



# “We face rape. We face all things”: Understandings of gender-based violence amongst female students at a South African university

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## ABSTRACT

*This study explores how female residence students at a South African university understand and experience gender-based violence. This article examines how women's identities and social interactions are affected by the presence of gender-based violence in their communities, and specifically the issue of violence in higher education institutions. Social constructionist theory framed this study as it focuses on how these women's 'talk' constructed their understanding of gender-based violence. Unstructured interviews were conducted with 12 female residence students and discourse analysis was used to analyse the interview material. Findings revealed that the fear of becoming a victim of gender-based violence serves to constrict the daily activities of these women. This research maps these ongoing discourses of fear which are present in all aspects of women's lives. It provides a formal articulation of women's experiences that are significant but frequently marginalised and normalised, showing the pervasive effects of fear of gender-based violence on identity and social life. The study contributes towards a growing body of knowledge surrounding the impact of gender-based violence at higher education institutions and works towards protecting students.*

**Keywords:** *Gender-based violence; South Africa; women; students; higher education; fear*

## INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence is prevalent in South Africa and this country has been labelled the 'rape capital' of the world (Human Rights Watch, 2010). In 2012, 55 201 rapes were reported to the police; however, this statistic needs to be viewed in terms of the gross underreporting

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of rapes in this country (Institute for Security Studies, 2012). The South African Police Service estimates that only one in thirty-six rapes are reported (Vetten, 2000). Research reveals that 30% of women in South Africa indicate that their first 'sexual' encounters were forced (Buga, Amoko, & Ncayiyana, 1996; Jewkes, Vundule, Maforah, & Jordaan, 2001; Richter, 1996). In South Africa it is estimated that one in four women are abused by their partners and a higher proportion of women are murdered by their partners than anywhere else in the world (Abrahams, Jewkes, Laubscher, & Hoffman, 2006; Abrahams et al., 2009; Van Rensburg, 2007). Approximately half of all South African women murdered in 1999 were murdered by their intimate partner, and it is estimated that a woman is killed by her intimate partner every six hours (Mathews et al., 2004). Furthermore, the overall rate of female homicide (24.7 for every 100 000) in South Africa is six times higher than the global average (Abrahams et al., 2009).

South African feminist researchers such as Dosekun (2013), Du Toit (2005) and Gqola (2007) explore women's experiences of fear surrounding gender-based violence, highlighting how this fear can constrain women's daily activities and behaviours. Du Toit (2005) argues that the prevalence of rape in South Africa undermines the citizenship of women, relegating them to second class citizens. Moffet (2006, p. 140) extends this argument by stating that men that resort to sexual violence are part of "a socially approved project to keep women within certain boundaries and categories". While some high-profile incidents receive significant media attention and social outrage, the overwhelming majority of acts of gender-based violence remain shrouded in silence. Underreporting of gender-based violence is also fuelled by not only a lack of trust in the criminal justice system, but also systemic fear in South Africa (Knox & Monaghan, 2003). Du Toit (2005, p. 260) argues that women are being raped on a "large and seemingly uncontrollable scale" in South Africa and authorities seem unable to adequately respond to the situation. This translates into "pervasive fear, systemic (contagious) humiliation and incapacitation" for South African women (Du Toit, 2005, p. 260). The prevalence of violence against women in South Africa and the inadequacy of authorities to respond has created a culture of fear amongst women in which gender-based violence is normalised. On a societal level this threat of violence maintains unequal power relations and as Corradi, Weiss Fagan and Garretón (1992, p. 2) argue, this social fear becomes "the permanent and muffled undertone of life". This article reveals the permeating effect of this social fear and how it serves as a political tool to control all women.

## **DATING RELATIONSHIPS: SEXUAL COERCION AND VIOLENCE**

South Africa is characterised by high levels of gender-based violence and its tertiary education institutions are not exempt from this violence or gender inequalities. Shefer,

Clowes and Vergnani (2012) conducted a study which explored the narratives of transactional sex amongst male and female students at a university in South Africa. Female university students reported having sexual relationships with older men or ‘sugar daddies’ so they could pay for photocopies or fees, and even gain a level of social status amongst their peers (Shefer et al., 2012). This study also highlighted how coercive sexual practices are endemic in intimate heterosexual relationships. Aggression and violence were found to be common in these relationships. Similarly the study of Clowes, Shefer, Fouten, Vergnani and Jacobs (2009) amongst male and female students at the University of the Western Cape found that coercive and unequal practices are reportedly common in heterosexual relationships. Varga’s study (2004, p. 164) reveals how young men and women from urban and rural townships in KwaZulu-Natal construct forced sex as normal and even describe it as “a custom and a norm in our community”. Research also indicates that young South African women often model their relationships around female vulnerability and male dominance (Bhana & Anderson, 2013). This normalisation of gender-based violence is indicative of the transactional and male-dominated nature of many heterosexual dating relationships, which are also marked by stark gender inequalities.

## **THIS STUDY**

This research study was conducted in 2009 amongst female residence students at a major metropolitan university in KwaZulu-Natal, and explored how these students understood and experienced gender-based violence. Gender-based violence emerged as a prominent challenge at this university as increasing media reports and public concern over this issue grew (MacKay & Magwaza, 2008; Tolsi, 2007). In 2007 a highly publicised incident took place in which a foreign exchange student from the United States was raped in one of the university residences. This drew attention to the problem of gender-based violence at the university, which resulted in the emergence of various gender-based violence activist groups and the temporary expansion of the university security budget. A safety review, commissioned by the university to investigate the problem of gender-based violence in residences, argued that “if we simply assume that this university follows international trends, as many of 2 000 of our students are being sexually assaulted annually – more than 10 for every single day of the academic year” (MacKay & Magwaza, 2008, p. 4). However, these security measures do not appear to have been effective as reports of gender-based violence continue to grow at this university. This study explores how women are affected by living in a space where gender-based violence is reportedly prevalent. It explores how women’s identities and social interactions are affected by the presence of gender-based violence in their wider communities and more specifically in their educational institutions.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As outlined above, this research explored how a group of young female residence students at the university understood and experienced the issue of gender-based violence. The research focused particularly on participants' discursive constructions of gender-based violence and how they located themselves within such discourses when discussing the fear and threat of this violence. This research focused on female residence students, not only because of increasing media reports and attention regarding gender-based violence in university residences (MacKay & Magwaza, 2008; Tolsi, 2007), but also because these women are part of a society which has the highest prevalence rate of gender-based violence in the world (Human Rights Watch, 2010).

Participants were identified using snowball sampling, and unstructured interviews were conducted with 12 young female residence students. A defining feature of this research was that participants did not need to have personally experienced a sexual or gender-related assault to participate in this research. An announcement was made in an undergraduate Psychology lecture regarding this study and the researcher asked whether any young women would be interested in being interviewed about their experiences of living in university residence. The researcher then contacted the women that volunteered to participate and existing participants referred the researcher to other women that would be interested in participating in the study. Participants were drawn from all levels of study (undergraduate and postgraduate) and were from a range of different university residences. All of the participants were black African and ages ranged from 19 to 23 years old. Ten of the women were South African whilst two were non-South African nationals from Zimbabwe and Botswana.

Informed consent was obtained before interviews were conducted and participation was emphasised as voluntary. Participants were asked "What problems do you and other women face living in residence?" The interviewer probed into a wide range of issues related to their gendered experiences of living on campus including fear, personal safety, whether gender-based violence was relevant in their daily lives and how women negotiated sexual boundaries in relationships given the widespread problem of sexual coercion. Participants were interviewed in private interview rooms in the Psychology Department of the university and all interviews were conducted in English. Participants were only interviewed once and each interview was approximately an hour to an hour and a half long.

Social constructionist theory was used to frame this qualitative study. Social constructionism seeks to analyse how signs and images have powers to create particular representations of people and objects that underlie our experiences of these people and objects, placing

language and its discursive ability to create multiple realities as the object of study (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). Discourse analysis (Parker, 1992; Willig, 1999) was used to analyse the interview texts. Discourse analysis explores the way individuals use coherent systems of meaning to create particular versions of reality and how individuals position themselves in relation to these versions of reality (Burr, 1995). Parker (1992, p. 6) refers to a discourse as “a system of statements that construct an object”. This research focused on the “identification of discursive constructions” (e.g. sexual safety, fear, gender-based violence) and the “subject positions contained within them” (Willig, 1999, p. 113). Emphasis was placed on exploring the power relations that these discourses produced by “looking at the kind of people who would gain or lose from the employment of this discourse” (Parker, 1992, p. 18). Furthermore, by analysing discourses we are able to achieve a liberatory effect in which we can identify alternatives to ‘what is’ and make recommendations for change (Willig, 1998). Focus was also placed on how these discourses are disseminated in society and become widely accepted as ‘taken-for-granted-knowledge’. The popularity of particular discourses is not accidental or coincidental, but embedded in power relations and personal motivations. As Hollway (1984, p. 238) argues, individuals are not just ‘accidentally’ positioned in particular discourses but derive “some satisfaction or pay-off or reward” from their positioning.

## RESULTS

### DISCOURSE OF FEAR

The research showed that although most women in the study claimed they were not affected by gender-based violence, analysis of their talk suggested otherwise. Most participants framed their everyday experiences and choices within a discourse of fear, in which they spoke about anticipating gender-based violence. Participants constructed gender-based violence as inevitable, and engaged in a ‘waiting game’ as they anticipated the danger they believed that men often represent. One woman, Lebo, who had lived in residence for two years, spoke about this waiting game:

You never know what may happen. Sometimes you hear cases of rape. So and so has been raped or so and so has been robbed of something or anything of the sort then you, you then start to wonder what may happen to you in the days to come or the few months to come.

Women positioned themselves in this waiting game in which they felt it was inevitable that they would become victims. One of the other participants, Zandile, voiced the fear and anxiety attached to living in a space where violence appears almost chronic:

What if something happens? What if someone comes into my room at night and rapes me? No one will hear. That's what makes me feel scared.

Despite discourse surrounding the dangers of public spaces, even typically 'safe' spaces, such as university residences, were not perceived as safe by the women in this study. Gender-based violence was referred to as the possibility that 'something' may happen. The absence of the term 'violence' in these accounts is interesting as it highlights how gender-based violence is normalised within the lives of these women, and while they feared the specific assaults, they did not conceptualise these as instances of a systemic organisation of gender power and inequality. The absence of this term could also represent a coping strategy because of the fear and anxiety associated with labelling particular behaviour as violence.

### **DISCOURSE OF WOMEN'S RESPONSIBILITY**

The anxiety experienced by the women in the study appeared to produce a discourse in which women positioned themselves as implicated in gender-based violence. Participants spoke about how they were responsible for avoiding gender-based violence. This discourse constructs women as responsible for gender-based violence and suggests that they are expected to develop and follow precautionary strategies. The women in the study articulated rules that would prevent 'something' from happening. They began to build precautionary strategies to shield themselves from this feared victimisation (Stanko & Radford, 1996). Miller (1997, p. 150) argues that women live their lives according to a "rape schedule", in which their behaviour is constantly shaped by the fear of being raped. Women constructed rules such as: do not wear short skirts; do not flirt with men; do not drink with men and do not walk alone at night. Women are expected to change their behaviour to avoid violence, such as changing what kind of clothes they wear, their movements and who they interact with (Stanko, 1996). Women who broke these rules were considered by participants to be responsible for the violence directed against them.

Rules such as 'don't drink alcohol with men' were positioned by participants as part of these precautionary strategies to avoid gender-based violence. One of the women in the study, Lebo, suggested that refraining from alcohol can reduce gender-based violence:

Well what you may do is refrain from alcohol because sometimes you find that, for example last year in the residence where I was staying there was a girl who was raped after they had been consuming alcohol. This bunch of guys. So maybe refrain from drinking alcohol with guys.

This participant is suggesting that the woman in her story was raped because she drank alcohol with a group of men. She describes the victim as participating in behaviour that broke the rules, and as a result the victim is seen as responsible for provoking her own attack. One of the other women in the study, Faith, also demonstrates the use of this discourse in the excerpt below. She frames her response in a victim-blaming discourse, holding the victim, a friend of hers, responsible for entering into the space of the attacker.

Why were you there in the first place? I'm not saying that it's right that they actually doing that but it makes it even more difficult that you actually went there with this guy and he did that.

The participant states that the woman in question purposely chose to associate with this man despite the known risks, situating her in the myth of the willing victim or the 'responsible' victim. However, this particular participant is discussing an incident of domestic violence between her friend and her friend's boyfriend. Her friend went to the boyfriend's university residence room and he physically assaulted her. The idea that a woman should refrain from entering her boyfriend's university residence room because he might assault her seems to place unreasonable limits on the social interactions of one gender. However, this participant normalises this situation and casts this behaviour as responsible for provoking the attack.

These excerpts operate on the belief that a woman can successfully avoid gender-based violence, and that women who cannot or who choose not to avoid such situations are to blame. The women in the study spoke about how they were responsible for avoiding violence, and as a result positioned themselves within a victim-blaming discourse in which it was the responsibility of women to avoid assaults rather than the responsibility of men not to attack them. This discourse provides a false sense of security because it allows women to believe that if they just follow the required rules, they can avoid gender-based violence. However, this restriction of self becomes oppressive in a way that Campbell (2002, p. 49) foregrounds when she states that "victims don't cause rape; rapists cause rape". One would not advise people to avoid driving because they may encounter drunk drivers, but it is taken for granted that women should be responsible for avoiding sexual violence (Feltey, 2004). Gqola (2007, p. 121) recognises this paradox and argues that in South Africa women are told: "you better make yourself seem safe in order to be safe – stay at home, participate in the cult of femininity, give in to unwanted sexual advances, surrender many choices, make yourselves as small, quiet and invisible as possible".

One woman, Ayanda, spoke about her conscious strategies to avoid gender-based violence.

Interviewer: What things do you do?

Ayanda: I'm very mean.

Interviewer: How you mean?

Ayanda: I don't smile a lot. I like to think I'm intimidating.

This poignant exchange is illustrative of the defence strategies that women construct to protect themselves, and that the fear of gender-based violence can change how we live our lives. The simple act of smiling is compromised because of the fear that it may open the way for social interactions that will end in violence. Stanko and Radford (1996) argue that women's anxieties around the potential dangers of heterosexual interactions have become part of their daily lives, which they factor into every encounter. Every encounter for a woman is fraught with potentialities for violence, which she is expected to protect herself from. Women's everyday activities become saturated with these 'rape schedules', until these imposed limitations come to function as habits and conventions that are seen as normal and natural.

This discourse of women's responsibility is riddled with internal contradictions because although it provides a veil of security, it also reinforces a victim-blaming discourse, normalises gender-based violence and creates conditions in which women feel unable to speak out. Investing in a discourse of women's responsibility and as a result an implicit victim-blaming discourse rationalises and excuses gender-based violence. The investment in these discourses frees men from the responsibility for gender-based violence and prevents both women and men from understanding it as a systemic social problem arising from inequality and collectively mobilising against it. The widespread availability of and investment in these discourses conceal the gender inequalities and social power relations that contribute to the continuation of gender-based violence. As Foucault (1976, p. 86) argues, "power is tolerable only on condition that it masks a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms". It is in this sense that normalised self-policing to 'avoid' vulnerability to sexual assault hides patriarchal power and masculine sexual entitlement, and legitimises the limitations to social freedom placed on the potential victims rather than the potential perpetrators.

## DISCOURSE OF SPEAKING AND SILENCE

The act of telling one's story of gender-based violence can be both cathartic and empowering; however, the silence surrounding gender-based violence continues to be widespread in South Africa despite media coverage of some incidents. Participants reveal the importance of speaking out and reporting incidences that occur in university residences. However, this speaking out is constrained by their distrust of university services, the reported lack of support from university security guards, and the idea that sexuality is a private and personal matter that should not be articulated in public, and that the female sexual experience is shameful, even when it is not chosen.

The women in the study spoke about the silence surrounding gender-based violence and how it is not acceptable to speak about such violence. They often declined to use the term 'violence' and instead referred to this violence in their talk as "it". This absence of referral and hesitation to label particular behaviour as violence demonstrates the ingrained silence surrounding gender-based violence. This can be seen in the excerpt of one of the participants, Mathi, below:

I've never seen anyone who said "It has happened to me" not that they would. People don't say things.

Another participant, Phumla, spoke about the socially validated silence attached to gender-based violence:

Because we recognise that if something happens to you, you can't actually ... you don't have a voice when something happens to you.

She speaks about how, when a woman is a victim of gender-based violence, her voice is taken from her, rendering her powerless. This refers to a culture in which women's voices and experiences are not validated. The sexual and intimate experiences of women, in particular the uneasiness and distressing emotions attached to sexually coercive experiences, are often marginalised because of the taboos related to these issues. However, they are actively taboo because discussing these experiences would mean questioning the potentialities for danger in heterosexual interactions and ultimately challenging the current social order. This silence and social invalidation serves to create a culture which supports and normalises the violence perpetrated against women. This helps maintain the gender inequalities present in our society.

One woman, Amanda, who had lived in residence for one year, spoke about how she was sexually assaulted by another male student in her room.

But from that day I realised that oh my word you think you know someone then something like that happens. So what if he raped me? You know? Nobody would have really believed me.

Later she spoke about her desire to tell others about her attack. She spoke about her desire to disclose the incident and let her perpetrator know that what he did was wrong and how it hurt her. The desire for others to acknowledge and recognise a woman's experience of sexual assault is vital as it helps her to validate the trauma of her experience and to reassert the autonomy and dignity that she was deprived of by the experience.

I've tried to make it clear that what you [he] did was not right. I don't like him anymore. I don't want us to be friends. That's what I tried to do and also talk about it. I like to talk about it. I want people to know that this happened.

She speaks about how he did apologise, but he did not acknowledge the enormity of the pain he caused her.

He tried to make it sound like it wasn't so bad and he did apologise but I felt that for what he said he didn't acknowledge that it was a problem.

The tension between this woman's desire to articulate her traumatic experience and the social invalidation she felt when she did is indicative of a culture which systematically normalises and tolerates gender-based violence. The social invalidation that women receive when they disclose their experiences of gender-based violence creates a cycle of underreporting and sends the message that women's experiences and identities are not valued. When society treats women as if they have less right to dignity, autonomy and well-being than human beings in general, this has negative implications for how women see themselves and are able to exist in the world (Du Toit, 2005). Society treats women as less than fully human when it tolerates gender-based violence, when women feel they are unable to speak out against this violence and when the social invalidation of women's traumatic experiences becomes the norm. This creates a 'crisis of social trust' and reveals an oppressive relationship between women and the society they live in.

The discourses emerging in this study: the discourse of fear, the discourse of women's responsibility, and the speaking and silence discourse, reveal how gender-based violence and the fear surrounding it is used to control women. What is more striking, though, is that

these findings show how women make themselves accountable for the violence perpetuated against them. As a result of this 'accountability', women tend to keep the problem of gender-based violence behind closed doors, which perpetuates the silence surrounding it.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings that emerged from the analysis highlighted the challenges that these women face: their fear surrounding gender-based violence, the tension between formal and informal reports of gender-based violence at the university and the silence surrounding this violence. The women in the study positioned themselves within particular discourses, and their investment in these discourses appeared to help them defend against the fear surrounding gender-based violence. However, these discourses also served to uphold gender inequalities and power relations that facilitate a society supportive of gender-based violence.

Participants' accounts show how the fear of gender-based violence is constructed as normal and a taken-for-granted aspect of a woman's life. As Gqola (2007, p. 118) states when she speaks about the problem of gender-based violence in South Africa: "Gender based violence is very ordinary: it is everywhere, commonplace, made to seem normal." It appears that the fear and anxiety surrounding gender-based violence are central to the identity of the women in this study, as this violence represents an ever-present danger they are expected to tolerate and manage. This finding is also similar to Dosekun's research (2007, p. 98) which revealed that all of the 15 female university students and employees that she interviewed were affected by the prevalence of rape in South Africa and that this fear of rape was "a possibility they factor into their daily decisions, movements and interactions". As a result of this fear and anxiety, the women in the study constructed 'rules' to protect them against becoming victims of violence. These findings reveal that victims of gender-based violence are blamed as they are assumed to have broken one of the many unspoken rules inherent in the precautionary strategies. Women are criticised for violating these 'rules' and even more importantly, they are not only perceived to be responsible, but they accept that responsibility willingly. None of the women in the study questioned why they were expected to perform these particular behaviours and adhere to these 'rules'. By assuming this responsibility women become part of the very mechanisms that reproduce and sustain gender inequalities and ultimately gender-based violence. This leads to two very important questions: "Why do women do this?" and "How can social institutions like universities help break these patterns?"

Notwithstanding these discourses of women's responsibility and how they reproduce a victim-blaming context and serve to legitimise women's imperative to engage in precautionary strategies, women also spoke about their frustrations surrounding gender-based violence. The study revealed that women did not feel that their voices were being heard in South Africa and their university, and felt marginalised and disempowered as a result. The women in the study distrusted university services and as a result rarely reported incidences. De Klerk, Klazinga and McNeil (2007) also found similar findings regarding the underreporting of gender-based violence at Rhodes University due to students' distrust of university services. The discourses of women's responsibility appear to provide a veil of security to the women in this study, but they also serve to uphold the gender inequalities and hegemonic power relations present in our society. While 'rape schedules' may provide some reduced risk, and reporting may increase humiliation and retaliation for the particular individual, they maintain a social system which puts all women at risk of assault, and all survivors of gender-based violence at even more risk of victim blaming at precisely the points at which they are most vulnerable and in need of support and understanding.

## CONCLUSION

One of the women in this study spoke about the challenges that she faced as a woman. She said: "*We face rape. We face all things.*" This statement is illustrative of how the experiences of fear and anticipation of gender-based violence appear to be interconnected with womanhood (Stanko, 1997). For a woman, her body becomes a site of struggle, a place upon which identity is negotiated. South Africa has some of the highest rates of gender-based violence in the world and the implications of this in the lives of women are extremely significant (Abrahams et al., 2006; Abrahams et al., 2009; Human Rights Watch, 2010; Mathews et al., 2004). This study has revealed a number of discourses that act to normalise, legitimise and excuse gender-based violence on campus that women themselves actively draw on in their understanding of gender-based violence. Thus the discourses of a culture of fear, of women's responsibility and the silences surrounding gender-based violence also serve to undermine women's safety on campus. This research reveals how women's lives are structured by the fear of gender-based violence, and are changed as a result. The need for others to acknowledge their experiences is indicative of the importance of breaking the silence surrounding gender-based violence. Further research needs to be conducted in South Africa in the area of gender-based violence, particularly as it is manifested at institutions of higher education as emerges in this study, and its effects on women's experiences of safety and freedom. Not only could this contribute to identifying this violence and how to reduce it, but also to changing the way it is understood. This would allow us to move beyond placing responsibility on those at risk of gender-based violence, and instead to focus on dismantling the social relationships and inequalities of power that allow gender-based violence to exist in South African society.

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