

## **(Mis)Understanding Same-Sex Sexual Violence Amongst Boys: A Perspective on Recent Rape Incidents in South Africa**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Incidents of male–male sexual violence amongst young boys in South Africa have been brought into sharp focus by the media and, to a lesser extent, research, yet there continues to be very little research into this phenomenon in South Africa. In this perspective, evidence is presented of how the dearth of research has led to a limited appreciation of the associated risk factors and the socioeconomic circumstances under which male–male sexual violence amongst young boys occurs. It is possible to theorise that this neglect results from a gendered discourse which frames males and females as perpetrators and victims respectively, and disregards males as victims. Moreover, drawing on critical men and masculinities scholarship, the contention is made that this neglect also results from limited recognition that boys are gendered, that there are a multiplicity and hierarchy of masculinities amongst boys, with dominant masculinities sometimes employing physical and sexual violence to suppress and control subordinate and alternative masculinities. More research is urgently needed on boy–boy sexual violence in resource-poor communities in South Africa. Such work should be grounded in the critical men and masculinities framework. The findings from such research could inform the development of context-specific gender-transformative interventions for young adolescent boys, to prevent their construction of violent masculinities and the use of violence.*

**Keywords:** Same-sex sexual violence; Boys, Masculinities, South Africa

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## INTRODUCTION

Incidents of rape reported in South African mainstream media often generate strong condemnation from civil society, academics and gender-based violence (GBV) activists. Reports of such violence are often followed by opinion pieces from academics, columnists and GBV activists. While the media attention reinforces research and policy responses to sexual violence in some instances (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2019), the public outcry and condemnation usually dissipate within a short period (Gqola, 2015). Reports from the South African media suggest, however, that sexual violence is common amongst boys, both in community and institutionalised settings (Daniels, 2019; Dayimani & Maliti, 2019; Shange, 2018). Incidents recently reported on in the media often involve gang rape, and tend to occur amongst young adolescent boys, with the ages of the alleged victims and perpetrators ranging between 5 and 13 years, and 12 and 14 years, respectively (Daniels, 2019; Dayimani & Maliti, 2019; Shange, 2018). For instance, in one incident reported in 2018, a group of five young adolescent boys (aged 13–14) in the Free State called a schoolmate of similar age into a school toilet and gang-raped him (Shange, 2018). The boy who was victimised was told that ‘the boss is calling you’, while the ‘boss’ waited to one side for the victim to be brought to him. This incident demonstrates a hierarchy amongst boys: dominance through the use of sexual violence by a group of boys on another boy, as well as dominance of one boy (i.e., the ‘boss’) over other boys, with the former assuming a position of authority in a group (Collins, 2013; Gear & Ngubeni, 2002; Gould, 2015).

Critical South African scholarship on men and masculinities has complemented the work of the women’s movement on violence, making a notable contribution to both research and prevention work regarding violence against women and girls (VAWG) (Langa, 2020; Morrell & Clowes, 2017; Potgieter et al., 2017). The critical scholarship on men and masculinities has also expanded feminist work, by bringing a theoretical and empirical focus to male–male violence. Yet, within this field of research, notwithstanding its instrumental role in highlighting the gendered nature and high prevalence of male–male violence, male–male sexual violence has been neglected, particularly as it manifests itself amongst young adolescent boys.

In this article, the argument is made that same-sex sexual violence amongst young boys is neglected as a research focus in South Africa, followed by a theorisation about the reasons for this neglect. That is followed by a discussion of how such neglect has led to a poor understanding of the phenomenon.

## RESEARCH ON SEXUAL VIOLENCE AMONGST BOYS

South Africa boasts more than two decades of research that has informed our understanding of the causes, risk factors, and impact of sexual violence on women and girls (Jewkes & Abrahams, 2002; Machisa et al., 2011). This work, which is globally championed by women’s movements, is premised on oppressive gendered systems that award men power over women (Javaid, 2018; McLeod, 2007; Sivakumaran, 2005). These investigations have also been supported by the strongly feminist allied body of work located within critical scholarship on men and masculinities (Clowes, 2013; Langa, 2020; Shefer et al., 2015). The latter body of work, beyond its focus on male–female sexual violence, has highlighted male–male physical violence, and related injury and mortality as gendered and highly prevalent (Ratele, 2008; Van Niekerk et al., 2015). Even as male–male violence has received due attention in critical men and masculinities scholarship, sexual violence – particularly amongst boys – is relatively neglected in this field. Such work should be encouraged, and it should draw on, and build, gendered understandings of masculinities amongst young adolescent boys.

What little existing research there is on male–male sexual violence in South Africa, has mainly been conducted in correctional settings amongst adult men (Dissel, 1999; Gear, 2007; Gear & Ngubeni, 2002), with a few recent exceptions (Jewkes et al., 2006; Jina et al., 2020). The findings from research in male correctional settings suggest that forced sex in these environments can be used as a tool to establish and reinforce hierarchies of respect and discipline (Gear, 2007; Gear & Ngubeni, 2002; World Health Organization [WHO], 2002). Some mainstream media reports of sexual violence in school hostels corroborate the empirical findings on sexual violence in correctional settings, pointing to a reliance on violence (at times sexual in nature) to establish and maintain gender hierarchies in ‘male’ institutions (Collins, 2013).

Globally, there is general consensus in the sexual violence field that official statistics vastly under-represent the number of male rape victims. Furthermore, evidence suggests that male victims of sexual violence are less likely to report sexual assault to the authorities than female victims are (WHO, 2002). For instance, research by Ward et al. (2018), among adolescent girls and boys in South Africa, showed that, while the study participants experienced sexual violence at somewhat similar rates, boys were less likely to report such experiences than girls. The relatively lower rates of reporting on the part of boys do not entirely explain the much less focused attention that boy–boy sexual violence receives in the

research field. Rather, this neglect, to some extent, may be explained by the fact that male sexual victimisation is often overlooked in government policy documents such as the National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide (RSA, 2019), as are other forms of violence and victimisation, despite evidence that boys and men are over-represented in South African reports of brutal and often fatal male–male interpersonal violence (Ratele, 2008; Seedat et al., 2014; Van Niekerk et al., 2015).

## **SEXUAL VIOLENCE VICTIMISATION AMONGST BOYS**

Research into the exposure of boys (and men) to violence demonstrates that boys – particularly those who are black and poor – are vulnerable to violent victimisation at the hands of other boys (Langa et al., 2018; Van Niekerk et al., 2015). To conceptualise men as vulnerable is, however, counterintuitive in mainstream feminist and feminist-founded gender scholarship. While critical men and masculinities studies make an attempt to highlight black men’s vulnerability and the emotional costs of challenging hegemonic masculinity (Clowes, 2013; Ratele, 2013), acknowledging men as victims of violence remains a challenge from a mainstream feminist standpoint, given the feminist political premise of men as possessing power over women, and concerns about future male domination of the VAWG field (Jewkes et al., 2015). For example, the emergence of critical men and masculinities studies in South Africa drew some criticism for their focus on men, notably from McLeod (2007), who highlights the risk of (re)centering men and further marginalising women in feminist and other academic or scientific enquiry.

The apparent denial of men’s vulnerability to violence persists, even though progressive feminist and feminist-allied men and masculinities scholarship have strongly demonstrated that neither gender nor power is binary (Connell, 1987). The conceptualisation of gender as multiple has had a progressive impact on gender scholarship, including a recognition of the importance of context and other identities that intersect with gender and, in turn, influence gendered subjects’ societal positioning and access to power and privilege (Crenshaw, 1990). Yet, with some exceptions (Gear, 2007; Makama et al., 2019), this paradigm shift has not readily translated to an understanding of power differentials amongst boys and men. Even as critical men and masculinities studies point to men’s vulnerability, tensions regarding their vulnerability continue to rise and remain unresolved, possibly due to the historical response of men’s movements to feminism, which often both denied women’s oppression and men’s privileges, and/or claimed to be equally oppressed by patriarchy (Messner, 1998). Thus, recognising men’s vulnerability may be perceived as excusing their privilege, power and violence, indeed potentially turning feminist politics against itself (McLeod, 2007; Morrell, 2007). Yet, critical men and

masculinities scholars have argued that male violence against other men and boys is as much about masculinity as it is about other forms of power. As such, the denial of men's vulnerability in gender scholarship occurs at the expense of boys and men, who are largely and indiscriminately perceived to be perpetrators of violence in general, and of GBV in particular, with little consideration being given to their own experiences of sexual victimisation at the hands of other men (or women) (Sikweyiya & Jewkes, 2009). Sexually victimised boys are thus excluded and marginalised, as they form part of those categories of people whom society and gender scholarship render unrape-able – a group whose victimisation is not believed and is even questioned (Gqola, 2015).

## **PERPETRATION OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AMONGST BOYS**

At the core of the exclusion and neglect of studying male–male sexual violence is the complexity of power and privilege amongst poor black boys. Given their overwhelming representation in the perpetration of violence, socially and economically marginalised boys and men are readily demonised for acts of violence, with little recognition that they are often also victims of violence (Van Niekerk et al., 2015). Furthermore, there is little recognition that, due to the ongoing impact of apartheid, which has sustained socioeconomic disparities in South Africa, boys who are victims or perpetrators of sexual violence often live in communities and families with high rates of violence (Bhana, 2016). As such, young boys in socioeconomically deprived communities are vulnerable to frequent and long-term exposure to violence, with a high likelihood of being traumatised and desensitised by violent experiences, thereby increasing the likelihood that they will perpetrate various forms of violence, including sexual violence. While research both in South Africa and globally has established a strong association between childhood trauma – including experiencing physical, emotional and sexual abuse and neglect – and men's behavioural problems and violence perpetration later in life (Gibbs et al., 2018; Machisa et al., 2011; Shiva Kumar et al., 2017), little is known of this association among young boys. It is important to note, however, that the link between trauma and violence perpetration is complex, nuanced and gendered. Specifically, the fact that some groups (e.g., poor, black queer women) which are exposed to prolonged violence often do not act out violence in turn, as highlighted by Gqola (2015), demonstrates that gender norms significantly contribute to boys' and men's violence perpetration in response to being exposed to violence.

Research has also shown that boys learn to be violent as part of their quest to embody a respected masculinity (Collins, 2013; Hearn & Howson, 2019; Herek, 1986; Ricardo et al., 2011). Valourised masculinities in South Africa and globally often denounce tenderness, emotionality and caring – characteristics that are deemed to be feminine (Vandello & Bosson, 2013). Through various socialising

agents and institutions, boys are encouraged to be stoic, risk-taking and fearless – characteristics that are aligned with hypermasculinity (Gibbs et al., 2014). In their quest for a respected masculinity, boys and men engage in violence to protect their honour and/or to emphasise their power (Gibbs et al., 2014). While patriarchy is recognised as a powerful *system* of oppression (Walby, 1989), and masculinities and femininities as (often limiting) *ideologies* of ways of gendered being, the limited agency of boys within contexts that encourage hypermasculinity is often not accorded due consideration. For boys who live in contexts of deep poverty, where the more common ways of laying claim to masculinity (e.g. wealth) are often unattainable, the available means through which they can lay claim to masculinity are often limited to their bodies, including dominance through violence (Luyt & Foster, 2001; Pinnock, 2016; Ratele, 2008).

Scholars note that violence in schools and/or amongst children is often a reflection of the violence in the children's communities (Bhana, 2016; Pinheiro, 2006). Work on gender and sexuality amongst young children reveals that the gender hierarchies observed amongst adults, and often sustained through the use of violence, also find expression amongst young children (Bhana, 2016; Bhana & Mayeza, 2016; Langa, 2015). Young boys' expressions of dominant masculinities usually manifest as violence and homophobia (Bhana, 2016; Bhana & Mayeza, 2016; Langa, 2015), notwithstanding that masculinities are contested among them (Langa, 2010; 2020). Similar to constructions of masculinities amongst adult men, boys frequently protect what they deem 'real boyhood', by policing gendered behaviour amongst their peers and othering alternative masculine expressions, at times through violence. For instance, boys who express peaceable (as opposed to violent) masculinities are often subjected to bullying by other boys who perceive them as violating gender norms (Bhana, 2016). Moreover, labeling boys who express alternative masculinities is instrumental in the policing of gender amongst boys, which in turn suggests an awareness of sexualities and heteronormativity amongst young children. Children's awareness and othering of non-conforming sexualities is further demonstrated by one of Langa's (2020) participants in his ethnographic longitudinal work in Alexandra township. The participant, a young man who took part in the study from when he was a young adolescent boy, reported that his peers at school and in his community viewed him as gay and mistreated him because of this – an experience that contributed to him concealing his sexuality and actively attempting to conform to heterosexuality for much of his teenage years. The gender hierarchy amongst boys, and the use of violence against those perceived as violating gender norms, suggest that sexual violence can be used by some boys as another form of violence to police and control other boys.

## CONCLUSION

Recent incidents of sexual violence amongst young boys have called for researchers in South Africa to give due attention to this field of study. With the dearth of research on this phenomenon, current responses (e.g., the incarceration of young boys who perpetrate related violence) are not likely to be evidence based. As such, it is doubtful that such responses will transform young boys' violent behaviours; rather they may reproduce violent crime. More research on sexual violence amongst young boys is needed in South Africa, and it should be rooted in the critical men and masculinities framework as that will enable a recognition of power asymmetry, multiplicity and the hierarchy of masculinities amongst young boys. The findings of such research could be used to develop theory-driven and context-specific gender-transformative interventions for young adolescent boys, to prevent their construction of violent masculinities and inhibit the use of violence. This is a nascent area of work that requires greater investment.

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