

The Country we Want to Live in: Hate Crimes and Homophobia in the Lives of Black Lesbian South Africans

By N Mkhize, J Bennett, V Reddy, R Moletsane (eds). 2010. South Africa. HSRC Press. 66 pp. ISBN: 978-0-7969-2341-7.

The Country we Want to Live in: Hate Crimes and Homophobia in the Lives of Black Lesbian South Africans presents an important innovative perspective on violence committed against black lesbians in South Africa. Built on a round-table seminar hosted by the Human Sciences Research Council during the 2006 '16 Days of Activism' campaign for no violence against women and children, the book highlights violence against lesbians as a gender-based violence issue that warrants attention within this campaign.

Given the campaign's general heteronormative focus, the emphasis was to highlight why lesbian and gay matters are gendered issues, and is definitely a human rights concern. In spite of South Africa's constitutional protections founded on the ideology of equality, human dignity and freedom, discrimination remains in the Bill of Rights and violence based on gender and sexual orientation in the country remains out of control and widespread.

At the round-table the dominating themes ranged from covering concrete work around policy change to the demand of South Africans to re-imagine the meaning of citizenship so that lesbians, gay men and transgendered people were offered unequivocal access to security, rights, dignity and the opportunity to live their lives free of hatred, stigma and fear.

The book emphasises that violence against black lesbians precipitated by culturally sanctioned homophobia and hate speech often results in physical, mental and emotional harm inflicted on them by certain men in the community. Justifications for the continued marginalisation of lesbians (and gay men) in communities range from the ideology that homosexuality is un-African, to beliefs that lesbians and gays cannot be afforded the same constitutional protections and rights provided to the rest of society. These perceptions and attitudes that homosexuality should be criminalised emanates from various notions of what correct or proper gender behaviour is and what is not. This is in spite of the current legal climate in South Africa where the constitution guarantees protection of all citizens including gays and lesbians.

Throughout the book there are references to the critical literature, news reports, articles and statements made by participants of the round-table conference that align the issues to ongoing discussions. They address the activism surrounding the campaign to end violence against lesbians and offer recommendations that are recognised to be important for ongoing policy and advocacy development.

This book provides a reflection of a 2006 round-table discussion that addressed policy and identified possible strategies towards eliminating violence against lesbians. Furthermore, it offers an insight into the socio-political context of South Africa and the language used to speak about these issues and reflects views expressed by some of the people featured in this historic conversation. Participants recognised the toll taken on people's lives by the struggle against hate crimes suffered by black lesbians. Everyone acknowledged the fact that activists experience a very wide range of emotional and physical challenges and that psychological assault or trauma is part and parcel of fighting for a world in which people are not victims of hate. However, since the round-table of 2006, murders of black lesbians have increased, in spite of visible media coverage and advocacy responding to the crimes.

The Country we Want to Live in: Hate Crimes and Homophobia in the Lives of Black Lesbian South Africans does not offer a detailed analysis of the state of affairs concerning lesbian lives in South Africa, nor does it speak on behalf of lesbians. However, it relates to issues as they are interpreted through the lens of the round-table discussion.

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