Perspectives

Violent protests and gendered identities

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ABSTRACT

In post-apartheid South Africa there has been a proliferation of public protests occurring in various contexts. While public protests are common globally, in South Africa they appear to be uniquely characterised by extreme forms of violence. The current analysis of public protests suggests that the root causes of public protests are socio-economic and political. However, the role of gendered identities is missing in analyses of violence in public protests. In this perspective, we argue that violent public protests in post-apartheid South Africa are linked to gendered identities in their intersection with race, socio-economic status and social class. First, we contend that public protest violence is due to the gendered division of public and private spaces. In line with this, we claim that, public protests as public phenomena become masculinised such that women are represented as virtually absent or with insignificant contribution to public protests while men tend to be more visible, take the lead, and draw from hypermasculine practices in their approach. Second, we argue that public protests become violent due to the ongoing marginalisation of unemployed and working-class men, which tend to be race based in South Africa. Last, we argue that violence in public protests is due to protection of privilege status by hegemonic groups which invokes radical attempts for inclusion by protesters. This perspective concludes that there needs to be a shift, in both the media and the scholarship on men and masculinities, in how violence of men in public protest is viewed. Much of the work on violence in South Africa is often attributed to problematic aspects of masculinity, yet what is needed is a political project that seeks to dismantle the structure that produces inequalities and, in its resistance to change, provokes frustrations that escalate to violence among protesters.

Keywords: public protests, violence, gender identities, structure, South Africa

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CONTEXTUALISING PUBLIC PROTESTS

Public protests are a global phenomenon occurring in both developed and developing countries, albeit in varying proportions and intensities (Shah, 2011). In a number of commentaries and or opinion pieces, South Africa is dubbed the protest capital of the world (e.g. Rodrigues, 2010). Of concern in post-apartheid South Africa is that protests have become markedly characterised by use of extreme violence by protesters, as evidenced by the violence that erupted during the protest action in Sebokeng in August 2007 (Hough, 2008), and more recently, burning of schools and state property during community protests over municipal boundary demarcation in Vuwani (Kanyane et al., 2016). As was evident in the Marikana mineworkers' strike in 2012, intimidation, forced participation, display of dangerous weapons and killings are a common feature in public protests (Sorensen, 2012).

The reasons people engage in public protests vary by country and in different localities within countries. For example, in Argentina, between July and August 2001, approximately 100 000 people protested International Monetary Fund-related measures that they felt would lead to large pay cuts; in Papua New Guinea a weeklong protest in June 2001 was held against International Monetary Fund/World Bank austerity measures (Shah, 2011). In post-apartheid South Africa, disputes have commonly revolved around wages at workplaces (Hartford, 2012), service delivery in communities (Hough, 2008), and free, decolonised quality education at institutions of higher learning (Badat, 2016). In summary, available evidence suggests that the root causes of public protests tend to be socio-economic and political (see Shah, 2011).

With some exceptions (Langa & Kiguwa, 2013), the role of gendered identities is sorely missing in analyses of violence in public protests. In this *perspective,* we attempt to articulate how gendered identities (i.e. masculinities and femininities) are linked to violent public protests in post-apartheid South Africa.

PUBLIC/PRIVATE BINARY AND THE GENDER BINARY

Public protests may be violent because they are gendered as they often appear male dominated with regard to participation and leadership. For example, in media representations (Whittles, 2016), women are either almost absent, or marginally represented in mass protests. Even when women visibly participate in public protests, they tend to be represented as less vocal and radical in their demonstrations and appear to attract much less attention from the media than men (Naicker, 2015). Yet, while few, some studies (Naicker, 2015) have shown that women play significant roles in protest actions, but their contributions are frequently overshadowed by that of men, much like in other social and political struggles where women's contributions tend to be relegated to the margins of history. This rhetoric of

public protests may have created an impression of protests being something that only men do and therefore a masculine practice. At the same time, this misrepresentation of public protests as a masculine phenomenon probably stems from what Marxist-feminists identified as gendering of space, with public spaces and activities reserved for men (Connell, 1987; Walby, 1990).

Given that much of the public protest agenda involves engagement with stakeholders and/or state leaders in public institutions, it is not surprising then that men tend to or are made to be more visible and take the lead. Furthermore, considering that dominant masculinities are often framed as the opposite of femininity (Connell, 1987), it is unsurprising that we do not often see peaceful demonstrations and peaceful conflict resolution during public protests, which may be deemed feminine approaches. What we do often see during public protests are demonstrations of hypermasculinity–a kind of masculinity that values aggression, destruction, bravery, dominance, and devalues femininity. It has been argued that hypermasculinity accentuates power and force, is commonly enacted in masculinised contexts (i.e. where women are absent or invisibilised) (Herek, 1986), and commonly develops among socially marginalised men in low-income settings for whom other means of attaining power are not easily available (Gibbs, Jewkes, & Sikweyiya, 2017).

This public/private binary exposes the fundamental lack of progress with gender transformation in South Africa. This is particularly troubling when evident (e.g. in student protests) at institutions of higher learning, contexts where more progressive gender relations are expected as an outcome of exposure to the transformational agenda, intellectual augmentation and accelerated development of student's cognitive abilities (Garrison, 2001).

VIOLENT PROTESTS AND MASCULINITIES

Public protests may be violent due to the intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) of gendered identities of the men who tend to participate in them. Crenshaw (1991) notes that the intersectionality theory is particularly useful in highlighting and addressing differences within what are deemed collective identities. In many of the public protests, those involved tend to be black, unemployed, poor and working class men (Langa & Kiguwa, 2013).

Class and race are significant factors in the hierarchical gender arrangement, with working class, poor and unemployed black men often relegated to the lower end of the hierarchy (Connell, 1987, 1995). In South Africa the apartheid regime created a race-based class system that placed the majority of black men at the lower end of the class hierarchy (Ratele, 2008).

Protesters often occupy marginal masculinities as they often lack access to economic resources; and as such they are hindered from accessing the "traditional masculinity" that

is much valourised in many South African contexts (Gibbs, Sikweyiya, & Jewkes, 2014) and is characterised by establishing a family and being the main breadwinner, amongst other things (Mavungu, 2013). The societal expectation for men to meet the demands of being a provider has implications for the amount of pressure they may feel towards being unable to fulfil this provider role compared to women. In post-apartheid South Africa, black poor men's frustrations with their inability to provide for their families, dejection about the diminishing prospects of getting jobs, and being increasingly pushed to the margins of the society may be causing them to lash out violently to those around them (Ratele, 2013) and to the state in the context of public protests.

STRUCTURE AND MASCULINITIES

Violence in public protests may be due to the power-based structural arrangement of society. And we argue that public protests are thus the result of conscientisation of the marginalised group (Freire, 1970), by the intellectuals and or radical activists within the group, about issues of power in connection with repression and privilege. As Freire (1973) notes, such conscientisation creates awareness among the marginalised group that 'they will not gain the liberation by chance but through the praxis of their quest for it, through the recognition of the necessity to fight for it' (p. 45). In line with this, we argue that poor and marginalised black men in South Africa engage in protests having thought critically about their circumstances, reasoning that their situation is unnatural, their oppression and marginalization unjust, and thereby start to devise strategies for altering their situation (Freire, 1973). Inclusion in hegemonies, including that of class (Gramsci, 1971) and gender (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), is appealing as occupying a hegemonic position in society represents power, status and privilege (Stern & Buikema, 2013). Hegemonies are also difficult to dismantle because they (are made to) appear natural (Cerulo, 1997). Understandably then, black poor men who are marginalised by these hegemonies, as argued above, are likely to seek to be included in the hegemonic groups, the holders of power.

However, hegemonies by their virtue seek to exclude certain groups from attaining and sharing power (Gramsci, 1971) and, consequently, very little change is effected by protesters since their struggle against marginalisation seeks inclusion in the hegemonies that marginalise them. Rather than relent to the demands of the marginalised and protesting group, agents of hegemony resist change and engage in violence to maintain their power. This is evident in the brutal force the state security is increasingly using to subdue protesters (Farlam, Hemraj, & Tokota, 2015; Shah, 2011), a tactic likened to the apartheid government's response to mass protests for political liberation of black people in South Africa. Such a response, often identified as a strategy to protect the privilege of an

elite few in society by protesters, may persuade them to engage in more radical strategies, including violence, to further lobby for their inclusion into ruling classes and masculinities.

CONCLUSION

While the value of gender transformative interventions that seek to change men's violent behaviour and build gender equity cannot be negated as a possible strategy to curb violent protests in South Africa, we argue that it is regrettable that much of the work on violence in South Africa attributes violence to problematic aspects of masculinity. Such an approach puts the emphasis and burden for transformation on poor, unemployed and working class black men whom are themselves marginalised by both the class and gender orders. We argue that what is needed is a political project, spearheaded by civil society groups working in tandem with law-makers and political parties, that seeks to dismantle the structure that produces inequalities. As the structure is resistant to change, it is the very thing that provokes frustrations that escalate to violence among protesters.

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