Gender-Based Violence in South Africa: A Crisis of Masculinity?

Does a 'Crisis of Masculinity' Explain the High Level of Gender-Based Violence in Contemporary South Africa?

Abstract

I will begin my analysis by outlining and defending the 'masculinities approach' to the study of gender and development. I will then turn to the question of how we can explain the high level of gender-based violence in contemporary South Africa. One common answer to this question refers to a so-called 'crisis of masculinity'. My principal aim in this essay is to offer a critique of the 'crisis of masculinity' thesis and show that it is inadequate for explaining the high level of gender-based violence in contemporary South Africa. By focusing solely on the changing gender relations in post-apartheid South Africa, the 'crisis of masculinity' thesis fails to take into account the effects of race and class oppression on the social construction of violent masculinities.

Introduction

When we look at gender inequality in contemporary South Africa, we are confronted with a seemingly paradoxical situation. South Africa's transition to liberal democracy has brought about a greater official recognition of gender rights. In fact, the new South African constitution is one of the most progressive constitutions in the world with regard to the legal protection of gender rights (Human Rights Watch, 2011). In addition, the South African government has implemented affirmative action programmes and ratified international treaties which seek to eliminate all forms of discrimination based on sex, sexual orientation or gender (Naidoo & Kongolo, 2004). At the same time, however, the right to physical freedom and bodily integrity of women and the LGBTI community in South Africa has been increasingly restricted by rampant crime rates, rape, sexual assault and the HIV/AIDS epidemic. South Africa has one of the world's highest rates of gender-based violence1 for a society not embroiled in armed conflict (Wood & Jewkes, 2005). The reported fifty-five thousand rapes of women and girls per year are estimated to represent only one ninth of the actual number (Morrell et al., 2012). This situation calls for an explanation. Why have women's gains in the 'public' sphere coincided with a deterioration of their physical security? I want to explain this seemingly paradoxical situation by focusing on masculinities and, in particular, on violent masculinities. The argument proceeds as follows: In the first part of this essay I outline and justify the 'masculinities approach' to the study of gender and development. In the second part I dismiss the notion that a so-called 'crisis of masculinity' can explain the high level of gender-based violence. Instead, I suggest that a focus on the historical legacy of apartheid and the conditions of material life is key to understanding why violent masculinities prevail in contemporary South Africa.

Why masculinities matter

I understand masculinity to be both a *place* in gender relations which defines itself in opposition to femininity, the *practices* through which men (or women for that matter) can engage that place, and the *effects* of those practices on the choices, personality and behaviour of individuals (Connell, 2005). This account of masculinity seeks to strike a balance between personal agency and social structure. On the one hand, individuals can draw on existing ideas of

Gender-Based Violence in South Africa: A Crisis of Masculinity?
Written by Maurice Dunaiski

'what it means to be a man' in order to legitimize their actions. On the other hand, individuals are not entirely free to choose those images which please them best (Morrell, 2001). Crucially, what it means to be a man is socially constructed and always contested within society. There is no singular, innate 'sex-role' to which all men adhere (Hamber, 2010). It is therefore more accurate to talk of 'masculinities'. However, to pluralize the term does not mean that all masculinities are equal or that there are as many masculinities as men (Kimmel, 2001). The analytical distinction between hegemonic masculinities and subordinate masculinities can help us capture the power inequalities which exist *amongst* men, as well as between men and women (Connell, 2002). For example, hegemonic masculinity during the apartheid era in South Africa was embodied by the white, heterosexual and militarized Afrikaner, to whom all other masculinities and femininities were subordinate (Swart, 2001). Since the advent of democracy the 'masculinities hierarchy' in South Africa has arguably become much more pluralistic (Morrell et al., 2012). However, what unites dominant masculinities in contemporary South Africa is their violent character (Cock, 2001). A representative survey suggests that around 30 percent of men believe that they have the right to be violent towards women (CIET, 2000). Guns and other weapons are a significant part of a violent masculine code which is shared across racial and class boundaries in South Africa (Cock, 2001). This dominant masculine code legitimizes and normalizes violence as an instrument for obtaining and defending power (Cock, 2001). It is therefore understandable that the high level of gender-based violence in contemporary South Africa is frequently attributed to the prevalence of 'violent masculinities' (Xaba, 2001; Wood & Jewkes, 2001; Hamber, 2010; Morrell et al., 2012). The connection between these violent masculinities and gender-based violence strikes me as uncontroversial. Thus, the question on which I can focus is why violent masculinities in South Africa prevail in the first place. Can they be traced back to a 'crisis of masculinity'?

Before I turn to this question I will justify my analytical focus on the *perpetrators* of gender-based violence. The 'masculinities approach' to gender and development (GAD)2 is still very much in its infancy (Cornwall & White, 2000). Research on masculinities has largely focused on men in 'Western' industrialized countries (Cleaver, 2002). Furthermore, GAD research has tended to deal with men in a superficial manner. Namely, as obstacles to women's development (Cleaver, 2002). I believe that, on a theoretical level, this is problematic for two reasons: Firstly, if GAD scholars continue to leave male gender identities unexamined, it might "prove impossible ever to identify the extent to which a gender relations approach [such as GAD] is actually the most appropriate method for achieving equality between men and women" (Chant, 2000, p.9). GAD, as a gender relations approach to development, should therefore endeavour to examine all gender identities—including different masculinities—for the sake of theoretical consistency. Secondly, by treating men as a single category (i.e. as an obstacle to development) GAD research has often failed to acknowledge that, even though all men might benefit from the subordination of women, not all men benefit *equally.* (Cleaver, 2002). Moreover, such an undifferentiated approach overlooks the fact that men have responded to the gender equality agenda in different ways. While some responses have been defensive, others have been accommodating or even responsive (Morrell, 2002). On a theoretical level, the conceptual tools of the 'masculinities approach' can therefore make an analysis more nuanced and perhaps even help "map out fault lines in the gender landscape which offer the possibility of gender alliances" (Morrell et al., 2012, p.20; Cornwall, 2000). I believe that it is possible to combine a focus on masculinities with a feminist agenda to overcome gender inequality as long as the following two pitfalls are avoided: Firstly, an analytical focus on masculinities should avoid focusing solely on *men.* The danger of this is that "all attention shifts to competition between males and women are re-excluded" (White, 2000, p.36). I avoid this pitfall by examining the impact of violent masculinities on the perpetuation of gender-based violence in South Africa. Secondly, a focus on masculinities needs to avoid redeploying "old patriarchal truths" (White, 2000, p.39). According to these truths 'men's problems' are caused by an 'overempowerment' of women and need to be addressed by restoring the 'deep masculinity' of men. In the second part of the essay I will argue that the 'crisis of masculinity' thesis makes exactly this mistake, and is therefore inappropriate for explaining violent masculinities.

On a practical level, the move of 'bringing men in' as clients and personnel of GAD initiatives is much more problematic. For example, there are legitimate concerns about the implications of allocating already scarce resources to working with men instead of with women (Cornwall & White, 2000). Furthermore, an overemphasis in development practice on 'men's problems' might dilute and undermine the hard-won gains of feminists and play into the hands of reactionary actors (White, 2000). However, I can bracket out these practical problems with the 'masculinities approach' because I do not intend to offer recommendations for development practice.

Gender-Based Violence in South Africa: A Crisis of Masculinity?

Written by Maurice Dunaiski

In this section I have outlined and defended my analytical focus on masculinities. In the next section I critically examine the 'crisis of masculinity' thesis which has been used to explain the prevalence of violent masculinities in contemporary South Africa.

A Crisis of Masculinity?

According to the 'crisis of masculinity' thesis men are increasingly confused and insecure because of women's assault on "male bastions of power" and the growing "social and cultural disapproval of traditional displays of masculinity" (Hamber, 2010, p.81). The contradiction between the old ideals of masculinity and the actual social position of men in relation to women is said to result in a "potent patriarchal hangover" (Lemon, 1995, p.62). This 'crisis of masculinity' discourse has its origins in the anti-feminist literature written in reaction to the women's and gay liberation movements in the 'Western' industrialized countries (Doyle, 1976; Goldberg, 1976). The transition to democracy in South Africa, with its powerful gender equality agenda, has prompted a similar backlash against the perceived 'overempowerment' of women (Lemon, 1995). Organizations such as the South African Association of Men (SAAM) or the Promise Keepers South Africa have sprung up in order to combat the 'crisis of masculinity' and restore the "tattered remains of the male image" (Lemon, 1995, p.65; Morrell, 2002). What sets the South African case apart from similar 'crisis discourses' in Europe and the USA is that the backlash against the gender equality agenda has been directly linked to the high level of gender-based violence (Hamber, 2010). Research by Walker (2005), Hamber et al. (2006) and Hamber (2010) suggests that a large number of South African men believe that their 'crisis' is directly responsible for men's violent behaviour towards women. However, the fact that the 'crisis discourse' has permeated South African society, does not mean that it is plausible. On the contrary, I believe that the 'crisis theory' *cannot* adequately explain the prevalence of violent masculinities, and hence the high level of gender-based violence, in contemporary South Africa.

Firstly, the 'crisis theory' defines masculinity as a singular and stable 'sex role' to which all men adhere (Lemon, 1995). However, this singular male sex role simply does not exist. The 'crisis theory' fails to acknowledge that *not all men* have responded to the equality agenda of the post-apartheid era by resorting to violent behaviour (Morrell, 2001). In fact, the post-apartheid era has seen a whole range of accommodating and progressive responses to the gender equality agenda (Morrell, 2002). Some of these responses by men have actively challenged the dominant masculine code. Organizations such as the South African Men's Forum, Agisanang (ADAPT), Sonke Gender Justice, or the National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality actively promote and draw upon non-violent, non-sexist masculinities (Morrell, 2002). These non-violent responses show that the perceived 'overempowerment' of women cannot plausibly *give rise* to violent masculinities.

Secondly, the applicability of the 'crisis theory' to the context of South Africa is questionable. The theory is predicated on the notion "that men are the primary breadwinners and the major change leading to their so-called insecurity [i.e. crisis] has been that men are losing this function" (Hamber, 2010, p.82). However, *even if* we accept this notion in the context of 'Western' industrialized countries, it seems problematic to apply it directly to the South African context. This is because women in South Africa, especially women in rural areas, were and are the primary breadwinners in the family (Hamber, 2010). The 'crisis theory' is based on the notion of a breakdown of the traditional 'Western' family structure. However, in the South African case this notion is misplaced.

Thirdly, by making the gender equality agenda the *sole* causal factor explaining men's violent behaviour, the 'crisis discourse' disregards the important effects of other socio-economic factors on the construction of masculinities (Morrell, 2001). The problem of men's violent behaviour is depicted as being about women's empowerment when it is in fact about something else (White, 2000). This "mystification" plays into the hands of reactionary actors such as SAAM who wish to deploy old patriarchal 'truths' and restore their priviliged position in society (White, 2000, p.40). That the problem of men's violent behaviour in contemporary South Africa is in fact about something else, becomes clear when we look at the important 'intervening variables' of history and poverty.

On the Importance of History:

I argue that the 'crisis of masculinity' thesis overlooks important historical continuities with regard to violence in South

Gender-Based Violence in South Africa: A Crisis of Masculinity?

Written by Maurice Dunaiski

Africa, especially the 'normalization' of violence under apartheid. The notion of a recent, post-liberation crisis (to which men respond with violence) simply cannot account for these continuities. This is problematic because the historical legacies of race and class oppression have played a significant part in the social construction of violent masculinities in South Africa (Hamber, 2010). In fact, it can be argued that the history of apartheid has "injected violence into the very gender identities of men" (Morrell, 2002, p. 322). For example, apartheid systematically emasculated black men: "they were called 'boys', treated as subordinates, and denied respect" (Morrell, 2002, p. 322). For most black men the violent struggle against apartheid was therefore at the same time a struggle to reclaim their 'masculinity' (Niehaus, 2000). During the violent struggle being a 'comrade' endowed an otherwise marginalized black man with status and respect (Xaba, 2001). Apartheid thus created a 'struggle masculinity' amongst young black men which normalized and legitimized violence. Furthermore, these 'young lions' treated women as 'fair game' and their status as 'liberators' ensured that they were coveted by women (Xaba, 2001). However, the transition to democracy suddenly made this violent and sexist 'struggle masculinity' redundant.

In the post-apartheid era the former liberators thus find themselves "vilified and defined as criminals for the very same reasons that they were heroes in the past" (Hamber, 2010, p.79). The 'comrades', who often sacrificed their formal education for the struggle, suddenly find themselves outside the "social, economic and political fence" (Xaba, 2001, p.112). This situation leads some men to reassert their violent masculinities in areas where they still have power, typically in intimate relationships with women (Hamber, 2010). Importantly, the impact of apartheid on the construction of violent masculinities is by no means confined to the struggle. For example, the apartheid state used systematic violence to discipline young boys. Up until 1996 around thirty-thousand boys a year received whippings following court sentences (Morrell, 2001). The experience of every-day violence in childhood teaches children that violence is normal and thus contributes to the prevalence of violent masculinities (Jewkes, 2002). This cursory excursion into the violent history of South Africa seems to suggest that the prevalence of violent masculinities nowadays can be traced back to and seen as an extension of the violent masculinities forged during the apartheid era. These observations also highlight the significant impact that state interventions can have on the construction and normalization of violent masculinities (Morrell, 2001).

On the Importance of Poverty:

The 'crisis of masculinity' thesis also fails to account for the significant impact of poverty on the construction and perpetuation of violent masculinities. The connection between poverty and violent masculinities is well established in the literature (Jewkes, 2002; Wood & Jewkes, 2001). Although gender-based violence can be found in all social classes, it is more severe and frequent in the context of material deprivation (Jewkes, 2002). For example, it has been argued that intimate partner violence is linked to men's experience of 'stress', and since material deprivation is inherently stressful, it contributes to men's violent behaviour (Gelles & Straus, 1998). A more nuanced approach to the poverty-violence nexus suggests that "economic inequality within a context of poverty is more important than the absolute level of income" (Jewkes, 2002, p.1424).

The socio-economic structure of contemporary South Africa is not only characterized by widespread poverty amongst the black majority but also by extreme wealth inequalities (Morrell et al., 2012). This societal schism has been exacerbated by the post-apartheid opening of the economy to foreign competition (Bond, 2004). The widespread material deprivation in South Africa, coupled with rising expectations caused by omnipresent displays of wealth, have "proved a tragic mixture for fostering the growth of violent masculinities" (Morrell, 2001, p.19). For many young black men 'successful masculinity' is now embodied by the likes of President Jacob Zuma who equate success with wealth and sexual 'prowess' (Morrell et al., 2012). In the context of poverty, where the trappings of wealth are unattainable, successful masculinity is thus "constructed through the young men's ability to access and control women" (Wood & Jewkes, 2001, p.327).

"I have nothing, and that other guy has a car and everything … it's that problem, because girls are interested in … having money, beautiful dresses. It's a competition." (Ngangelizwe township resident, in Wood & Jewkes, 2001, p.323).

In this competition men use violence to achieve control over women and defend their 'manhood' against other men

Gender-Based Violence in South Africa: A Crisis of Masculinity?

Written by Maurice Dunaiski

(Morrell et al., 2012). Violence against women, especially intimate partner violence, can therefore be seen as an expression of power which is otherwise made impossible by the harsh conditions of material life in contemporary South Africa (Jewkes, 2002). Importantly, the context of material deprivation does not *cause* gender-based violence. It rather exacerbates gender-based violence by linking misogyny and sexism with "male vulnerability" (Morrell et al., 2012, p.23).

Conclusion

Unfortunately, a discussion of misogyny and sexism in South Africa would take us beyond the scope of this essay and into the slippery terrain of 'culture'. Suffice it to say that any such discussion would have to take care not to pathologize 'African masculinities' by falling into the trap of cultural determinism (Mason, 2012). Another interesting issue, which I also have to leave unexamined, is the impact of global economic trends on the prevalence of violent masculinities in South Africa. However, the point of this essay was not to provide a *complete* picture of the complex causal relations which give rise to and perpetuate violent masculinities. My aim was rather to show that the 'crisis of masculinity' thesis fails to account for this complexity and therefore does not adequately explain the high level of gender-based violence in contemporary South Africa.

Bibliography

Bond, P. (2004). South Africa's Frustrating Decade of Freedom: From Racial to Class Apartheid. *Monthly Review.* 55, 45-59.

Chant, S. (2000). From 'Woman-Blind' to 'Man-Kind': Should Men Have More Space in Gender and Development? *IDS Bulletin.* 31, 7-17.

CIET. (2000). *1997-2000 Surveys on sexual violence, summary report.* Johannesburg: CIETafrica. Available at: http://www.ciet.org/_documents/2006224131250.pdf [accessed 26.12.12].

Cleaver, F. (2002). Men and Masculinities: new directions in Gender and Development. In Cleaver, F (ed). *Masculinities matter!: men, gender and development.* London: Zed Books.

Cock, J. (2001). Gun violence and masculinity in contemporary South Africa. In Morrell, R. (ed). *Changing Men in Southern Africa*. London: Zed Books.

Connell, R. W. (2002). On hegemonic masculinity and violence: Response to Jefferson and Hall. *Theoretical Criminology.* 6, 89-100.

Connell, R. W. (2005). The Social Organization of Masculinity. In Whitehead, S. & Barrett, F. (eds). *The Masculinities Reader*. Cambridge: Polity.

Cornwall, A. (2000). Missing Men? Reflections on Men, Masculinities and Gender in GAD. *IDS Bulletin.* 31, 18-27.

Cornwall, A., & White, S. C. (2000). Men, Masculinities and Development: Politics, Policies and Practice. *IDS Bulletin.* 31, 1-6.

Doyle, R. F. (1976). *The rape of the male*. St. Paul: Poor Richard's Press.

Gelles, R. J. & Straus, M. A. (1998). *Intimate violence: the causes and consequences of abuse in the American family*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Goldberg, H. (1976). *The hazards of being male: surviving the myth of masculine privilege*. New York: Nash Pub.

Hamber, B., Hillyard, P., MaGuire, A., McWilliams, M., Robinson, G., Russell, D., & Ward, M. (2006). Discourses in

Gender-Based Violence in South Africa: A Crisis of Masculinity?
Written by Maurice Dunaiski

Transition: Re-Imagining Women's Security. *International Relations.* 20, 487-502.

Hamber, B. (2010). Masculinity and Transition: Crisis or Confusion in South Africa? *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development.* 5, 75-88.

Human Rights Watch (2011). 'We'll show you you're a woman'. *Report on Violence against Black Lesbians and Transgender Men in South Africa*. Available at: http://www.hrw.org/reports/2011/12/05/we-ll-show-you-you-re-woman [accessed 19.12.12].

Jewkes, R. (2002). Intimate partner violence: causes and prevention. *Lancet.* 1423-1429.

Kimmel, M. (2001). Afterword. In Morrell, R. (ed). *Changing Men in Southern Africa*. London: Zed Books.

Lemon, J. (1995). Masculinity in Crisis? *Agenda*. 24, 61-71.

Mason, C. (2012). Men, HIV/AIDS and Culture. *International Feminist Journal of Politics. 14,* 247-266.

Morrell, R. (2001). The Times of Change. Men and Masculinity in South Africa. In Morrell, R. (ed). *Changing Men in Southern Africa*. London: Zed Books.

Morrell, R. (2002). Men, Movements, and Gender Transformation in South Africa. *The Journal of Men's Studies.* 10, 309-327. [online] Available at: http://www.biomedsearch.com/article/Men-movements-gender-transformation-in/87415341.html [accessed 19.12.12].

Morrell R., Jewkes R., & Lindegger G. (2012). Hegemonic Masculinity/Masculinities in South Africa: Culture, Power, and Gender Politics. *Men and Masculinities.* 15, 11-30.

Naidoo, V., & Kongolo, M. (2004). Has affirmative action reached South African women? *Journal of International Women's Studies.* 6, 123-135.

Niehaus, I. (2000). Towards a Dubious Liberation: Masculinity, Sexuality and Power in South African Lowveld Schools, 1953-1999. *Journal of Southern African Studies.* 26, 387-407.

Rathgeber, E. M. (1990). WID, WAD, GAD: Trends in Research and Practice. *The Journal of Developing Areas.* 24, 489-502.

Swart, S. (2001). 'Man, gun and horse'. Hard right Afrikaner masculine identity in post-apartheid South Africa. In Morrell, R. (ed). *Changing Men in Southern Africa*. London: Zed Books.

Walker, L. (2005). Men Behaving Differently: South African Men since 1994. *Culture, Health & Sexuality 7.* pp.225-238.

White, S. C. (2000). 'Did the Earth Move?' The Hazards of Bringing Men and Masculinities into Gender and Development. *IDS Bulletin.* 31, 33-41.

Wood, K. & Jewkes, R. (2001). 'Dangerous' love: Reflections on violence among Xhosa township youth. In Morrell, R. (ed). *Changing Men in Southern Africa*. London: Zed Books.

Wood, K. & Jewkes, R. (2005). Violence, Rape, and Sexual Coercion: Everyday Love in a South African Township. In Whitehead, S. & Barrett, F. eds. *The Masculinities Reader.* Cambridge: Polity.

Xaba, T. (2001). Masculinity and its malcontents. The confrontation between 'struggle masculinity' and 'post-struggle masculinity' (1990-1997). In Morrell, R. (ed). *Changing Men in Southern Africa*. London: Zed Books.

Gender-Based Violence in South Africa: A Crisis of Masculinity?
Written by Maurice Dunaiski

1 The term 'gender-based violence' describes violence against women, transgender persons, and men because of how they experience and express their gender and sexuality (Human Rights Watch, 2011).

2 The GAD approach is not concerned with women *per se,* but with the differential impact of socially constructed gender roles upon the lives of women and men in developing countries (Rathgeber, 1990).

—

Written by: Maurice Dunaiski
Written at: University of York, UK
Written for: Dr Carole Spary
Date written: January 2013