

Manhood, violence and coercive sexualities in men's prisons: dynamics and consequences behind bars and beyond

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Over the last few years the CSVr in Johannesburg has conducted research on sexual violence in men's prisons. One striking feature of this work, which initially jolted my assumptions, has been the relative readiness of perpetrators of male same-sex rape in prison to report this violence to us as compared to the bashfulness of victims.

It's the context of the situation where perpetrators seem more willing to talk about their violence than victims - that I'll consider in this article, showing how it is actually well explained by the social place that sexual violence occupies in prison. This focus which has pertinence far beyond prison walls as well, sheds light on particular notions of gender and sexuality and their relations to violence.

The ways in which sexual violence in men's prisons is

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understood and lived is largely framed by dominant inmate culture - the behaviours and understandings considered normal in that context and which are upheld by those wielding most power. Sexual violence in prison is interwoven into the workings of dominant inmate culture, which in South Africa is strongly influenced by prison gangsterism. So for example, sexual violence is structured into gang hierarchies and features in the classification processes of new members into these hierarchies. But while it is so embedded in this culture, the many ways in which the culture normalizes this violence, simultaneously make it invisible.

One way in which this happens is that parties in the violence are conceptually disappeared. Male victims of prison sexual violence are no longer even acknowledged as men, but are commonly believed to have been turned into "women". In the words of one of our respondents,

"If ... sex [is done to you], ... you are now a woman ... There is nothing we can do ... and we don't care ... When [you] walk past people want to touch [you] or threaten to rape [you]."

Another aspect of this is that sexual violence is normalized through forced partnerings which are often referred to as prison "marriages". The majority of rape victims end up being taken as "wives" or "wyfies" in forced marriage relationships by the perpetrators, whom the dominant inmate culture identify as "men". In these forced marriages the wyfies (who have had the feminized identity imposed on them) are seen as the means to the "men's" sexual gratification and, in the vast majority of cases, "marriages" become the place of ongoing sexual abuse.

While “marriages” are abruptly and brutally brought about through rape, in more than a few ways they also mimic the dominant heterosexual marriages that we’re all familiar with in dominant heterosexual relations outside. This resemblance is regularly drawn on to legitimize them, with inmates saying things like, “But prison wives are treated just like women outside”. Ultimately “marriages” smooth over the anxiety-provoking issue of violence by disappearing its protagonists: they turn victims into “wives” and perpetrators into “men”.

In contrast, other powerful and prevalent discourses bring very specific unwanted attention on the victim, blaming him for what has happened to him and building the perception that rape is the victim’s fault and the perpetrator has done nothing wrong.

While in these ways, sexual violence is minimized and obscured at the same time that there’s a profound stigmatization of victims, in contrast other forms of violence in prison are seen as central to establishing identities that are desirable and validated in inmate culture. The meaning of “manhood” in prison relies on an ability both to use and withstand violence (along with qualities like manipulation skills and self-sufficiency.) Violence is so wrapped up with “manhood” that if someone who has been made into a “woman” wants to escape the abuse and be promoted to “manhood” he’ll have to commit violence to prove his worthiness.

This way in which different forms of violence function to establish different gendered identities strongly resonates with Whitehead’s (2005) analysis of masculinity and violence. He identifies two categories of violence employed by men (in contexts of “masculine anxiety”) to assert manhood amongst their peers. The first which relates to the reliance of the notion of prison

manhood on particular forms of violence, is violence that supports the masculinity of both men in that it’s seen as men fighting against each other (they’re viewed as “worthy rivals”). But the second, which regularly involves sexual humiliation, is violence which functions to exclude victims from the category “man”. To become victim of this sort of violence is seen as a signal that one is unworthy of a masculine status, turning him into a “non-man” (Whitehead, 2005, p411). Male rape in prison, seen as destroying the victims masculinity while endorsing that of the perpetrator, is clearly an example of such violence.



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In the fundamentally misogynist environment of the prison, the feminine status imposed on victims represents the demolition of respect and identity amongst peers. The notion that ‘real men’ cannot be raped – and that if they were real men they would have managed to fight off attackers is widespread in society generally. So there’s very minimal if any room in prevalent understandings of masculinity for experiences of victimization amongst men.

Regarding the official states of affairs, practices of the Department of Correctional Services (DCS), like the dominant inmate culture make prison rape invisible. Quite literally rape is disappeared in the prison records of violence where there’s no category of rape / sexual assault. So if someone is raped, this is captured under the general category of “assault”. The policies also do not state just what it is and what is not allowed regarding sex and sexual violence. This leads to much confusion and ultimately assists in keeping sexual violence hidden for not naming it for what it is – at the same time that it contributes to homophobia. DCS’s lack of services and capacity to deal with sexual violence mirrors this absence. The official systems then, like the inmate culture, provide no space for male rape victims.

It's also pertinent to consider an emerging discourse which tries to oppose these dominant currents. It's employed by some activists attempting to address the situation and to get recognition for victims of prison rape. In doing so they've highlighted the potential for male rape victims to themselves become violent in the future. So, 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 in attempt to regain their manhood.

But it's certainly not a given that aggression and violence follow sexual victimization - and in terms of how prison rape may generate future violence, it seems noteworthy that in these well-intentioned discourses, the victims are singled out as potential perpetrators while those doing the raping and coercing - the prison "men" - are ignored (that's not to say that they're not sometimes the same people). It is however perhaps more likely that prison "men" will, on release, continue their abusive ways and in relation to 'outside' women as well.

There is certainly strategic mileage in this approach where it draws much-needed attention to male rape victims, but this argument can itself be damaging. By foregrounding victims as future rapists, activists risk stigmatizing them further. They get seen not as victims or survivors but as dangerous potential perpetrators, with the implied message being that we should pay prison rape victims attention to stop them from violating others and not because they're worthy of our attention simply because they've been harmed and violated.

Unintentionally, this sort of message leaves male victims as few options as they are offered by the brutal notions of "masculinity" which have such a hold on the inmate culture. These notions make recognition and respect conditional on a capacity for violence - and

the activist discourse ends up doing the same thing by saying the reason we need to pay them attention is the danger that they'll become violent. The vulnerability of men is an area that society apparently refuses to acknowledge unless we feel frightened by what our ongoing disregard may bring. Therefore, certain attempts to start addressing male vulnerability end up uncritically assuming automatic links between men and violence - and run the risk of endorsing the very beliefs we seek to debunk.



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Prison represents a key socializing institution in South Africa like in many other countries with scores of our young men entering as well as exiting it everyday. The impact of prison experiences on those experiencing them is suggested in the findings of a survey we conducted in a youth correctional facility (Gear 2007). We asked the young men about different kinds of processes that they'd been through that they felt had turned them from boys into men. The emphasis was on their feelings, and they were told to include formal and informal processes, as well socially acceptable and frowned-upon processes where relevant. We found that as they'd spent longer in prison, processes that had taken place during their incarcerations became more and more of a feature. The periods of imprisonment were however relatively short. For example, amongst those who'd served 2 - 3 years of their sentences, 52

% had participated in processes inside prison which they felt had turned them from a boy into a man. At the same time, manhood processes taking place inside prison were having an impact even soon after inmates' arrivals - so they didn't have to be there long to have these formative experiences. Similarly, we found that they'd gotten much of what they knew about sex from their in-prison experiences.

Clearly prison experiences play a critical role in these

young inmates' sense of themselves as well as in their approaches to sexuality and gender.

Deeply destructive notions of what it means to be a "man" are entrenched in prison and include ones that see victims of prison sexual violence going unrecognized or receiving only stigmatized and humiliating attention while perpetrators go unchallenged and even garner respect as a result. But while these harmful ideas about manhood may be particularly exaggerated in prison, the discourses that support them are powerful outside prison as well. They are also the same ones feeding South Africa's extreme levels of gender based violence more broadly, solutions to which are only going to come about with the celebration of alternative ideas of manhood that do not link respect with violence. Fundamentally alternative notions of masculinity need also to acknowledge male vulnerability. These are two sides of the same masculinity coin.

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