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A Brutal Education

This entry was posted on June 1, 2011 by Jen Thorpe, in Current Affairs, LAW, SEX AND SEXUALITY and tagged corrective rape, Deva Lee, fear, government, heterosexuality, lesbians, masculinity, patriarchy, rape, safety, South Africa, townships, women. Bookmark the permalink. 5 Comments

By Deva Lee (<http://feministssa.com/our-contributors/>)

The recent spotlighting of **corrective rape** in the media has made it internationally known that South African townships are a space where **laws fail to infiltrate**.

(<http://feministssa.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/pull-quote-deva-lee1.gif>) The recent spotlighting of corrective rape in the media has made it internationally known that South African townships are a space where laws fail to infiltrate. Despite a progressive constitution which promotes equal rights for all, for many lesbian women living in townships, South Africa is little different than other countries on our continent. Human Rights Watch is regarding the recent surge as “corrective rape”, referring to the rape of lesbians by heterosexual men, who believe they are ‘correcting’ or educating these women, and so curing them of their “abnormal” and “inhuman” sexuality. This is a phenomenon currently regarded as unique to our country, as an epidemic (<http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2011/05/02/south-africa-no-arrests-lesbian-murder-case/>).

Four corrective rapes between March and May this year have called attention to the crisis, namely the attacks on Nokuthula Radebe, Noxolo Nogwaza, Nqobile Khumalo and an unnamed 13 year old girl. Only the last of these women survived. At least 31 South African lesbians have been killed because of their sexuality in the past decade (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/may/09/lesbian-corrective-rape-south-africa>),

including Zoliswa Nkonyana and Eudy Simelane – a midfielder for Banyana Banyana, our national women’s soccer team.

Some of the men living in these townships have said that lesbianism seems to be a new trend (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/video/2009/mar/12/south-africa-corrective-rape>) that they do not appreciate. Since we can assume that lesbians have lived in our townships for as long as the townships themselves have existed, it is more likely that these women have begun publicly expressing their sexuality by dating other women and, in the cases of the brave few, showing public affection. This has been met with a violent response.

While the law protects lesbians, a cultural obstacle deters these women from expressing their sexuality: social dynamics in our townships are still forcibly patriarchal. It has become clear that the perpetrators of corrective rape are both threatened and intimidated by a relationship in which they are not dominant. In particular, and for me this is the most tragic aspect of the crisis, activists like Simelane and Nogwaza are targeted.

These attacks are a reaction to a social situation in which these men feel powerless – something which they are not accustomed to, nor are they willing to accept. The act is therefore intended to be as punitive as it is ‘corrective’: lesbians are punished with rape, violence and, in many cases, death. Ironically, these women are being punished for attempting to take advantage of their Constitutional Rights (<http://www.info.gov.za/documents/constitution/1996/96cons2.htm#12>).

In response to activism from local NGOs and online petitions the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Development set up a national task team in May 2011. The team is said to include six government representatives from the judiciary, SAPS and Social Development and six representatives of the LGBTI community. The proposed strategies include the amendment of the Sexual Offences Act to account for sexual orientation as an aggravating factor, which should lead to heavier sentences. After the rape of an adolescent lesbian in Pretoria, the National Youth Development Agency and ANC Women’s League (<http://mg.co.za/article/2011-05-11-all-south-africans-must-act-against-corrective-rape>) added their names to the list of organisations calling for these attacks to be classified as ‘hate crimes’. As it stands, the Equality Act prohibits crimes against persons of a specific group, or ‘hate crimes’, detailing discrimination based on race, gender or disability. Organisations are calling for this Act to detail specifically the discrimination based on sexual orientation. Cases involving homophobic attacks, including corrective rape, can then be brought before the Equality Court.

In order to really tackle the issue in the short-term, the state’s response to these crimes needs to be two-fold:

1. **As a preventative measure, townships need to be made safer.**

Relying on public transport is often an instigating factor in these attacks, since women are forced to travel alone at night. Introducing street lights in darker areas may deter attacks in some cases. In addition, the availability of indoor toilets would also minimise the time that women spend alone at night.

2. Once arrests have been made, swift convictions are essential.

(<http://feministssa.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/pull-quote-2-devalee.gif>) With less than 1% (<http://www.channel4.com/programmes/dispatches/articles/south-africa-rape-facts>) of rapes ending in a conviction, those who survive and report corrective rape are not guaranteed safety. For instance, the case against the nine men accused of the corrective rape and murder Zoliswa Nkonyana in 2006 has been postponed more than 30 times. In response to cases like this, the One in Nine Campaign (<http://www.oneinnine.org.za/>), who support women who report gender-based violence, maintain that “justice delayed is justice denied” and continue to put pressure on government to address rape cases speedily. In more than a decade, *only two cases of corrective rape have resulted in a conviction*, including the sentencing of a man to 15 years in prison for the corrective rape and murder of Nqobile Khumalo on May 26th 2011.

Unless immediate action is taken, it is evident that lesbians living in South African townships, and LGBTI activists in particular, are at risk. As Ndumie Funda of the NGO Luleki Sizwe (www.lulekisizwe.com) told the Mail and Guardian (<http://mg.co.za/article/2011-05-06-people-are-dying-as-we-speak>) earlier this month, “People are dying as we speak”.

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5 thoughts on “A Brutal Education”

1. Roane says:

June 1, 2011 at 7:52 am

The situation in South Africa is a sad one. We know that the issue of violence and sexual assault against women and children is a major issue, but the justice system is drowned under a swell of crimes, trials and postponements. What we really need is something similar to the crime courts they had during the World Cup, where these issues were dealt with swiftly.

However, another major problem we face in South Africa – and internationally – regarding sexual crimes is the victimisation of the perpetrator: the rapist is made out to be someone who couldn’t help themselves, and the victim is made out to be the one at fault. I believe that one of the most important actions that needs to take place is education – only when people are educated about the realities of the world will these problems (hopefully) disappear. But with the state of our education system the way it is, my hope is not too high.

Reply

2. mudkipzo says:

June 1, 2011 at 9:17 am

Deva, as always you remain beautifully eloquent.

I can rarely express my frustration with corrective rape adequately, and how we deal with it. I think part of it is making men partners in the journey, as hopefully they can influence each other. The more allies the better, I feel.

No one should have to leave their home feeling unsafe, and there should be better security. But there also has to be a better attitude coming from the top down. The president is a polygamist, for chrissake. This is not a good lookout for women’s rights.

But keep blogging, because we need to keep speaking. When we give up, they win, after all

Reply

3. Pingback: Us Uppity Bitches « The Paper Ninja

4. Brad Lee says:

June 1, 2011 at 10:44 am

Great article Dee, I have two things to say. While I agree that this kind of attack should accrue the status of a “Hate” crime in addition to rape and murder, I think it is sad that it is necessary to do this. Rape, committed by a person of any gender, should be severely punished, regardless of the gender of the attacker. I don’t believe the crime of rape, corrective or otherwise, is taken seriously enough, by society in this country. When one reads the statistic that one in four men in SA has forcibly had sex with a woman, you realise how unevolved the South African male is. While I find corrective rape particularly abhorrent, the primitive gender attitudes of SA men as a whole makes me want to vomit! I’m ashamed of my nationality and my gender as a SA man. My second comment is

that you are preaching to the converted on this site (Feminists & women), and that your article needs a wider audience...I would like to see this published in Mens Health, FHM and other male publications. I've no doubt there are more men out there who would be horrified at the behaviour of their own....I hope so anyway. Point the finger where it belongs, and shame them into acting. Men need to change not women, or lesbians.

[Reply](#)

5. **Maureen says:**

June 16, 2011 at 3:09 am

Well done Deva! I agree with Brad, this article needs to appear in all the Men's Magazines. This is not only a South African problem but a problem throughout Africa and the world. Who do these men think they are, God is the only judge of man not men. There go I but for the grace of God.

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