



<http://www.mambaonline.com/2016/09/14/soweto-pride-bans-gay-testing-feminist-principle/>

# Sexuality and Security in South Africa

## What is the issue?

In 1996, South Africa's constitution ushered in progressive legislation that simultaneously decriminalized consensual same-sex relations while also suggesting that groups who made up the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) community were a class of people who required explicit protection within the constitution.

However, much to the surprise and dismay of many observers, rates of violence have remained high against LGBT South Africans, particularly black LGBT populations residing in the majority black townships of South Africa.

### Key Points

- 1) Much of the sexuality based violence in the Johannesburg area is gendered. Gender non-conformity seems to be the basis of much of the homophobic violence experienced by members of the LGBT.
- 2) Class and geographic location are strong determinants in experiences of violence. Individuals with less social power as well as those occupying spaces of economic insecurity were more at risk
- 3) While women are certainly more likely to be victims of violence there were a surprising number of gay and bisexual men that experienced both violence and the threat of violence.
- 4) Economic insecurity and loss of masculine authority and privilege have been hypothesized as the root of much of this violence.

## What I found

Two questions animate this study, why have black LGBT South Africans been a target of violence and harassment? Secondly, what can be done to effectively curtail violence against black LGBT South Africans?

First, there are a number of hypotheses concerning why black LGBT populations have faced increased scrutiny in their communities. The first idea is that gender and class play a disproportionate role in determining who experiences violence. In the first instance, it appears that gender non-conforming LGBT people are more likely to experience violence. This is especially the case for transgender individuals (both men and women) and LGBT men and women who challenge gender conventions in their physical appearance. Furthermore, the gendered nature of the violence is also demonstrated in the disproportionate violence experienced by women who are perceived to be lesbians or gender non-conforming. This is not to suggest that gay men escape these forms of violence, it is only to emphasize the disproportionate impact of violence on women's lives. To be clear South Africa faces an epidemic of gender based violence and women of all genders and sexualities are disproportionately targeted. My research suggests that LBT women are even more vulnerable.

Class positionality is also a factor in determining who is subjected to LGBT violence. Much of the violence against black LGBT South Africans occurs in communities that are under-resourced in which unemployment is high and economic mobility is low. Many of my informants speak of feeling danger as they navigate the streets and



<http://www.out2africa.com/event/soweto-pride/>

social spaces in the townships and certain inner city areas (particularly taxi ranks).

I would like to hypothesize that much of what is described as homophobic violence cannot be delinked from the larger problem of gender based violence. In fact, it could be argued that homophobic violence is a special type of gendered based violence given the disproportionate violence experienced by women and feminine gender performing men. Women are punished in their communities for defying assumptions that their bodies and sexualities are available for men's pleasure and control. Men who are feminine gender performing (or otherwise non-gender conforming) are punished for relinquishing forms of masculine authority. What this suggests is that behaving outside the norms of gender creates a form of anxiety for men in the community.

The question might be why men living in townships are feeling disempowered and how does that disempowerment translate into homophobic violence? There has been much scholarship that speaks of violence against women in post-apartheid South Africa and theorizes around shifting gender relations and increased empowerment and independence of women as creating anxieties for poor and working class men. Many of these men are chronically unemployed or underemployed and are lacking the financial means to perform traditional masculinity. Independent women are seen as a threat and an affront to the order. This is particular the case in neoliberal South Africa where industrial labor has declined and service labor (the pink collar economy) has exploded. A simultaneous feminization of labor has occurred in which young men often find themselves excluded from legitimate sources of earning income in the formal economy. Of course, statistics show that formal economy employment is still lower among women, but the fact the few women who do have access to the formal economy in ways that men in their communities may not is hypothesized as a root to this violence.



<http://www.theigbtupdate.com/tag/soweto-pride/>

Little theorizing has been done about the why of homophobic violence. But I would suggest that these anxieties I describe above are operating in some form. What perhaps may be needed in future studies is to spend time with heterosexual men and ask them about attitudes toward black LGBT people in their communities. As of now, much of the work seems based on a few studies that were not specifically addressing the violence faced by black LGBT South Africans. I would like to also suggest that part of the reason for the violence lies in assumptions of value. Black LGBT people are often seen as not belonging to communities and those that target them for violence rightly assume that they have more social power than the poor or working class black LGBT person.

There are several strategies that have been pursued to try to deal with curtailing homophobic violence and almost all of them deal with increasing social visibility and the social value of black LGBT populations.

### **Activists groups have pursued the following strategies**

- 1) Awareness Training of service providers that LGBT people must engage. This includes police, nurses and doctors at state hospitals, and educators at secondary institutions.
- 2) Placing pressure on the police and the criminal justice system to properly prosecute crimes committed against black LGBT people.
- 3) Providing forms of social support for LGBT South Africans including the creation of safe spaces for socializing
- 4) Providing education and training so that black LGBT youth may improve their socioeconomic standing

### **Black LGBT artists and individuals have been engaged in the following activities**

- 1) Documenting the black LGBT experience for the public
- 2) Creating alternative public representations of black LGBT people
- 3) Creating social spaces for black LGBT communities

All of these actions exist to normalize the experience of black LGBT South Africans (particularly black LGBT women) in township communities where most reside. In doing so, there is an explicit critique of the representation of black LGBT in the popular media as male, cisgender, affluent, and living in the white suburbs. While certainly this describes a portion of the black LGBT community, the majority of black LGBT people do not have the cultural or class capital to circulate in these spaces, and these popular representations erase the experiences of black lesbian and bisexual women, black transgender men and women, and those who are gender non-conforming.

If part of the reason why black LGBT people are vulnerable resides in their value to society, the notion that they either do not exist, should not exist, or should be eliminated from society must be critically resisted. Black LGBT Advocacy Groups, artists, and community members actively produce the kinds of worlds that they would like to see inhabited.



## Research Methodology

The project deployed an interdisciplinary framework for study grounded in ethnography and discourse analysis. Ethnography consisted of participant observation, what James Clifford would call “deep hanging out,” and some one on one interviews with members of the black LGBT community. Discursive analysis consisted of developing an analytical strategy based in black feminist and black queer studies of media, artists performances, and the statements and actions of the various role players engaged in creating forms of security (or insecurity) for black LGBT South Africans.

Sites of participant observation were chosen based on well-known social spaces frequented by the black LGBT community members. These sites were expanded as the researcher met new people in the community. Sites ranged from personal homes located in township areas near Johannesburg, to nightclub spaces in the city of Johannesburg, to informal gathering spaces in the city center.

Artists and media were chosen based on either their identity as a member of the black LGBT community or their desire to engage the conversation and improve the life circumstances of black LGBT South Africans in their work.

I tended to focus on artists who were deliberately provocative in trying to rethink conceptualizations of African identity and black racial identity along with the categories of sex and gender.

## Policy Implications

Ultimately if the government is interested in decreasing homophobic violence it must address the issue of both changing attitudes in communities as well as the issue of economic insecurity. I also feel that the government must also address its criminal justice system away from incarceration toward forms of restorative justice.

### Three immediate recommendations

- 1) Government should offer more financial support to black LGBT NGOs. Black LGBT NGOs are doing the work in black communities to create and foster changed attitudes as well as to provide social support for the black LGBT population.
- 2) Government should foster additional opportunities for skills training, job training and education for black LGBT populations.
- 3) The criminal justice system should be reformed to properly identify and find forms of restorative and communal justice for people who commit homophobic violence.



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