

**Abstract** This article explores the dynamics and layers of discourse surrounding sex, sexual violence and coercion in South Africa's men's prisons. Violence in prison – most of which goes unrecorded – is ritualized and is fundamental in establishing inmate identities and hierarchies. Male rape, perhaps the most severely under-reported, is one of many forms of assault occurring (predominantly) between prisoners. Drawing on interviews with (ex-)prisoners, together with related media coverage, I show how in dominant discourses on prison sex and sexual violence a blurring occurs between 'homosexuality' and 'male rape'. Consequently, inclusive understandings of diverse sexualities are negated and sexual violence in prison is denied. I trace how powerful discourses on gender and sexuality make invisible the violence of male rape, and simultaneously demonize same-sex desire behind bars. Moreover, I consider the embryonic discourses that challenge hegemonic understandings, arguing that they have not yet adequately succeeded in producing more accepting understandings of male sexuality or male victimization.

**Keywords** homophobia, male rape, masculinity, prison, sexuality

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## Behind the Bars of Masculinity: Male Rape and Homophobia in and about South African Men's Prisons

### Introduction

Historically, both sex and rape in South African men's prisons have largely gone unacknowledged. Indeed, their existence has often been vehemently denied (Achmat, 1995). In recent years both subjects have received increased public attention. Influencing this have been a sprinkling of progressive initiatives by health and violence-prevention practitioners and researchers, as well as a large-scale investigation into prison corruption,

the Jali Commission of Inquiry (appointed in 2001, it has recently released its extensive report). Consensual sex between men in prison has occasionally made it into public view, but to a lesser extent than the 'scourge' (Jali Commission of Inquiry, 2006: 29) of sexual violence behind bars. Existing evidence points to sexual violence as likely the most severely under-reported form of assault at the same time as advancing the view that it is indeed widespread. The rape of one male prisoner by another is a common form of this violence.

Despite somewhat greater awareness of their occurrences, the subjects of sex between men and the rape of men in prison remain smothered by taboo and stigma. Moreover, when they are sporadically catapulted into society's view, the anxieties that surround them tend to overwhelm the event. Discourses that militate against meaningful engagement and fuel destructive myths come to the fore and confuse significant differences between issues of sexuality and violence. Homosexuality and male rape – two of society's greatest taboos – are evoked and confused. These confusions in discourses of prison sex and violence, and their resultant casualties, are the main focus of this article. Same-sex desire and male rape victims are alternately demonized and unacknowledged. The place where men encounter these discourses is in prison. In turn, the prison is located in a transitional 'post-conflict' society, which is marked by discursive flux and contestation. These contexts bring added layers of intolerance and anxiety that further damage the people involved and jeopardize the achievement of the progressive values enshrined in the 'new' South African constitution.

## Methodology

This article is based on a qualitative study into sex and sexual violence in men's prisons done at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV) and funded by Irish Aid (Gear and Ngubeni, 2002). Data were collected in Gauteng between November 2000 and September 2001 via in-depth focus groups and interviews with 23 ex-prisoners and prisoners. These were conducted by the author with the facilitation assistance, translation and support of Kindiza Ngubeni. Participating prisoners were held in a juvenile prison and recently released ex-prisoner respondents were drawn from various age-groups and lengths of incarceration. Collectively, the informants had experienced 18 South African prisons. I also employ personal experiences gleaned through the project to date, together with observations of related media coverage. This is in an attempt to distinguish prevalent discourses surrounding sex and violence in prison and the challenges they generate.

## An anxious context

In 2005, the topic of sex in prison burst into the South African public arena when the prison watchdog body – the Judicial Inspectorate of Prisons – recommended to the Department of Correctional Services (DCS) that consensual sex in men’s prisons should not be punished (Anirudhra, 2005). This took issue with an earlier decision made by the DCS to charge two inmates for having consensual sex. Furious calls from listeners dominated chat radio and images were conjured up of vast resources being spent on rearranging prison life to provide for the sexual desires of abhorrent inmates. One tabloid responded by publishing a snap poll on whether members of the public believed inmates should be allowed to have sex (Maluleke, 2005). Comments from the poll point to additional anxieties aroused by news of the recommendation. All bar one of the published comments were concerned with the belief that sex between prisoners would lead to an increase in crime. Access to sex, pollees said, would negate the purposes of imprisonment by making prison too much like the outside world.

His conviction might lose its meaning . . . Even those convicted for different offences may no longer draw a line between prison and the outside world.

Prisoners could feel free if they were given the right to have sex, resulting in increased crime levels.

The responses ignore current realities of prisons in which general occupancy rates exceed 170 percent, inmates regularly spend 20 hours a day locked in cells, receive food only twice a day, and some have to sleep in shifts.

The fear of crime expressed in the poll pervades society and fuels particularly punitive attitudes that stifle public engagement with prisoners’ well-being. Populist notions that ‘causing pain will assuage our fear of crime and make us safer’ (Steinberg, 2005: 28) are not unusual. In South Africa they are arguably intensified in the context of transition to democracy, which has been accompanied by high levels of violence and also by a reframing of perceptions. As Harris (drawing on Simpson, 2001) commented:

In the past, violence was largely framed as ‘political’, both on the part of the apartheid state and through resistance to it. By contrast, violence today is commonly (simplistically) labelled ‘criminal’. Such a discursive shift has redefined not only violence but issues of crime, legitimacy and justice. (Harris, 2003: 1)

While this simplistic division between past ‘political’ violence and contemporary ‘criminal’ violence belies numerous criminal strands in past ‘political violence’, it also denies the politics of current ‘criminal violence’.

The popular legitimacy bestowed on much past violence by virtue of its being understood as occurring in the context of opposition to the apartheid state, has been replaced by retributory anger towards those involved in presently prevalent forms of violence (or ‘criminal’ violence). Current violence predominantly defined as ‘criminal’ tends to be viewed without attention to its political and socio-economic context (Van der Merwe, 2006). Prisoners, the most visible ‘face’ of violence, become a magnet for angry attention.

Public animosity towards prisoners is not softened by attitudes towards (homo)sexuality: South Africa remains notoriously homophobic (Joint Working Group, 2005). Typically, any suggestion of sexual activity behind bars elicits from the public anxious pronouncements and denouncements. An effect of this is to blur the distinction between consensual male–male sex and male rape. Multiple public anxieties surrounding crime, violence and homosexuality produce a conflation of male rape with homosexuality. This lack of differentiation is also evident within prisons themselves. One result is that public and prison discourses negate recognition of male rape victims behind bars. The treatment of these men reflects this negation, which is compounded by dominant perceptions of offenders and imprisonment. Simultaneously these discourses fuel homophobia and entrench dangerous ideas about what it means to be a man.

#### *A moment in the public eye*

The confusion between sexuality and violation that usually accompanies coverage of sexual violence in prison came sharply into view when the acclaimed 2001 edu-drama television series targeting South African youth – *Yizo Yizo* – included a prison rape scene (SABC, March 2001). One of the characters, a gangster called Chester, was arrested and raped on his first night behind bars. In the public hullabaloo that ensued as a result of the episode, what was actually the portrayal of rape was frequently interpreted by audiences as ‘homosexuality’. It was hard to tell whether people were more upset about the alleged screening of ‘homosexuality’ in prime-time viewing or about the showing of male rape. Although the episode was screened several years ago, it remains a vivid reference point in popular memory.

#### *Territories of conflation: ‘homosexuality’ and sexual violence*

The blurring of the distinction between consensual (homo)sex and violence in discussions of male rape, and specifically when these happen in prisons, has also been observed elsewhere, notably in the USA (Donaldson, 2001; Scarce, 1997; Wooden and Parker, 1982). The cited writers comment that researchers themselves have often contributed to the confusion. For example, the term ‘homosexual rape’ has been used by

researchers, implying that the perpetrator is homosexual and/or that rape is linked to consensual sex between men. In fact, the rape of another man is an offence that ‘virtually no incarcerated homosexuals commit’ (Donaldson, 2001: 124). By contrast, rape is overwhelmingly the preserve of men who identify as heterosexual and have until incarceration only had heterosexual encounters.

In opposition to this situation, there have been attempts to highlight the difference between consensual sex and violation. Scarce (1997), in ‘Male on Male Rape’, attempts to draw attention to victims of rape in the US context, by outlining ways in which coercion is conflated with ‘homosexuality’. The task is not made easy because same-sex consensual behaviours were historically outlawed not only in most US prisons but also in several states – a situation that has seen male victims who dared to report having been raped to authorities *themselves* being charged with the crime of sodomy and/or breaking prison rules. (The ground-breaking Prison Rape Elimination Act of 2003 has since been passed in the USA. The standing of consensual sex among inmates, however, remains unclear (American Police Beat, 2006), although the country’s sodomy laws were in 2003 also declared unconstitutional.)

## Homosexuality and male rape: a masculinities perspective

Feminist analyses of gender, and the growing field of masculinities studies that has emerged from them, assist in making sense of connections between the anxieties towards male rape and homosexuality that lead to the situation where, as Scarce (1997: 10) comments, ‘an inability to distinguish sex from rape’ sees ‘society often treat[ing] same-sex rape with the same disgust and hatred as homosexuality’. Homophobia can be understood as a direct result of hegemonic constructions of gender that prescribe conformity with the ‘heterosexual matrix’ (Butler, 1990). Key features of this matrix are that it defines gender into categories that exist in opposition to each other (manhood versus womanhood) and in hierarchal relation to each other (manhood holds the pivotal position). Individuals are required, within this framework, to fulfil a stable gender role that expresses a stable (heterosexual) sex in the ‘compulsory practice of heterosexuality’ (p. 151). Sexuality and gender are therefore made dependent on each other. At the same time, each category’s difference to its ‘other’ becomes an essential component of its being (Gutterman, 2001). In other words, the matrix is a regime that requires one either to be a ‘man’ (a heterosexual male) *or* a ‘woman’ (a heterosexual female). Those not conforming to heterosexuality thus threaten the system that demands

heterosexuality as an essential condition for ‘manhood’ or ‘womanhood’. Because maintaining this notion is necessary for maintaining the status quo and the elevated position of heterosexual masculinity within it, other forms of male sexuality represent a fundamental threat to ‘masculinity’ (Connolly, 1991).

Weeks (1985: 190) described masculinity as being ‘precariously’ achieved by constantly warding off its threats, specifically by rejecting femininity and homosexuality. This helps to explain dominant responses to male rape: male rape evokes notions of both femininity and homosexuality. Because vulnerability is constructed within dominant notions of gender as a fundamental facet of femininity, and sexual contact with another man (even unwanted) is associated with homosexuality, same-sex male rape becomes directly linked to both of ‘masculinity’s’ others: femininity through vulnerability, and homosexuality through same-sex contact. This linkage therefore demolishes a male victim’s claims to ‘manhood’ (a notion built on the belief that ‘real men cannot get raped’).

Male rape can also be considered one form of what Whitehead (2005) conceptualized as ‘exclusive’ violence – violence perceived to function by ‘exclud[ing] the [male] victim from the category “man” as unworthy of belonging there’ and often characterized by sexual humiliation. By negating the victim’s masculinity, and positioning him as a ‘non-man’, the violence affirms the masculinity of the perpetrator. The ‘non-man’ is so defined because of his failure to meet the ‘key qualifications of masculinity’, which Whitehead (2005: 416–17) identifies as ‘transcendental courage and sexual conformity’. This perceived de-masculination is a central facet of the stigma of male rape that keeps many of its victims suffering in shame and silence (Rumney and Morgan-Taylor, 2004; Singh, 2005; Woodin, 2002).

## Discourses in and about South African prisons

Muddlings between sex and violation emerge not only when the South African public is confronted with the issue, but are also prominent in discourses at work within prisons themselves. During our interviews with prisoners and ex-prisoners it was tricky to tell whether certain interviewees were more disapproving of the fact that forced sex acts involved only men or that one of the participants was unwilling. An ex-prisoner provided the following response when asked about why he eventually decided to report to warders the ongoing sexual coercion by a cell-mate on a recently arrived young prisoner:

You see, for me it is not right for a man to sleep with another man. It’s not right . . . because you are also a man.

Among people living and working in prison, the term 'homosexuality' is often used as a hold-all term to refer to all sexual encounters involving two men, no matter what the content or terms of the encounter. This usage conflates consensual sexual acts between men with sexual violence involving only men. Some talk about 'victims' of homosexuality and people going into prison 'afraid of homosexuality' when it is clear that what they are afraid of is being forced into unwanted sex. In a similar vein, an activist organization reported to a parliamentary committee their concern about the common 'misperception [in prison] that sodomy and rape are the same thing' (PMG, 2004).

South Africa's historical criminalizing of anal sex between men as 'sodomy' has no doubt contributed to this situation. Before 1998, anal or oral sex between men constituted a criminal offence *regardless* of whether it was consensual or forced. Despite the scrapping of these laws, the legacy of the prejudice behind them lives on as is evidenced in both prison and public discourses. (For instance, the police watchdog, the Independent Complaints Directorate (2000) still lists 'sodomy' as an offence on its website without defining what it means by this.) While such messages breed in public consciousness a continued criminalization of things associated with homosexuality, sexual violence goes unacknowledged.

Current legislative and policy silences exacerbate the problem. There is no legal category providing for male rape: 'rape' in South African law currently relates to vaginal penetration of a female by a male. The Sexual Offences Bill, which for years has been in drafting, will likely rectify this, but there is no clarity on when it will be passed and much concern about the lengthiness of the process. Moreover, the DCS lacks clear policy on male-to-male sex crimes. Officials and prisoners have been confused about just what is and what is not allowed. Most staff believe that all sex is officially prohibited while others refer to the country's constitution when it comes to consensual encounters. South Africa's constitutional freedoms should prevail in prison including those of sexual choice and equality and the right to humane conditions of imprisonment and bodily integrity (Fourie, 2005). Yet clauses in correctional legislation on 'indecent conduct' are nowhere defined and therefore open to differential interpretation. 'Indecency' is regularly equated with 'sodomy' rather than the circumstances of (various) behaviours to which the common-law offence relates. Regarding the 2005 Judicial Inspectorate's recommendation (discussed earlier), a DCS spokesperson stated that while there was no specific regulation on consensual sex, most prisons did not permit it. Additionally, a legal opinion commissioned by the CSV (Fourie, 2005: 16) was of the view that 'no such prohibition exists'. Clearly, however, the issue requires better articulation and coherent application (Harris, pers. comm., 2006).

Although neither sexual violence nor consensual sex get much official attention, different interpretations of prison rules inform a tendency to confuse sex and violation, and add to the invisibility of victims. This lack of clarity when talking about sex in prison, together with homophobia and sometimes punitive attitudes towards imprisonment, regularly result in situations where attempts to engage with the issue of sexual violence get hijacked by heated argument on the morality of allowing/punishing consensual sex in prison.

The absence of language to name rape and abuse and distinguish it from consensual sex is mirrored in the lack of mechanisms to prevent rape and support its victims. Within prisons some officials are themselves involved in prison rape by selling sex targets to other inmates and/or accepting bribes to turn a blind eye. Yet others are resigned to abuse as part of prison life. Those officials who might want to intervene are severely hampered by virtually non-existent skills or structures for victim support. This is amply evident in the poor state of disciplinary, legal, medical and psycho-social procedures and services (Equality Project, 2004; ALP and TAC, 2004). We have encountered, for instance, a senior security officer who conveyed erroneous information to a victim that dissuaded him from opening a case, and a prison doctor who had never been trained and did not know how to perform an anal examination following rape. Formal DCS information-gathering systems also result in the category of 'rape' vanishing from official versions of prison violence. In these statistic-producing systems, rape is captured in the general category of 'assault'.

*Of women, wives and men: dominant inmate culture and invisibilizing male victims*

At another level of prison life, in the workings of the dominant inmate culture (most visible in, but not reducible to, gangsterism), the denial of sexual violation is stark. Not only are male victims not acknowledged as such, but they are commonly believed to have been turned into 'women'. A young prisoner explained:

In fact, the person who has been raped . . . is regarded as a woman . . . Prisoners will whistle for him as if whistling for a woman. Others will be fingering him . . . saying 'Hello sweetheart' [*mimics*] when he passes . . . If he mistakenly step[s] on your feet, you will call him 'bitch'.

The sense of demolished masculinity and imposed 'womanhood' is central to the immense stigma and shame that keeps most victims suffering in silence. Like their female counterparts outside prison, they are regularly blamed for what has happened to them. In this case, however, it is for not having 'managed' to hold onto their 'manhood' or for 'allowing' themselves to be turned into 'women'.

If I say you are a criminal that means I respect you. But if you have [had] sex [done to you], it's obvious that they will see you differently . . . Even the criminal in you is now gone and you are now a woman . . . There is nothing we can do for you and we don't care . . . When [you] walk past people want to touch [you] or threaten to rape [you].

Certainly, similar accusations come from broader society and testify to the power of the public myths that equate 'manhood' with 'invulnerability'. An ex-prisoner exclaimed:

*Of course* they can't tell their families! The wife and children will think 'You're nothing! You've been raped. You are only as good as we women!'

It is primarily through rape and various degrees of coercion that a portion of the male prison population is positioned within the prisoner hierarchy as 'women' to be treated as the general and sexual property of other inmates identified as 'men'. Unfamiliar with codes governing inmate relations, first time offenders are especially susceptible to manipulation and trickery regularly employed to establish sexual subordinates. A typical path into being made a 'woman' is for a new offender to accept food, drugs or protection from another prisoner. By doing so he is unknowingly viewed as having created a debt, which he will be expected to 'repay' with sex. 'Men' regularly take 'women' as 'wives'/'*wyffies*' in long-term relationships known as 'marriages', usually initiated with the 'man' raping the person he takes as his 'wife'. According to dominant inmate culture, 'marriages' are the 'correct' place for sex to occur – that is a particular mode of sex where 'men' penetrate and 'women' are their passive receivers.

Strongly evident in these sets of relations is the imperative to ensure the reproduction of Butler's 'heterosexual matrix' where subjects are categorized into stable genders that express stable sexes which are 'oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality' (Butler, 1990: 35, 151). In the prison context where sexual activity is perforce homosexual, the requirement for opposite stable sexes is translated into the search for oppositional stable sex *roles* (active penetration or passive receiving) (Gear, 2005). A feature of the hegemonic definition of prison manhood is an exclusively penetrative sexual role while 'womanhood' demands an exclusively receptive sexual role. This sexual status quo with 'men' penetrating 'women' is protected in the workings of the prison gangs. The construction of the gender–sex role equation is also evident in the practice of demoting 'men' who have been raped to the status of 'women'. Basically, anyone who has been penetrated in a power-defined sexual interaction is defined as a 'woman'. Thus inmate discourses ensure that raped men vanish, turning them into 'women' whose 'job' it is to provide 'men' with sex.

For male victims, rape regularly results in a change in their gender status and location in the gender hierarchy. Following from the oppositional and hierarchical construction of gender, where one category is brought into being by its difference from the other and hegemonic masculinity is achieved by the insistence of superior oppositeness to femininity (and homosexuality) (Weeks, 1985), same-sex male rape positions victims as the very difference (womanness) that has up until that point defined what they are not. While necessary to guard against blanket characterizations of the state of prison 'wifedom', for many a *wyfie*, dramatic discontinuity is wrought as they are catapulted from one end of the gender hierarchy to the despised other. Although far messier than the framing discourses would have us believe, the gendering–de-gendering aspect of understandings of male prison rapes is nevertheless a central component of victim experience. Broadly, this seems to be characterized by a sense of no longer being a 'man' while also not being a 'woman' – although one is labelled as such. It can be viewed as a state of being caught between two vying gender identities – a position that is irreconcilable because of the oppositional way in which dominant notions of 'manhood' and 'womanhood' are constructed (see Gear, 2005).

*Disappearing into 'marriage': victims and 'wifedom'*

Marriages are modelled on dominant heterosexual relations between men and women and this legitimizes them and normalizes the abusive relations they usually contain. (This is not to say that many 'outside' heterosexual marriages do not also mask violence. Indeed, prison relationships reflect back at us disturbing connections with relations beyond prison walls.) Although prison 'marriage'-type relationships will commence and unfold differently, not necessarily involving coerced relations, more often than not they reportedly do and have been described as 'sexual slavery' both in the South African and US contexts (Gear, 2001: 119; Human Rights Watch, 2001: 73). In these relationships '*wyfies*' are expected to take care of the 'home space' (cell) and serve their 'husbands' who regulate the scope of their *wyfie*'s interaction with other inmates and warders. 'Men'/'husbands', on the other hand, are required to provide materially for their 'wives' via smuggling and theft networks.

The negation of violence and victimization caused by the containment of these experiences in 'marriages' was evident in the ways interviewees explained the nature of both marriages and rape. Assertions such as 'prison women are treated just like women outside' or 'you can't rape your wife' show the familiarity of marriage being drawn on to legitimize these relationships (even though marital rape became a crime in 1993). Many respondents 'named' rape as being at a height when individuals first arrive in prison but maintained that it then dwindles. It appeared to us, however,

that although in marriages the same level of very direct violence may not be apparent, the use of force does not necessarily diminish. Rather, the force together with recognition of its victim recedes from sight because of being contained in the 'normal' institution of 'marriage'. The initial rape effectively forces a rupture in the way that the victim is perceived by fellow inmates and himself, which re-arranges gender so as to then re-establish 'normal' heterosexuality for the prison context. This, and the marriage through which this 'normal heterosexuality' is practised, is central in disappearing the violence it contains. As time goes on, levels of coercion do not necessarily reduce but may just become less visible. The line between coercion and consent can be particularly blurred in prison largely because of the commodification of sex in that context (where it is exchanged for any number of necessities or luxuries). But as Scarce (1997: 39) noted on the part of prison officials in the USA, 'Frequently the coercive . . . relationship is mistaken for consensual homosexuality'.

### Distancing 'homosexuality'

Prisons harbour a subculture that, on the one hand, supports probably the greatest concentration of male-on-male sex in the country but, on the other, is virulently homophobic. In turn, the processes of 'marriage' – reportedly the most common site of sexual (inter)action – can be seen as a conscious strategy to create distance from notions of homosexuality.

Importantly, as has been shown of other subcultures as well, sex acts in themselves are not automatically equated with one or another sexual identity (Dirsuweit, 1999; Epprecht, 2005; Niehaus, 2002). '[N]ot all people who engage in same-sex practices regard themselves as homosexual, or are so regarded by others' (Sinfield, 1994: 179). In many such subcultures, same-sex activity re-enacts heterosexual gender roles. Reid (2005: 213) notes of gay life in small town South Africa, for example, 'a sharp distinction between 'masculine' and 'feminine' which has the strong imprint of the heterosexual model'. Moreover, and more generally, as Marshall (1981: 154) remarked, many 'definitions of male homosexuality continue to be pervaded by the tyranny of gender divisions'. Of prisoner relations, Steinberg (2004: 43) comments that 'inmates end up engaging in the most vicious parody of the misogynist relationship between a man and woman on the outside'. Part of this tyranny is the extent to which deviations from the heterosexual model are frowned upon.

### Transgressions and criminalized homosexuality

Alternative modes of sexual interaction exist and challenge the rules of power-defined 'marriages'. Since these threaten the sex-gender status quo

and are associated with 'homosexuality', participants risk punishment or victimization. One example is a practice known as *ushintsba ipondo*. Literally meaning 'to exchange a pound', it is defined as an equal exchange of sex for sex. It is characterized by mutual agreement and the fact that participants – regarded as of equal status – take turns to penetrate and receive. In doing so, they disrupt the system whereby a single gender identity is equated with a sex role (where 'men' are penetrators and 'women' are penetrated).

You do not know who is the husband and who's the wife. They're all husbands sometimes, they keep exchanging. (Ex-prisoner)

This blurring of gender roles results in an association of the practice with 'homosexuality'. Accordingly, it poses a substantial threat to the sexual gender status quo, is considered deviant, and participation in it is a punishable offence.

[If I catch them] I've got a right – even if they belong to another gang – to assault them and explain later. (Ex-prisoner)

Respondents were unanimous regarding the dangers (including rape, extortion and beating) involved in participation but *ushintsba ipondo* is nevertheless apparently fairly common. Out of the oppressive relations then, other configurations of sexual interaction emerge that challenge the dominant forms and the intolerances that structure them. Overall, however, inmate hierarchies obsessively seek to maintain the abusive 'heterosexual' sets of sexual relations, and to close the spaces where alternatives may be negotiated. As such, they endorse coerced patterns of sex while outlawing much that is mutually agreed. Homosexuality is criminalized and violence legitimized.

In other ways too, understandings of 'homosexuality' as criminal/involving criminals are being transmitted: inmates may come to associate 'homosexuality' with violence and exploitation. For some interviewees, exposure to prison sexual activity and sexual violence was their first encounter with male–male sex. Given prior non-engagement with issues of diverse sexualities, it is not surprising that notions of homosexuality and violence can become confused. For them, coercive prison encounters constitute the yardstick for understanding sex and sexual relationships between men. Even when prison experiences do not necessarily provide individuals with their first such encounter, they likely influence perceptions on the subject. One young offender explained, for example, that 'gays' are people who you 'have to sleep with' when '[you] do not understand what is going on'.

For another respondent, violence and criminality have apparently become integral to his understanding of male-on-male sex. His explanation

of why he would never get involved with men outside suggests that he views violence as a necessary component of such relationships. Sex with other men has for him also become a signal of criminality:

You are digging your own grave [if you have relationships with men outside] . . . I would never ever . . . Such a person can kill you at anytime . . . If they still do then you must know that that person has not yet stopped being a criminal. He is still a criminal because he does that thing . . . the main thing we do in prison.

## Manhood, violence and victim-violence potential

As has been argued, the taboos of male rape and homosexuality are linked by the threat they both pose to dominant notions of masculinity. The virulent homophobia and misogyny detectable in men's prisons can partly be understood as an effect of the especially intense demands in that context to prove one's 'manhood'. This follows from the infantilizing, identity-robbing, single-sex nature of the environment and from the lack of opportunities for self-expression. Milieus of this nature feed high levels of what Whitehead (2005: 415) terms '[m]asculine anxiety, the fear of collapse in self-identity as a man', which, in turn, may precipitate violence. The fear, Whitehead argues, springs from the romanticized ideal that manhood resides in transcendental courage. While in reality transcendental courage can only be episodically achieved (Hearn and Whitehead, 2006), violence may be employed to assert it.

In opposition to prison 'womanhood', notions of 'manhood' are linked to the capacity for displaying particular violence together with the ability to withstand it (Steinberg, 2004). It follows that responses to a sense of lost manhood may include violence: through violence it can be regained. Indeed, prison gangs will reportedly demand of 'women' seeking promotion to 'manhood' that they stab another inmate to prove their claim to masculinity.

The potential for violent 'compensatory' behaviour on the part of male rape victims is noted by many writers (Donaldson, 1993; Harvey, 2002; Irwin, in Saum et al., 1995; Singh, 2005):

Psychologists and rape counselors believe that the pent-up rage caused by these assaults can cause victims, especially if they don't receive psychological treatment, to erupt in violence once they return to their communities. Some will become rapists, seeking to 'regain their manhood' through the same violent means by which they believe it was lost. (Donaldson, 1993)

However, while the pressures of dominant masculinity should prepare us for further cycles of violence to emanate from cases of male rape, it is an issue requiring further investigation. The likelihood (or not) of prison rape

victims becoming future perpetrators of violence needs to be established. Embryonic discourses that are challenging the silence around male rape include assertions about victims' potential for further violence despite the fact that there is no conclusive evidence about the extent to which rape victims later become perpetrators of violence (Donaldson, 1993; Friends Against Abuse, 2004; Harvey, 2002). In its bluntest form, a regularly stated argument is that unless we pay victims the attention they deserve, they will become rapists on the outside.

Aggression and violence are by no means necessary responses to sexual victimization. But in terms of how victimization in prison may generate future violence, it seems noteworthy that in these progressively intentioned discourses the victims are singled out (as potential future perpetrators) while those doing the raping and coercing (the prison 'men') are ignored. It is not unreasonable to suggest that on 'men's' parts too, destructive notions of masculinity are entrenched in prison, and that in other arenas they may well continue to act out identities that involve the abuse of others.

The situation where victims are linked to possible future violence emerges from a focus on victims and an attempt to get them recognized (rather than from a general attempt to understand trajectories of future violence produced by prison rape). And much-needed strategic mileage exists in this approach where it draws attention to otherwise invisible subjects. An unintended effect of this approach, however, is that it contributes to a normalization of men's violence on two counts. First, its treatment of 'men' seems to fall into the naturalization trap that comes with prison sexual victimization regularly taking place in a framework of 'normal' gendered institutions ('marriages'). It has been argued that 'marriages' serve to obscure the abuse they contain. Not only do they make the victim invisible, they make the *perpetrator* invisible as well – he's a 'man'/'husband' in a 'marriage', 'just like outside' – a definition that masks his violence. Second, returning to the victim, the vulnerability of *men* is apparently an area society refuses to acknowledge unless we feel threatened by what ongoing disregard may bring. Therefore, in attempts to build a discourse of male vulnerability, men and violence become uncritically bound – a situation in danger of endorsing the very beliefs we seek to debunk.

Arguably inmate men are doubly disadvantaged by the tendency to make recognition of vulnerability and need of support dependent on violence. While male rape victims are generally barely acknowledged, some form of 'he deserves it' is a likely retort regarding prisoners. In the climate of retributory anger towards 'criminals' (that divorces them from their political and socio-economic circumstances), it is (again) by pointing out the *danger* of ignoring their well-being that is the route to acknowledgment.

When activists foreground victims as future rapists on the outside, they risk stigmatizing them further. We also refuse them the opportunity to be more than just potential perpetrators. And ironically we leave them as few options as are offered by the gangs (where no violence = no acknowledgment) and by the repressive ‘masculinity’ that is behind the stigma that denies men’s vulnerability. Simultaneously, those who achieve ‘manhood’ in prison (and include the perpetrators of sexual violence) apparently escape our concerns about future violence. This is despite the relative smoothness with which they could conceivably slide back into being the ‘men’ of outside society – to relate no less destructively than they do inside.

### Conclusion: disappearing victims, disqualifying desire, prefiguring perpetrators

In ending it is pertinent to consider two other recent television moments that arguably encapsulate some of the problems surrounding prison sexualities. The first was a documentary on prison life,<sup>1</sup> where inmates, talking to the camera, voiced their strong objections to the very same *Yizo Yizo* episode outlined earlier (where the protagonist is raped on his first night in prison). One prisoner in the documentary, explaining his disapproval of the *Yizo Yizo* portrayal, drew on the rich history of sex between men in the single-sex mine compounds (Moodie with Ndatshe, 1994; Niehaus, 2002), and stated, ‘It’s thigh sex, not penetration’. His friend added, ‘Nobody forces you . . . It’s two consenting guys’. In another (talk show) programme, a long-time ex-gangster stated repeatedly: ‘it’s not rape’ that mostly happens in prison, ‘it’s by agreement’.<sup>2</sup>

In both cases, the dismissal of rape points to the extent to which sexual violence is normalized in this context and definitions of ‘consent’ beg interrogation. Their objections, however, can also be read first as an attempt to intervene in the typical public demonization of prisoners and happenings behind bars, and second as pointing to a key casualty of the prejudiced muddlings that usually accompany articulations of sex and violence in prison. Specifically, their objections to *Yizo Yizo* can be viewed as an attempt to seek understanding for male–male desire, which is more regularly stigmatized or denied. This stigmatization/denial is one of the consequences of the conflation (of sex and violence) often featuring in discussions of sex in prison (‘homosexuality’ gets jumbled with violence, consensual sex gets demonized). So, in the television programmes, the ways that the (ex-)prisoners distance what they have to say about prison sex from the violence of rape, and that they draw on a history of same-sex relations in closed institutions, can be viewed as an attempt to draw attention to *alternative* patterns of same-sex sexual interaction (ones that are not rape).

In the first case they target the *Yizo Yizo* programme – now over five years old – because it represents such a *lonely* interpretation of the multi-natured stories of sex behind bars. *Yizo Yizo* as a *rare* public account of ‘prison sex’ is considered to be a *defining* account (the only account) of sexual interaction in prison. Because it depicts a rape, they assume that it represents all prison sexual activity as rape. More generally, this amounts to a call for appreciation of the complexity of prison experiences rather than the dangerous lumping together of a range of experiences including those as different as sex and rape.

South Africa’s transitional context is one where fear feeds potent versions of ‘the notion that criminals and victims are as different as night and day’ (Fattah, 1997: 321). In fact these categories cannot be neatly distinguished (criminals are commonly victims too). Institutions, systems and languages of post-apartheid society are in a state of flux or are still being imagined. In the prison context, discourses on masculinity construct ‘men’ as invulnerable, and homosexuality as Other to ‘manhood’. These discourses create erroneous links between homophobia and male rape. They legitimize coerced and violent relationships (on the grounds that they are ‘normal’ and familiar) while at the same time undermining and demonizing other patterns of (homo)sexual interaction that are consensual and non-violent. In these portrayals and understandings of prison life, sex and violence become muddled, hurt men are erased, desire is disqualified and violence endorsed.

While these notions of masculinity are never fully successful in defining actual experiences and closing the spaces where alternatives are negotiated, they continue to gather momentum both inside and outside prison. Engagement with the complexity of prison sex experiences and developing language with which to communicate it are necessary to counter these currents, which fuel the construction of harmful, exclusionary identities, and deny their victims. Embryonic discourses that seek to intervene in these processes are gradually beginning to emerge. However, by bringing male vulnerability into sight through a lens of violence, these discourses unintentionally provide men with few alternative options of developing new models of manhood.

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## Notes

1. 'Art of Survival', November 2004, Special Assignment (SABC3).
2. '3 Talk', February 2005 (SABC 3).

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