

Interrogating the notion of “corrective rape” in contemporary public and media discourse

Recent media reports have shown a rise in attacks against lesbian women in townships across South Africa. The nature of the violence includes assault, often with grievous bodily harm, rape, murder or any combination of these. The sexual violence perpetrated against these women has become a particular focal point in media coverage, crudely termed “corrective” or “curative rape.”

Whilst coverage of these attacks draws necessary attention to the prevalence of homophobia in South Africa, as well as the alarming rates of violence against women, the discursive formations around the issue raise several concerns about how sexual and gender-based violence, homophobia and the linkages between them are understood in society.

This CAI brief argues that contemporary media and the public should rethink their understanding of “corrective rape” and the discourse used to engage this notion. The paper problematises the language of “corrective rape,” arguing its inadequacy in describing or explaining the phenomenon. Through critical analysis of a video featured in *The Guardian*, titled *South African Women Fall Victim to ‘Corrective Rape’*,⁽²⁾ which typifies the coverage and dominant discursive formations around the issue, it is argued that contemporary media discourse around “corrective rape” inadvertently further reinforces and re-inscribes patriarchal, heterosexist and racist power through its construction of the phenomenon as sexual violence inflicted by Black township men against Black lesbian women.

Problematising the discourse of “corrective rape”

Coined in the early 2000s by a group of human rights organisations in response to the increasing frequency of the phenomenon, the term “corrective rape” is highly contested and takes on varying meanings depending on how it is deployed and by whom.⁽³⁾ In contemporary public discourse, it is used to describe sexual violence against gay, lesbian or gender non-conforming people with the object of punishing them for and/or correcting their perceived sexual deviance and/or disruption of heterosexist gender roles.

Although used in an attempt to evoke rapists’ justification for attacks on women who defy socially prescribed gender codes,⁽⁴⁾ the construction of the notion of “corrective rape” in contemporary media discourse particularises it to Black township lesbians. This discursive limit raises some important questions about how we understand and address the systemic and structural drivers of inequality in our society: what is the salience of the articulation of these identities in the language around “corrective rape”? Is it an issue which uniquely affects these women because they are lesbian, Black and poor, or is it, as Melanie Judge puts it, an unfortunate and misconceived turn of phrase which oversimplifies and “disguises vicious homophobia and misogyny”?⁽⁵⁾

Contemporary public and media discourse has been fixated not only on the subject, but also on the nomenclature of "corrective rape." Any report covering the rape of a Black and ostensibly lesbian woman in a township is near-always immediately linked to the phenomenon. In the face of this obsession, Judge argues that while "there is a need to make visible the circumstances under which lesbians are targeted for rape, there are important factors that the term fails to reveal."(6)

While affirming that the risk and experience of this violence is, indeed, disproportionately experienced by women who are Black, lesbian and living in townships, a deeper analysis of the issue of sexual violence against gender non-conforming women clearly shows that this violence is principally related to a culture of heteromascularity.(7) The reason for the perpetration of this violence, although articulated as such, is not because these women are lesbian. It stems from how masculinities and, consequently, femininities are constructed and expressed within a heterosexist and patriarchal gender-order. Understanding this is important because it situates "corrective rape" centrally within sexist heteronormative values which are given meaning by, and expression through, the complex interplay between both victims and perpetrators' experiences of structural social, economic and cultural discrimination.(8)

The stories behind the expositions: A brief summary of The Guardian video

The media is a public forum which reflects important processes and makes citizens aware of the debates and circumstances that surround them. Because of the way in which they provide scripts from which we derive our own ideas of our racial, gender and sexual identities, they play a critical role in the cultural production of society, how individuals negotiate and whether they occupy space.(9) As such, heteronormative values are reinforced and reconstructed through a variety of discourses which are communicated and sometimes even constructed by the media themselves.

On 22 October 2011, a 04m40 long (controversial) video was published in the online edition of the The Guardian, which presented interviews with three lesbian identifying women who share the common experience of surviving assault and sexual violence because of their gender non-conformity. These interviews are interspersed with "reply" interviews with three men who hold homophobic views about lesbian women in particular. All of the respondents are Black, all of them are ostensibly working-class and, given the context in which they are filmed, all live in urban townships.

In all of their accounts, the women describe their harrowing experiences of violence as being at the hands of 'straight'-identifying men who took issue with their gender-non-conformism, for the purposes of correcting this behaviour. One woman recounts how, in addition to being assaulted, her grandmother was harassed in her home as a result of her gender-non-conformism. Another tells how both her daughters were raped in order to be shown "that [they]

don't have to be like their mum; that [they're] supposed to know that [they're] supposed to be involved with a man..."

The victim constructed: Black, township lesbians

Like other popular media reports, the representation of the issue in this video foregrounds the cause of "corrective rape" as the sexual identity of gender non-conforming women. In doing so, it makes the victim/survivor's own gender non-conformism the point of focus instead of interrogating the heteromasculine identity of which sexual violence is an expression. This consequently reproduces normative understandings of gender and sexuality which are themselves patriarchal and heterosexist. The survivor of "corrective rape" is constructed as 'the Black lesbian who was raped in order to "correct" her lesbianism' as opposed to a person who suffered sexual violence which was used to terrorise her into conforming to the gender role prescribed to by a patriarchal and heterosexist society, in which she lives. The distinction between these two definitions is both nuanced and significant.

In *Black Sexual Politics*, Patricia Hill Collins reflects on how in the American context, because of the way in which lynching and rape served as gender-specific mechanisms of sexual violence (men were victimised by lynching and women by rape), race and gender constituted separate rather than intersecting forms of violence that could not be equally important:(10)

As targets of lynching as ritualised murder, Black men carried the more important burden of race [and] as rape victims, Black women carried the less important burden of gender.

Similarly, through the nomenclature and discourse of "corrective rape," Black lesbian survivors of rape are positioned as carrying the more important burden of homophobia and other survivors of rape the less important burden of misogyny. "Corrective rape" is fetishised in current discourse, which consequently normalises other forms of sexual violence which do not fall within the same class. This binary thinking about sexual identity and gender then mandates that one foregrounds *either* sexual identity *or* gender, but not both. This raises the same questions that bell hooks does in her chapter on *Race and Sex* in her book *Yearning*, in which she critiques the failure to recognise the convergence of race and gender as interlocking systems of oppression:

If I accept the premise of coverage, that this rape is more heartbreaking than all rapes that happen to women of colour, then what happens to the value of my body? What happens to the quality of my Blackness?(11)

In continuing with this premise of coverage, which emphasises the salience of Black lesbian identity, the media becomes complicit in not only reproducing a discourse which pits intersecting identities against each other, but also normalises sexual violence by diverting attention away from the structural systems of power which make it possible.

Sexual violence is one of the many tools that patriarchal power utilises to police, enforce and reproduce the gender order. It operates within and enforces a political system of male dominance and female subordination that sexualises power for men and powerlessness for women.(12) Instead of being determined by the gender/sexual identity of whom it targets, as in the normative understanding, the policing function of sexual violence is determined by the gender role its targets are structurally required to occupy. As such, in a patriarchal society all sexual violence can be regarded as “corrective” and, in a misogynist and homophobic society, such “correction” is principally suffered by women who subvert endemic patriarchal and heterosexist notions of what it means and how to be a woman.

This paper does not argue against the salience of sexual identity and gender non-conformism in the continued perpetration and experience of this violence, nor the importance of drawing attention to it. Instead, it argues against the situation of these identities as the sole or principal mode of understanding the phenomenon of “corrective rape,” motivating for an understanding which situates it within the broader framework of the structural systems of power which operate in a patriarchal and heterosexist society. In doing this, necessary attention can be given to the intimate relationship between the multiple identities occupied by both victims and perpetrators, and how they intersect.

The perpetrator constructed: Black township men

The representational and discursive problems of the video and its immersion in the normative discourse of “corrective rape,” as in contemporary media and public discourse, do not stop at its inadequacy in explaining sexual violence against gender non-conforming women or the construction of its survivors. These problems also have great implications for how the perpetrators and their mentality are constructed. Through the sole focus of the video is on Black subjects, with particular emphasis on their race and context – urban townships – throughout the b-roll of the tape, the video visually situates the issue as a Black township problem affecting Black township lesbians.

All three of the men interviewed in the video are furthermore, in one way or another, homophobic. Indeed, one of the male subjects explicitly endorses this violence, stating that “if there is someone who is raping the lesbians, me I can appreciate their thing; it’s just to let them know that they must be in a straight motion of way. Another explains lesbian identity as fiction that emerges out of a woman’s failure to sustain heterosexual relationships and resorts to relationships with other women, an opinion shared by the third man, who argues that “in fact, there are no lesbians, naturally...”

Stuart Hall argues that “the media are not only a powerful source of ideas about race; [they] are also one place where these ideas are articulated, worked on, transformed and elaborated.”(13) These men express views obviously informed by patriarchal heterosexism and tied to their race in the video. Through its obsessive fixation on the Black township-ness of

sexual violence against gender-non-conforming women, it is Black men that are effectively articulated as the perpetrators of this “corrective rape,” re-inscribing and reinforcing the endemic construction of Black men as perpetrators of violent crimes. The video is demonstrative of how racist ideology manifests itself in all aspects of media and public discourse: “every word and image [is] impregnated with unconscious racism because they are all predicated on the unstated and unrecognised assumption that the Blacks are the source of the problem.”(14)

This has implications for our response to the issue. By foregrounding their race, even through a structural gender analysis of the matter, the point of interrogation is no longer what about the masculinities that allow this phenomenon to persist, but rather about *Black* masculinities that allow it to persist. Commentators on the matter, such as Aidan Prinsloo, demonstrate this situation of “corrective rape” as a Black male-perpetrated phenomenon.

In his article, *Perpetrators of Corrective Rape: Uncertainty and Gender in the 21st Century*,(15) Prinsloo attempts to explain the behaviour of perpetrators of “corrective rape” through Sartre’s Manichean schema. Under this schema, perpetrators’ behaviour is posited as a disruption of an essentially white European imagined Black pre-colonial African gender order by Black African men, emasculated by the colonial project – hence the salience of their Black township-ness. “Corrective rape,” he argues, “is the most obvious manifestation of the need to combat homosexuality in order to reinforce traditional gender concepts. The action of “corrective rape” provides these men with the illusion that they possess the masculinity necessary to subjugate a woman.”(16)

While he attempts to show the flawed reasoning in this Manichean modality, for him, its subject remains the Black township male. Not only does his account exceptionalise Black sexism and homophobia from structural patriarchal heterocentrism, it also neglects to acknowledge that “corrective rape,” though rarely reported, does occur outside of the Black township context.

The discourse of “corrective rape” and its fixation on its Black township-ness constructs “Black male heterocentrism as a special brand of this disorder, more dangerous, more abhorrent and life-threatening than the sexism that pervades the [white heterocentric] culture as a whole, or the sexism that informs white male domination of women.”(17) It says little about the structural implications of endemic patriarchal heterocentrism which cut across and order society, irrespective of race, gender or class.

Concluding remarks

If any meaningful engagement with the phenomenon of sexual violence against gender-non-conforming women is to be had, the language of “corrective rape” as it stands in public discourse must be altered. This violence should no longer be particularised to the extent that it becomes a matter of race and sexual identity, as demonstrated in this paper. “Corrective rape” should be situated within an understanding of homophobia, sexism and racism as interlocking

systems of oppression which operate together to control, through violence and terror, women who happen to be Black, happen to be lesbian and happen to be from townships.

NOTES:

- (1) Contact Sekoetlane Jacob Phamodi through Consultancy Africa Intelligence's Africa Gender Issues Unit (gender.issues@consultancyafrica.com).
- (2) Annie Kelly and Laurence Topham, 'South African women fall victim to corrective rape', The Guardian, 12 March 2009, www.guardian.co.uk.
- (3) The gender-justice advocacy and LGBTI sectors have been fraught with disagreement on this term, the discourse it invokes as well as the consequent approaches that emerge out of it in addressing the issue. This has been exemplified by difficulties in building and implementing coordinated strategic interventions as well as the dissolution of the 07-07-07 campaign which was initiated in 2007 to serve this very function. As a response to these difficulties and the challenges that come with this nomenclature and the discourse it entails, the One in Nine campaign also recently initiated a series of public dialogues which aims to unpack these issues with the object of arriving at a discourse which locates the phenomenon in an appropriate context and enables directed, united and appropriately responsive interventions from all stakeholders.
- (4) Melanie Judge, 'Changing the language of prejudice', The Mail and Guardian, 12 June 2011, www.mg.co.za.
- (5) Melanie Judge, 'Changing the language of prejudice', The Mail and Guardian, 12 June 2011, www.mg.co.za.
- (6) *Ibid.*
- (7) Martin, A., Kelly, A. and Turquet, L., 2009, 'Hate crimes: the rise of "corrective" rape in South Africa', ActionAid: <http://www.actionaid.org>; Reid, G. and Dirsuweit, T. 'Understanding systemic violence: Homophobic attacks in Johannesburg and its surrounds', in Isaack, W. (ed.), 2007. *State Accountability for Homophobic Violence*. Johannesburg: People Opposing Women Abuse (POWA); Melanie Judge, 'Changing the Language of Prejudice', The Mail and Guardian, 12 June 2011, www.mg.co.za.
- (8) Sanger, N. 2010. The real problems need to be fixed first: Public discourses on sexuality and gender in South Africa. *Agenda*, pp.114-125.
- (9) Viljoen, S. 'Masculine ideals in post-apartheid South Africa: The rise of men's glossies', in Haddand, A., Louw, E., Sesanti, S. and Wasserman, H. (eds.), 2008. *Power, politics and identity in South African media*. Cape Town: Human Social Research Council Press.
- (10) Hill Collins, P. 2005. *Black sexual politics*. New York: Routledge.
- (11) Hooks, B. 1990. *Yearning*. Boston, MA: South End Press, pp.62.
- (12) Mackinnon, C.A. 1987. *Feminism unmodified: Discourses on life and law*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- (13) Hall, S. 1995. The whites of their eyes: Racist ideologies in the media. In G. Dines and J. Humez, *Gender, race and class in the media: A text-reader*. London: Sage, pp.20.
- (14) *Ibid.*

(15) Aidan Prinsloo, 'Perpetrators of corrective rape: Uncertainty and gender in the 21st century', Consultancy Africa Intelligence, 2 May 2011, www.consultancyafrica.com.

(16) *Ibid.*

(17) Hooks, B. 1990. *Yearning*. Boston, MA: South End Press.