Although South Africa stands proud with its protection of LGBTQ rights by constitutional law, heteronormative, patriarchal structures of society and internalised as well as widely institutionalised homophobia (often justified by religion, culture and tradition) contribute significantly to discriminations based on sexual orientation of victims. Hate crimes against lesbian women are conspicuously present in all population groups. Nevertheless, I demonstrate in the thesis that the after effects of the Apartheid system and the related lack of access to essential resources puts black lesbians at a particular risk of hate crimes compared to lesbians in other population groups.

Placing the main focus on sexual violence against lesbian women, the thesis illustrates in conclusion, the concept of corrective rape - rape as an instrument to 'correct' them for their supposed opposition to the heteropatriarchal - as well as its characteristics and causes, identifying differences between different population groups of South Africa.

Sexual violence against lesbian women cannot be entirely separated from sexual violence against women in general. But, when this act is further committed due to their gender identity or sexual orientation, lesbian women in South Africa face the additional risk of corrective rape. Lesbian women who take on normative attributes of masculinity in dress code, behaviour and appearance are often punished for this subversion with corrective rape. Corrective rape becomes a means of pushing them back into the traditional heterosexual perception of womanhood. It is hard to draw clear borders between rape and corrective rape, and thus identify a violent act conclusively as corrective rape, yet examples of interviewed victims I provided in the thesis have shown that perpetrators do indeed rape lesbian women because of their gender identity or sexual orientation.

As the extremely brutal acts of sexual offences against lesbian women can have diverse psychological and physical consequences, emphasis is furthermore placed on the after effects of corrective rape, considering examples of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and HIV/AIDS. In this context, the thesis looks carefully at the structures and structural problems of support organisations, such as the health service, police and justice system.

I am conscious of the fact that a detailed analysis of these individual themes and matters exceeds the scope of this Masters Thesis by far. This work seeks rather to present a range of approaches for analysis that provide possible answers to the raised issues. Besides, I can not guarantee the actuality of the data as I finalised the thesis in February 2007 (missing e.g. the '070707 campaign' on hate crimes against lesbians and gay men, etc.).

Please feel welcome to contact me for more details.

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