

ON SEX, VIOLENCE & BEING MACHO IN THE ARMY

Male soldiers and sexual violence

NYAMEKA MANKAYI interviewed 14 male soldiers in the South African National Defence Force between the ages of 23 and 33, looking at how masculinity, sexuality and sexual violence is expressed in a military context. Articles flowing from these qualitative interviews appeared in two journals.

There is a dangerous contradiction in the adherence of male soldiers to the right of women to refuse sex on one hand, and their ambiguity around this right on the other.

Gender equity has been a high priority since the 1994 elections, yet despite numerous initiatives by concerned groups, gender-based violence remains endemic in South Africa. Rates of male violence towards women and children remain extraordinarily high, with between a quarter to two-thirds of women reporting either physical or sexual intimate-partner violence.

Aggressive behaviour, including physical violence and intense interest in sexual 'conquest', is important to the presentation of hegemonic masculinity.

This article looks at how the military, which is male-dominated and where aggression and conquest are valued as a professional ethos, might vicariously facilitate violence against women. It explores the association between the militarisation of male soldiers and violence, in particular sexual violence.

CONSTRUCTIONS OF MASCULINITY

To understand violence, it is necessary to focus on the socio-cultural context and the complex relations of meaning and power within which male masculinities are constituted. Across cultures and communities, some aspects of masculinity – such as heterosexuality, the importance of physical strength and control over

women – consistently emerge as key to hegemonic masculinities. Aggressive behaviour, including physical violence and intense interest in sexual 'conquest', is important to the presentation of hegemonic masculinity.

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The military structure is dominated by masculine characteristics such as aggression, bravery, heroism and heterosexuality, and the idea of the 'warrior hero'. War is the central function of the military, and the organisational context of it legitimises and idealises violence, which could rationalise male violence towards women. Indeed, feminists have long criticised the military as reflecting and representing patriarchy in its most extreme form, with war as a metaphor for rape.

Reasons for failing to control sexual temptation were couched by the individual interview participants in the well-documented 'male sex drive' discourse, this 'meaning' becoming exaggerated due to soldiers being deployed away from their sexual partners, in poor communities where transactional sex with women and girls – which is abusive and possibly coercive and violent – is easy due to their economic vulnerability.

WHAT IS 'RAPE'?

In reflecting on sexual violence, the dominant discourse of participants was that rape and rapists were abnor-

mal and pathological. Rape was seen as problematic, and differentiated from 'normal' male sexuality. Yet strong ambiguity emerged when presented with certain 'rape' scenarios, highlighting the popular notion that women are not always believable when they say they've been raped.

Women were positioned as being at times responsible for being sexually violated when they were not 'clear' and 'strong' enough in their protests. Even a little force ('pushing') by men seemed justified as something relatively trivial. It appears that only extreme forms of men's violence (being 'gun-handled') qualified as contributing to sexual violence.

Also, in reflecting on coercive sexuality, some participants continued to invoke the popular notion that women 'cry rape'. More disturbing was the claim by participants that even if a woman was raped, she'd be more upset about being 'used' by a man.

ARMED AND DANGEROUS

The combination of exaggerated masculinity and certain material conditions of military life create a situation in which coercive and even violent sexual practices may be normalised and legitimised, and in many cases rendered invisible. Socially, it is a critical intersection that requires examination, given the highly mobile nature of military populations, their subjectiveness in being so integrally locked into weapon-carrying and violence, and their potential to enact violence in many situations.

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HOW MACHO IS MACHO IN THE MILITARY?

Race groups in the SA National Defence Force sometimes differ on what they see as manly, but despite their different departure points, masculine identity is always strengthened by military culture.

During the apartheid era, service to the nation was portrayed as necessary to transform young white conscripts into responsible men who could support a family and function in organised civil society.

The SA Defence Force, which became the SA National Defence Force on the eve of the first democratic election in 1994, was a crucial source of ideas about appropriate behaviour for white men. The media presented military successes in such a way that the warrior hero was revered.

The long history of masculinity and militarism has not been unique to South Africa. The link between militarisation and 'masculinisation' is universal – men have since time immemorial been expected to be protectors and fighters. But a shift from conscription to volunteers has provided the opportunity to combine armed masculinity with the masculinity of the breadwinner.

This article briefly interprets 14 interviews held with male soldiers from different racial groups. All 14 were at a tertiary institution while pursuing a career as junior commissioned officers. They were aged from 23 to 33.

JOB SECURITY

In South Africa many join the military for job security or educational opportunities – the masculinity of improving yourself or providing for your family. Close to 80% of soldiers joined for job security and fringe benefits, and because they sought discipline, orderliness, uni-

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RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Soldiers from different racial groups with different historical and social backgrounds join the army for different reasons, and assess masculinity differently. All the white participants believed soldiering was a 'calling' and not just a job, while their African counterparts joined primarily for socioeconomic reasons.

'I tried to go to varsity, and was accepted in two institutions, but I had no money to study' (Thando).

Sam, a coloured man from a low socioeconomic background, saw the masculine imperative of being responsible and providing for his family: 'It breaks my heart to see how some families suffer because the man is irresponsible ... I can't stand it. That's why I come here.'

The military has its own traditions, seldom written down but taken seriously nevertheless. Toughness and leadership are seen as manly. Uniforms denote strength and valour, creating a sense of pride. They are used to benchmark masculinities against one another – for instance, the white uniforms and activities of the navy are ridiculed by other service divisions.

A comment on them being a 'bunch of gay guys' shows that gay men are particularly 'othered' in the military, where homosexuality means subordinate masculinity. Remarked one participant: 'Me, I'm a para-trooper; I'm a man [boasting]. I enjoy being a man. I don't want to be a feminine man.'

SUBSTANCE ABUSE, MASCULINITY AND PROMISCUITY

Participants also cited 'unhealthy' traditions – drinking and casual sex are rife. 'Guys start to drink very heavily, smoke heavily and start to experiment with drugs,' said one.

Drinking practice is perceived as a site in which power and legitimacy of masculinity and sexuality are cemented: '... you must impress the ladies, the whole time and that you must be at heart of every party and you must be able to drink until you drop, and try not to drop while you're drinking'.

Masculine culture is deeply embedded in South Africa, and participants' conceptions of masculinity and sexuality call for investigation as they have implications for the lives of young women and men (black and white) in the SANDF and in broader society.

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