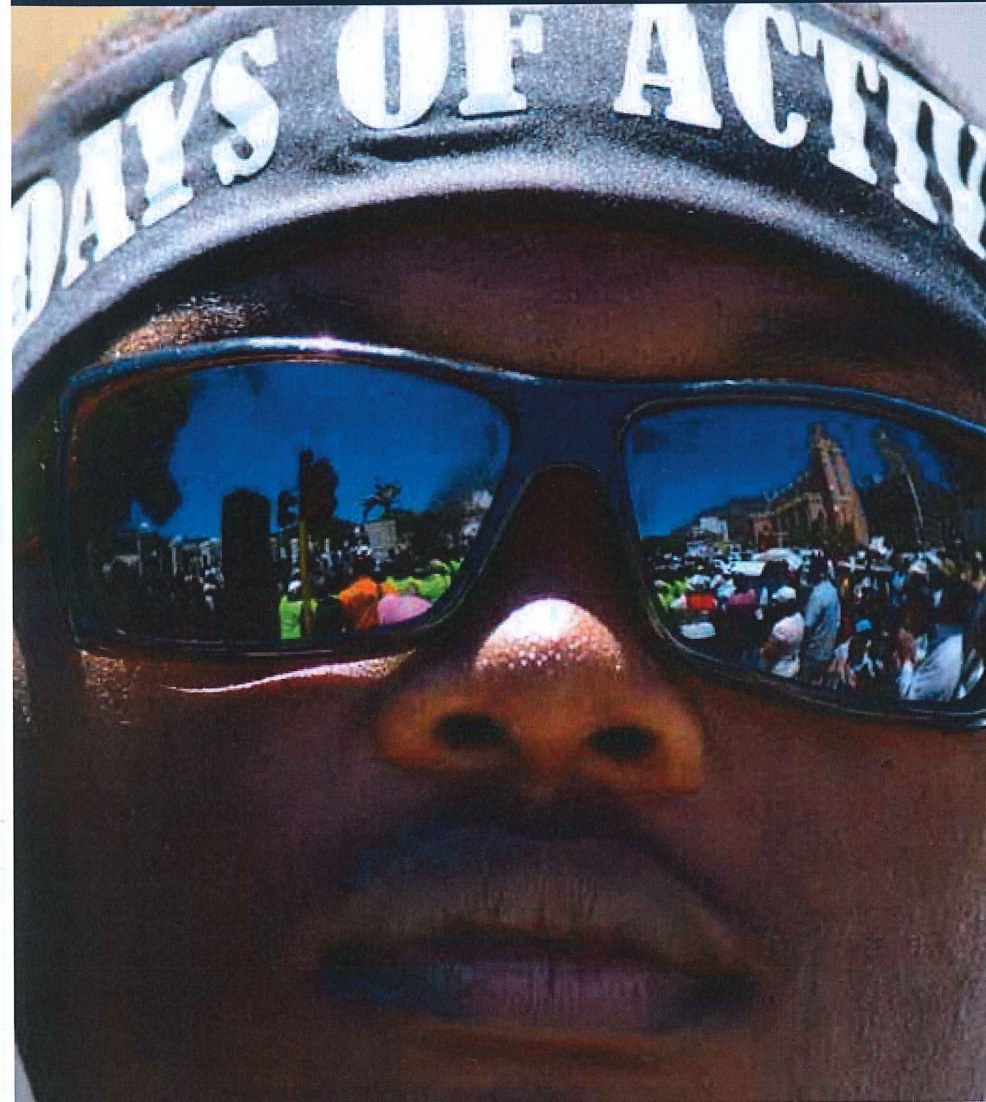


CLOUD

OVER THE RAINBOW NATION:

'Corrective rape' and other hate crimes against black lesbians



Violence against black lesbians has no place in our democracy and, along with other forms of discriminatory violence, requires dedicated public education and stronger condemnation by policy-makers and civil society in order to be eradicated, write VASU REDDY, CHERYL-ANN POTGIETER and NONHLANHLA MKHIZE.

SOUTH AFRICA HAS TAKEN A SOLID STANCE on the issue of gender-based violence against women and children. As a nation, we participate in campaigns like the 16 Days of Activism Against Violence. We celebrate Women's Day each year. The media, government and business sectors are all instrumental in putting these issues in the public forum.

Yet there is one women's issue that remains hidden from the public eye, even though it is destroying not only individual lives but also our solidarity as a rainbow community. This is the issue of violence against black lesbians. Like data on other forms of violence against women, many incidents of violence against black lesbians go unreported and unnoticed, and therefore remain outside the public consciousness.

However, some examples of violence against lesbians have made it into the public domain. Zoliswa Nkonyana died in February 2006, after she was stoned, beaten and stabbed in front of her house by a gang of men in Cape Town – for being a lesbian. In September 2005, another young lesbian nearly bled to death during the Johannesburg Pride parade, after being hit by a thrown bottle. In December 2004, a 22-year-old lesbian was raped in Meadowlands, Soweto; in the same month, another teenage lesbian was raped in Mohlakeng. Two other rapes of lesbians were reported earlier that year. But these cases are only the tip of the iceberg.

Even without physical violence, black lesbians generally are marginalised by their families and communities for their sexual identity. They are told they are unAfrican if they are not living a heterosexual lifestyle. But beyond this prejudice, they are often singled out and targeted by men who use rape as a twisted form of 'therapy'. The term 'corrective rape' has been coined to describe this particular type of hate crime, because the rapists claim that they are acting in the lesbian's interest, by 'teaching her to behave like a woman'.

The result, of course, is always the opposite: a rape survivor may learn to hide her sexual identity but she has not changed it. Instead, she is even more isolated from her own community, while the rapists – and family members who may even have encouraged the rape – are more firmly entrenched in their violent hatred towards homosexuals.

Physical violence against black lesbians provides us with contemporary examples of

how stigma, machismo and masculine power combine with heterosexism to suggest that violence is somehow normalised in our communities.

Isolation is only part of what the 'corrective rape' victim suffers. Anecdotal evidence indicates that this crime frequently involves a gang of men attacking a single woman, often with knives or other weapons. Afterwards, the woman needs hospitalisation, if she survives the ordeal – many do not. Those who do survive may find that the rape has left them pregnant or infected with HIV or another sexually transmitted disease.

These women carry the scars of their emotional and psychological violation long after their physical scars have healed. As one rape survivor said at a seminar co-hosted by the HSRC in December 2006: 'Rape causes anger. It destroys and wrecks lives. It causes divisions and it damages an innocent soul... Is this the freedom that we were fighting for as South Africans?'

We have noble legal instruments that offer protection, but as a society we live in the face of heightened stigma against homosexuality”

Another rape survivor told the seminar how she had been attacked more than once by different groups of men: 'They told me that "I think today you will shut up", but I'll never do that, I'll never shut up... Really they want to silence me. Then I have two options: it's either to shut up or to continue to tell [myself] that they've done nothing. I will continue in what I believe in. So I survived again.'

The December seminar on Gender-based Violence, Black Lesbians, Hate Speech and Homophobia was hosted in Pretoria by the Gender and Development Unit of the HSRC and the Durban Lesbian & Gay Community & Health Centre, to bring 'corrective rape' and other forms of violence against black lesbians into the public eye. In solidarity as researchers, human and gender rights activists and legal experts, we highlighted what should be an obvious fact: that violence against black lesbians is as unacceptable as violence against any other women or children.

The recent publication of *I Stories* by the Genderlinks opinion and commentary service for the 16 Days of Activism campaign gives a voice to South African women and children, including black lesbians. In one narrative, Marco Ndlovu, a 39-year-old black lesbian from Pietermaritzburg, says: 'As a lesbian, hate, violence and misogyny follow me wherever I go. I became pregnant as a result of being raped by a man I believed to be a friend. I have been beaten almost to pulp because of my sexual orientation, at the instigation of none other than my mother.'

To be black and lesbian in South Africa seems to be a burden riddled with much anxiety. Ten years after the formal adoption of a remarkable constitution, we are celebrating the legalisation of same-sex unions. A damper on these hard-won rights is that the majority of our citizens – women – continue to struggle against cultural attitudes that deny them the right to live with their identities.

One way to fight homophobia and violence against homosexuals is through the media. At the seminar in December, Donna Smith of the Forum for the Empowerment of Women raised the point that media representatives rarely showed up at functions that educate on issues like gender-based violence against lesbians. She said that when a lesbian support organisation approached a local television production company about its negative presentation of homosexuals in a drama series, the producers turned down any possibility of discussion with the organisation. News media also tended to be insensitive to the need for lesbian rape survivors to protect their identity, to avoid attracting more attacks.

Socio-cultural causes of violence remain a serious challenge for us as we negotiate a society free from violence. We require sustained public education, including stronger and more vocal partnerships between policy-makers and civil society to confront and curb such violence. Like gender-based violence, homophobia cannot be allowed to persist in our democracy.

The Gender-based Violence, Black Lesbians, Hate Speech and Homophobia seminar was sponsored by the Foundation for Human Rights.

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