

# PERSPECTIVE

## “I’ll show you how a real woman should act”: One woman’s experience of homophobic violence and intimidation in post-apartheid South Africa

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### ABSTRACT

*South Africa experiences alarming levels of intimate partner violence and femicide, as well as increasing reports of homophobic violence against women. This article focuses on a qualitative study, which explored how women’s lives and identities are transformed by living in this culture of violence against women. Open-ended interviews were conducted with 27 undergraduate women students, who attended a South African University. The article draws on the interviews of one of these women, a Black African lesbian woman, Phelisa. Discourse analysis was used to analyse her interview texts. Phelisa’s story is presented as a single-case study example of homophobic violence and intimidation in a South African township. The case study highlights the various discourses associated with this violence, specifically the ‘homosexuality is un-African discourse’ and the ‘discourse of feminine transgression’.*

**Keywords:** case study, gender; homophobic violence, violence against women, South Africa, Black African women, homosexuality

### BACKGROUND

Contemporary South Africa displays striking levels of wealth and social inequality, despite being one of Africa’s largest economies (Narayan & Mahajan, 2013). South Africa’s high levels of inequalities can be attributed to the legacy of apartheid and the unfair distribution of the country’s resources along racial lines (Aliber, 2001; Narayan & Mahajan, 2013). Because of apartheid most of the country was forced into a cycle of intergenerational poverty, which continues even today. During apartheid, South Africa was known for its racialized economy and its culture of political violence. Although political violence has decreased since the first democratic election in 1994, the literature suggests that post-apartheid South Africa has become characterised by violent and sexual crime instead (Bremner, 2004; Britton, 2006). Gqola (2015) cements this view in her description of rape as ‘South Africa’s recurring nightmare’ and argues that the rape epidemic is now embedded in the country’s contemporary talk. Research indicates that South Africa experiences high levels of rape, intimate partner violence and femicide (Abrahams et al., 2009; Wood, Lambert, & Jewkes, 2008). There are also increasing reports of homophobic violence against Black African<sup>2</sup> lesbians in South Africa, which is reflected in recent literature (Bennett, Reddy, & Moletsane, 2010; Morrissey, 2013). Furthermore, the South African Demographic and Health Survey of 2016, found that one in five women in South Africa has experienced violence (Statistics South Africa [StatsSA], 2016). Despite the overwhelming evidence regarding the prevalence of violence against women, there is substantial

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2 The racial terms commonly used in contemporary South Africa include: ‘Black African’, ‘Coloured’, ‘Indian/Asian’ and ‘White’ and stem from White-imposed apartheid racial categorisations (Erasmus & Pieterse, 1999). It is important to acknowledge that these racial categories are socially constructed racial binaries, with historically oppressive connotations rooted in colonialism and apartheid.



legislation in South Africa protecting the rights of women and the LGBTQ<sup>3</sup> community. The extensive legislation, which protects women, include the Domestic Violence Act of 1998; the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Amendment Act of 2007, the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act of 2000 and the South African Constitution of 1996. In terms of LGBTQ rights, South Africa was the first country to place sexual orientation under the protection of constitutional law (Gontek, 2009). In 2006, South Africa became the fifth country internationally and the first country in Africa to legalise same-sex marriage (Gontek, 2009). However, despite the institutional gains and the constitutional recognition of gay rights, violence against women, especially violence against Black African gay women persists.

## THE STUDY

The study explored how young women's lives and identities are shaped by living in violent spaces, such as South Africa. The study was interested in the question: "How do women discursively construct their experiences of living in South Africa?". Relatively unstructured interviews were conducted with 27 female undergraduate students between the ages of 18-32 years from a South African University, however for this article only one woman's case study (Phelisa<sup>4</sup>) is discussed. Universities represent microcosms of wider South African society because the normalisation of violence is carried over into university life and culture, making a sample of university women applicable in this context (Gouws, Kritzinger & Wenhold, 2005). A purposive and snowball sampling approach was used. Ethical clearance was granted by the University's research ethics board, and participants were accessed through the Student Research Participant Programme (SRPP) at the University. Each student in the undergraduate psychology programme must accumulate academic credit by participating in their choice of a wide range of research studies. Many of the women that participated in this project recommended the study to their friends, and some of the participants may have been drawn to the study because of their own experiences of violence. Two interviews were conducted with the participant and each interview was a few weeks apart. The first interview consisted of an opening statement, discussing the prevalence of violence against women in South Africa and the researcher's interest in the participant's life story. During the second interview, the researcher asked the participant for more stories to illustrate themes that had arisen in the first interview (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). The study draws on social constructionist theory, to guide the data collection and analysis process. The social constructionist approach argues that it is through language that we construct our understandings of the world and are constructed by these understandings (Burr, 1995; Willig, 2013). A method of critical discourse analysis, following Parker's (1992, 2004) was used, to explore how individuals inadvertently use language to construct their understanding of their world, focusing on the connection between power, language and resistance. A discourse provides "frameworks for debating the value of one way of talking about reality over other ways" (Parker, 1992, p. 6). I critically explored the way discourses produce, reproduce and challenge power relations (Parker, 1992). I also explored the motivations underlying these discourses and how they related to the participant's life story.

3 The LGBTQ community comprises of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people, who are united because of a common culture and social movement.

4 Phelisa is a pseudonym, which I used to protect the confidentiality of the participant.



## A CASE STUDY OF PHELISA

Phelisa, a Black African 28-year-old social work student and lesbian<sup>5</sup>, describes how she was attacked in Soweto Township in the excerpts below.

I was in Soweto visiting my grandmother. She (Phelisa's girlfriend) came and we went to buy beers. On our way there, okay on our way back there's these two guys and they wanted to talk to me. I was like "I don't want to talk to you", because I knew that guy. I grew up with that guy. That guy used to ask my sister out as a child. Now that I'm all grown up he thinks he can ask me out now so I've, I was so irritated by his behaviour. Then he looked at the girl I was with and started swearing at us. "You fuck each other with curlers" and whatever, whatever and said a whole lot of nasty things. And I got so pissed off. I was so angry. We ignored him and he kept going. He got very irritated we weren't giving him any attention and he said "I'm talking to you, bitches. Why aren't you responding?" blah blah. We just kept quiet and he said um, he said "I'll show you how a real woman should act like". Then he grabbed my girlfriend and then it started happening. We're screaming but nobody comes to help.

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Then I got a brick. I hit this guy with a brick in his face while I was focusing on that I pulled my girlfriend and I ran back to my granny's house. So we get home. She's bleeding now because this guy was hitting her, trying to pull her...

These guys got out of the car they had like sticks and stuff. I was so terrified. I was so scared. The worst thing that scared me was that if these guys could rape me. I was so afraid.

They beat me up. My grandmother couldn't do anything. She kept screaming for them to stop. Still, nobody came to help. Eventually, they left. I got inside. I was bleeding.

Phelisa's attack is a multi-faceted issue and she appeared to be attacked for various reasons, such as: (1) for being sexually unavailable (she would not talk to the men and only dates women) and (2) for being masculine (he states, "I'll show you how a real woman should act" and "you fuck each other with curlers"). Her attacker uses the word "curlers" in his statement. "Curlers" is associated with a feminine beauty product and alludes to constructions of appropriate femininity and how these women are violating these constructions by literally 'fucking them'. Accordingly, Phelisa's attack is an example of how men try to police the sexuality of women and women are punished if they transgress from 'acceptable' norms (Gontek, 2009; Reid & Dirisuweit, 2002). The men that attacked her appeared to invest in the discourse of feminine transgression, in which women who transgress from 'traditional' heterosexual female norms of dress, behaviour or desire, and act in ways that do not support the subordination of women, are punished (Bennett, 2010; Moffett, 2006, 2009). Therefore, homophobic violence is constructed as a method of social control, creating a new discourse: 'the discourse of homophobic violence as social control'. This discourse fits in with existing literature, which suggests that public spaces are inherently characterised by male heteronormative dominance (Koskela, 1999; Pain, 1997), therefore if lesbians 'flaunt' their sexuality in the public arena then they are threatening men's constructions of gender identity and must be punished (Gontek, 2009; Msibi, 2009).

Phelisa may have also been subject to homophobic violence because homosexuality is constructed as 'un-African' and infused with notions of colonialism and moral degeneration (Bennett, 2010; Gontek, 2009; Morrissey, 2013). African leaders invested in the myth that homosexuality was imported into Africa and as a result 'the discourse that homosexuality is un-African' is embedded in what passes for 'African tradition' (Livermon, 2012). However, research indicates that same-sex relations were found throughout precolonial Africa (Epprecht, 2008; Morgan & Wieringa, 2005). Therefore, an argument can be made that because of the rising tide of homophobia,

<sup>5</sup> Phelisa self-identifies as a lesbian and emphasises this during the interviews.



which dictates that homosexuality is un-African, unnatural and ungodly and the production of public spaces as heterosexual, Black African lesbians have become symbolic sacrifices during times of social change (Mkhize et al., 2010; Van Zyl, 2015; Vincent & Howell, 2014).

It is important to note that the public space that Phelisa is attacked is in an impoverished area, Soweto Township. Violence against Black African lesbians in townships often emphasise the boundaries of privilege in South Africa where only the privileged (mostly the Whites) in the suburbs can enjoy the benefits of the rights in the constitution (Van Zyl, 2015). The rights and protections afforded in the constitution and legislation surrounding women and LGBTQ individuals in South Africa are often influenced by place and material conditions and do not extend to the impoverished communities, which are often under-resourced and crime-ridden.

Phelisa explains the aftermath of the attack in the excerpts below.

My grandmother and my other aunt who has a car came and she took us to the police station. Then these guys victimise us. Secondary victimisation. They ask us 'Why are we gay? So beautiful to be gay. We shouldn't be.' And they keep on calling each other "Hey come and hear this. What do you ladies say?". It's all a big joke to them...

>> They said "Okay. We're just going to say counter charge. You have to go into a cell." And they put me in the cell. I stayed there. I couldn't sleep. I was in pain. I asked them if I could see somebody for pain, just to get painkillers. I sat there the whole night.

The case never even made it to court. The case was dismissed without me knowing about it. We sat for hours, from early in the morning, waiting for the case to be called in. No one did. They didn't. And when the judge was about to leave. I went and asked the magistrate and said "I'm here for this case. What is happening?". And he said "No. That case was dismissed.". "On what grounds?". "There was not enough evidence." "What do you mean not enough evidence?". It happened on a Saturday it's Monday today, have you tried to get any evidence?". Nobody could answer me.

In the excerpts above, Phelisa is at the police station to report her attack, but instead of receiving support, she experiences secondary victimisation when the police officers harass her ("So beautiful to be gay"). The statement "So beautiful to be gay" is constructing a specific kind of femininity, which dictates that beautiful women cannot be gay and therefore these women are violating gender norms. Homophobic talk such as this is a regulatory mechanism to control gender identity (Van Zyl, 2015). A lesbian is punished for 'trying to be a man', thus crafting "the contours of what 'real men' and 'real women' should be—and what happens to them if they are not" (Judge, 2014, p. 70). Further on in the excerpts, a counter charge is filled against Phelisa by her assailant. She is kept in the cell, despite her injuries and is denied medical attention for four hours before she is released. The legal case against her assailant was also dismissed, and she was not given a sufficient reason why, other than the statement "there was not enough evidence". This signifies the ineffectiveness of the criminal justice system in South Africa and may indicate corruption. The way the system has treated Phelisa is abysmal and may be symbolic of the institutionalised silence surrounding homophobic violence.

At the end of this analysis, it is important to remember that this is not Phelisa's only story and as Adichie (2009, p. 1) states: "The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete". These excerpts from Phelisa's interviews represent an incomplete narrative because they are only fragments of her life story. She is not only a survivor of homophobic violence but also a social work student at a prestigious university, a social activist and a talented writer. Reflecting on Phelisa's story, one must be careful not to fall into the trap of 'Blackwashing homophobia' by setting up Black poor young women as the inevitable victims and Poor Black men as the inevitable perpetrators (Judge, 2017). The racialising effects of the discourses discussed construct the Black queer as the object of violence and whiteness and White queers



as situated outside the domains of violence (Judge, 2017). These are problematic representations; however, I believe that the problem of homophobic violence against Black African women needs to be highlighted and these problematic representations acknowledged. Phelisa's narrative was chosen for this article not because of an attempt to sensationalise violence against women but because it shines a light on the atrocities being targeted against many women and the injustice of the legal system.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Homophobic violence against women cannot be divorced from the broader social context of South Africa and its history (Vogelman & Eagle, 1991). Therefore, recommendations to address this problem should be on a systemic level. Literature suggests that current legislation and policy frameworks in South Africa are insufficient to appropriately respond to hate crimes and to prevent homophobic violence from happening (Breen & Nel, 2011). The increasing violence against women, especially lesbian women, warrants the development of a more appropriate legal model for South Africa, which considers the relationship between hate crimes and violence against women. Research indicates that multi-level responses are required, such as fast-tracking the development of hate crime legislation and related service provider guidelines, in which hate crimes are acknowledged as priority crimes; and increased diversity awareness in communities, and education and training programmes for service providers (Breen & Nel, 2011). The problem of homophobic violence against women must also be highlighted in research publications and the media. Homophobic violence against women is often side-lined by politicians in South Africa and this issue needs to be placed on the political agenda. Finally, to address the core problem of homophobic violence, men and women, both young and old need to be educated on gender role socialisation and gender identity. This requires identifying and deconstructing dominant discourses, which constructs women as subordinate to men and re-thinking gender role socialisation.

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