

The Everyday Violence of Gendered Identities in Post-Apartheid South Africa

Abstract

In South Africa, everyday violence shapes and is shaped by a historically grounded enmeshment of gendered, racialised, and classed inequities, or what María Lugones referred to as the coloniality of gender. In contributing to scholarship on the coloniality of gender in South Africa, we conducted focus group discussions and individual interviews in two marginalised South African communities. Research participants highlighted how patriarchal social relations structure quotidian life. Specifically, they described how violence is used to reify masculinised identities (e.g., that of the breadwinner) and to ‘protect’ women from other violent men. Several participants interrogated the gendered systems of meaning that are normatively attached to such violence. By examining the discursive interplay of violence, gender, and impoverishment in the data, we conclude by considering how the coloniality of gender works to entrench hierarchical social ordering in contemporary South Africa. Accordingly, we advocate for structural and political change over individualising interventions.

Introduction

The constructivism of gender iterates the performative aspects of masculinity and femininity, linking gender to biology, sexual difference and the sexual division of labour. However, from a decolonial feminist standpoint, rigid gender categories did not exist in these ways amongst indigenous and Black people prior to colonialism. Instead, more fluid categorisations prevailed (Wekker 1993, 2016; Oyèwùmí 1997), and this non-existence of strictly binaristic gender categories led to the racist categorisation of colonised people as animalistic, nonhuman and anachronistic (see Ratele, 2021). Following María Lugones (2007, 2008, 2010), we understand this way of conceptualising gender as *the coloniality of gender*.

Nadira Omarjee^{1,2}

[ORCID ID 0000-0001-9018-3741](#)

Ghouwa Ismail^{1*}

[ORCID ID 0000-0001-7138-7028](#)

Nick Malherbe¹

[ORCID ID 0000-0002-4968-4058](#)

Bongani Mavundla¹

[ORCID ID 0000-0003-3156-5592](#)

Nomagugu Ngwenya¹

[ORCID ID 0000-0001-7009-9999](#)

Pascal Richardson¹

[ORCID ID 0000-0002-6697-8453](#)

Shahnaaz Suffla¹

[ORCID ID 0000-0002-4597-5472](#)

¹Institute for Social and Health Sciences, University of South Africa & South African Medical Research Council-University of South Africa Violence, Injury and Social Asymmetries Research Unit

²Department of Sociology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

*Corresponding Author:

ismaig@unisa.ac.za

Keywords

Everyday violence; gender; patriarchy; masculinity; vulnerability; South Africa

Attribution CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

In this paper we probe into how the coloniality of gender and the modern colonial gender system function in South Africa. In outlining the coloniality of gender, it is useful to begin by distinguishing colonialism from coloniality. As Ratele (2021, p. 770) explains it: “Whereas colonialism signals to economic, political and administrative structures that for the most part were dismantled during the 20th century, coloniality summons racist difference into the modern period (imbricating the colonial and modern), including the very ideas of life and being human, of economic orders, cultural imaginaries, and political assemblages.” The enduring logic of coloniality established a categorical and dichotomous framing of gender, race, and sexuality – mobilising these constructions to further entrench the socio-economic inequalities and hierarchies set in motion during the colonial era (Boonzaier, 2023). As such, the coloniality of gender speaks to the centrality of the role that gender plays in consolidating coloniality in the realm of ideology, everyday practice, intersubjective relations, labour practice, culture, identity formation, statecraft, and settler colonial violence. As Lugones writes: “unlike colonization, the coloniality of gender is still with us; it is what lies at the intersection of gender/class/race as central constructs of the capitalist world system of power” (Lugones, 2010, p. 746).

If colonialism is linked to patriarchy through the coloniality of gender, then the metropolises were successfully able to subjugate women and children, laying the foundations for pernicious forms of control and forms of violence, such as the violation of indigenous people’s land rights, reifying power relations persistent in modern day society with the afterlives of slavery and apartheid in the form of racial capitalism (see Robinson, 1983). These factors contribute towards today’s high levels of poverty and the ways in which attendant violences, such as gangsterism and gender-based violence (GBV), flourish in neighbourhoods where the State is mostly absent. Moreover, patriarchal violence is a metaphor for all violence because it is borne out of the repudiation of femininity (Benjamin, 1988, 1995). Therefore, the everyday violence that affects gender ordering is about maintaining the coloniality of gender. As such, the everyday violence of gender does not function independently from, for example, the everyday violence of racism (see Essed, 1991).

In post-apartheid South Africa, the hangovers of coloniality and apartheid can be witnessed in the ramifications of gendered identities and the ways in which they intersect with racial capitalism, limiting these identities to heteronormativity. The apartheid State’s making and solidifying of racial categories was part and parcel of its project of controlling sexualities and gender expressions – themselves racialised in very particular ways (Ratele, 2016). The hangovers of coloniality sustain the coloniality of being (Maldonado-Torres 2007), which, in turn, perpetuates colonial violence, as evident in the coloniality of gender (Lugones 2007, 2016). Saidiya Hartman (2019) encouragingly points out that Black life persists amidst contexts marked by coloniality and social death. In this light, the everyday violence of gender constructivism places an undue burden on Black people surviving historical

erasures whilst trying to find spaces for healing, centring voice and discovering new ways of being/becoming (Mupotsa, 2017). Another important strand of gender constructivism is the critique on heteropatriarchy as a political regime that shapes all social relations, especially national ideologies, and influences how GBV manifests in post-apartheid South Africa. This critique underscores the urgency of shifting the cultural archive of coloniality and apartheid in the dynamics between gendered subjects. As Gloria Wekker (2016) asserts, the historical systemic injustices of coloniality and the cultural archive have perpetuated “the violence that was visited on Black people overseas went unregistered, was obfuscated and disavowed” (p. 165). Thus, the everyday violence of gendered identities helps us to understand and push back against the violent act of colonisation, replacing the ‘old’ cultural archive with new ways of being which are limited for impoverished communities where there is a lack of access to resources. Wekker’s argument is crucial for rethinking social policies (e.g., violence intervention programmes and policies on community violence), particularly in relation to poverty eradication and the elimination of GBV.

In much contemporary discourse in South Africa, violence as a gendered phenomenon tends to be spectacularised – made into a problem that is ‘out there’ rather than a part of daily life (Boonzaier, 2023). Yet, violence as both a spectre and a presence of daily life informs how people move, relate, and be (Langa et al., 2020). Moreover, as we will see, it is also through the quotidian spectres and practices of violence that coloniality humanises and dehumanises people along racialised, gendered, and classed lines (Ratele, 2021).

In this article, we are concerned primarily with 1) how people living in low-income settings in South Africa experience everyday violence in relation to the coloniality of gender, and 2) how and if they push back against such violence. In pursuing these aims, we analysed interview and focus group data collected in a community-engaged research project that was undertaken in two South African communities, one in Johannesburg and one in Cape Town. We locate this research within a scholarly tradition that seeks to foreground coloniality and decoloniality within considerations of masculinity and violence (e.g., Boonzaier, 2023; Mfecane, 2020; Ratele, 2021), offering a community-engaged contribution to this scholarship. It is in alignment with this tradition of scholarship that we strived to challenge and reveal the function of the coloniality of gender so that we might begin to move into and advocate for pro-feminist masculinities, plural sexualities, and gender justice (see Boonzaier et al., 2021; Shefer & Ratele, 2023). We believe that scholarship of this kind raises important considerations for policymaking and community-centred violence prevention programmes, as well as how we understand being, knowing, doing, and relating in contexts marked by everyday violence.

Approaching the Study of Gender and Violence in South Africa

South Africa presents among the highest rates of GBV in the world (Boonzaier, 2023). In synthesising existing research on GBV in South Africa, a recent report noted that 2 407

cases of femicide were recorded in the country in 2017, 1 033 of which were the result of intimate partner violence (see Oosthuizen et al., 2024). The report furthermore observes that according to data collected by the South African Police Service, 53 498 sexual offences were recorded in the country between April 2022 and March 2023. GBV is notoriously under-reported, meaning that these alarming statistics are likely lower than the actual rates of GBV in South Africa (see Gqola, 2015).

We do a disservice to the study of gender and violence in South Africa when we import universalising Western frameworks to analyse and understand the issue (Mfecane, 2018). As several critical masculinity scholars in South Africa have argued (see Shefer & Ratele, 2023), studying male violence – towards women, towards other men, and towards gender non-conforming people (Boonzaier et al., 2021) – requires an analysis that is attuned to the country's historical-structural milieu (Ratele, 2021), where such violence is understood as being shaped by a historically grounded enmeshment of gendered, cultural, capitalist, and racialised social structures (Bhana et al., 2021), as well as centuries of deeply entrenched narratives and discourses rooted in coloniality (Boonzaier, 2023). Indeed, under colonialism, colonised subjects were dehumanised at a structural level, and therefore also at the level of day-to-day life. Such colonial dehumanisation was profoundly gendered. Black men were engaged by white colonial settlers as (non)men with (non)masculinity (Ratele, 2021), where Black women were stripped of their personhood in relation to white people *and* to men (Boonzaier et al., 2021). Similarly, colonialism and slavery saw white settlers establish property rights over Black subjects (Gqola, 2015), with Black women's bodies routinely violated and Black men placed in a colonial hierarchy of masculinities (Langa et al., 2020).

Contemporary logics and narratives of coloniality have sought to essentialise GBV in South Africa as a problem of blackness and maleness (Ratele, 2016). In other words, such violence has been dichotomised and normalised through the logic of the coloniality of gender, with Black men established as essentially aggressive, perpetually threatening, and fundamentally dangerous perpetrators of GBV, whereas Black women are constructed as deserving victims (Boonzaier, 2023). Black subjects of all genders are, through the imposition of the coloniality of gender, made sexually deviant and in need of 'civilising' (Boonzaier et al., 2021). The coloniality of gender also imposes expectations onto the categories of gender that it seeks to fix into place. Inclusive of these expectations is the assertion of male dominance (Shefer & Ratele, 2021). Some argue that in South Africa, gendered expectations were entrenched by the apartheid-era migrant labour system (Mfecane, 2018), where racialised economic deprivation was coupled with the expectation that Black men would provide materially for their families (Bhana et al., 2021). Although some scholars have insisted that male violence can be understood as a means of reclaiming masculine power within these oppressive and degrading social structures, Gqola (2015) warns against unquestioningly reverting to these sorts of

explanations precisely because those who are most oppressed in a society do not, in every instance, resort to violence. And even within hegemonic conceptions of masculinity, men have found ways to care and break from colonial expectations and fixities (Bhana et al., 2021). Moreover, it has been found that Black masculinities can be subordinated and dominated at the same time (Boonzaier et al., 2021; Ratele, 2016). We might then say that masculinities, like gender performance more generally, should be understood as multiple, material, embodied, and lived out in and against systems of coloniality, systems that seek to legitimise and delegitimise different subjects for purposes of racial, gendered, and economic subjugation (Mfecane, 2020).

Methodology

The current study forms part of the *Everyday Violence Project* (EVP), a community-engaged and participatory research project that sought to examine how people in South Africa live, experience, and resist violence in their quotidian lives; how everyday enactments of violence relate to systemic power differentials; how everyday violence has been constituted by the global COVID-19 pandemic; and how affective and material resources can be and have been harnessed to reduce violence of this kind. The EVP research team comprises of researchers who, although community outsiders, are committed to sustained collaborations with local communities to build and sustain equitable and safe community structures and relations. The project's participatory and community-engaged character is embedded in both its conception and implementation. Throughout our longstanding and ongoing community engagements, community members have consistently emphasised the imperatives of safety and protection in what they perceive as increasingly violent social contexts. As such, we collaborated with community members in various capacities to explore individual and collective accounts of everyday violence, probing into how such violence is forged through societal phenomena as well as the minutia of people's individual lives.

We collected data via in-depth semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions that explored the roles that the coloniality of gender – and masculinity in particular – play in structuring everyday violence. Therefore, within the interviews and focus groups, we endeavoured to probe into how coloniality works to gender knowledges, ontologies and social systems in relation to everyday violence, including who are 'legitimate' and/or 'illegitimate' objects and subjects of such violence. The EVP adopted a qualitative, participatory research design to enable the exploration of the heterogenous lived experiences of community members, as well as how these experiences give rise to understandings of power, the coloniality of gender, and structural subjugation in relation to everyday violence (Hope et al., 2019).

Study setting and design

Data were collected in two South African communities, one of which is located in Johannesburg, Gauteng, while the other is in Cape Town, Western Cape. Both

communities are indexed as “low income” and “high crime”. The Johannesburg community remains underserved and has seen many ongoing struggles for clean water, sanitation, and adequate housing. This community comprises well over 9000 households, most of which are shack dwellings, with a population that exceeds 21 000 people. The community is multinational and includes those who speak Setswana, isiZulu, Sesotho, isiXhosa, Xitsonga, and several other languages. The Cape Town community constitutes approximately 169 houses and almost double as many backyard dwellings. There is a lack of adequate community infrastructure (e.g., few streetlights, run-down streets, and a dearth of recreational spaces) which has been linked to a lack of safety in the community. Afrikaans is the dominant language spoken in the community. With 80% of community residents unemployed, 75% of those living in the community live in the upper bounds (R1500, approx. €76.02) of the poverty line, whereas 47.1% live just below this.

Study population and sample

As a result of the legacy of apartheid spatial planning, the majority of the participants from the Johannesburg community identified as ‘Black’, while those from the Cape Town community identified as ‘Coloured’. Although these racial categories are, themselves, legacies of the racist apartheid State’s violent efforts at social engineering, material inequalities in contemporary South Africa remain structured through socio-political processes of racialisation. As such, it is necessary to understand power inequalities in contemporary South Africa through these socially constructed racial categories; however, we should not use them uncritically.

In total, 31 participants – all of whom were over 18 years old – were recruited to participate in the individual interviews (i.e., 15 participants from the Johannesburg community and 16 from the Cape Town community), while 70 participants were recruited to participate in the focus group discussions (FGDs) across the two communities (i.e., 3 FGDs per community), resulting in 10-12 participants per FGD. Participants were recruited using convenience sampling as well as a system of referrals and snowballing, the latter of which relied on the community networks established via the researchers’ longstanding engagement in each community.

Data collection procedure

Community members with whom we have collaborated in the past assisted with participant recruitment for both the interviews and the FGDs. Effort was made to ensure that the interviews and FGDs reflected a range of ages and genders within the different communities. However, as noted below, we encountered some constraints in attaining a fully diverse sample. While individual interviews were conducted one-on-one by members of the research collective, at least four members of the research team facilitated each FGD. The research team members who served as focus group facilitators and individual

interviewers are multilingual, which allowed us to converse in the different languages spoken by participants, namely: English, isiZulu, Afrikaans and Sesotho.

All participants were provided with a participant information sheet outlining the research project. Following this, informed consent was obtained from interviewees and focus group discussants, with each participant signing a form consenting to their participation in the research as well as their responses and the discussions being audio recorded. Each interview and FGD lasted approximately one hour. The recorded interviews and FGDs were transcribed verbatim and translated into English by service providers specialising in transcription and translation. The transcribers and translators were required to complete a Standard Confidentiality Agreement.

The interviews and FGDs were conducted in or near to participants' communities. Where required, transportation was arranged for participants. Lunch and a shopping voucher were provided to each participant. In the event that a participant experienced any distress, a trained psychological practitioner – who also served as one of the Principal Investigators on this project – was present at each FGD and interview.

Data analysis

The in-depth semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A) and focus group discussions (see Appendix B) were analysed utilising a collaborative thematic analysis approach. This collaborative approach provided an opportunity for each of us to shape and drive the analysis in different ways. Although this allowed for nuance in the analysis, there were nonetheless challenges in ensuring that our analysis was cohesive, meaning that the analysis was repeatedly revisited and revised, debated, and consolidated through collective discussion. Drawing on the thematic analysis guide espoused by Braun and Clarke (2006), we took a six-step approach to collaborative thematic analysis.

Step 1: Initial meeting for organising and planning, as well as familiarising ourselves with the data.

We commenced with two team dialogues. These took place in a face-to-face format in order to coordinate and strategise how we would interpret and analyse the corpus of data, and to decide on the theoretical underpinnings of the paper, as well as the responsibilities of each author. We decided that the research questions would be based on the broader concerns of the EVP. From this, a timeframe for the data analysis was determined. Two face-to-face collective data analysis workshops, respectively 2 and 3 days, were then organised to initiate the collective data analysis process.

Step 2: Open and axial coding (generating initial codes).

At the first collective data analysis meeting, we generated initial codes from the data. Since the data set was large, we set up two teams to analyse the data. This was a four-phase

process where each team identified patterns in the data and established links between those patterns. Each team member then identified emergent themes and discussed these with their respective team members. Following this, each team presented its themes to the other team, who then offered input, comments and suggestions as a means of verification and refinement. We then discussed the initial extrapolated codes and negotiated the endorsement of the different generative themes. Through this process, we sought to integrate the various perspectives, while also addressing inconsistencies in the coding and theme generation processes (Olson et al., 2016).

Steps 3 and 4: Collectively developing a draft codebook and evaluating the codebook as a research collective.

During the first workshop, after all of us had endorsed the generative themes, we wrote up a preliminary codebook. We then piloted the codebook against the data to check for veracity. Subsequently, the two teams independently worked through the corpus of data whilst regularly consulting and verifying with the other team on identified codes and themes.

Steps 5 and 6: The final coding process, reviewing the codebook and finalising themes.

Throughout the second workshop, the two teams continued to utilise the codebook across the corpus of data. We then analysed and discussed the data together as a collective. Following this, we agreed on a thematic framework comprising the themes and associated subthemes to systematically capture the research findings.

Ethics

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles specified by the College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee, (NHREC Registration No: Rec-240816-052; CREC Reference No: 90092155_CRECHS_2020), as well as the ethical code of conduct recommended for social research (Babbie & Mouton, 2001).

Results

The two interrelated themes that we identified in the corpus of data for this article were: 1) *The Patriarchal Everyday*, and 2) *Vulnerability as a Pathway to Violence*. We attempted to connect each theme with the other in different ways. The speech that we examine in the following analysis was spoken by 21 participants, five of whom identified as male and 16 who identified as female. There are likely many reasons for this. The topic at hand was, for instance, one that is especially pertinent for women in these communities. Men may have taken a greater interest in some of the conversational topics that were more directly relevant to their experience of violence. Additionally, men may not have felt comfortable expressing their views, especially when these contradicted those of the women in the group. We sought to elaborate on some of these reasons in the following analysis.

The patriarchal everyday

In both communities, participants connected structural violence (e.g., poor service delivery, high crime rates, gun violence, gangsterism, unemployment) to direct instances of violence (e.g., familial abuse, sexual violence) through a gendered reading of the everyday; one that, at different moments, colluded with and challenged the violent patriarchal logic inherent to the coloniality of gender. As such, it was through gender that participants engaged with how South Africa's violent structural totality manifests itself in quotidian community settings.

Participants in both communities spoke of unemployment and its connection with violence in the home. Perhaps most prominently, participants underlined the so-called breadwinner role expected of men (see Boonzaier et al., 2021; Mfecane, 2018). Although the masculinised conception of the breadwinner is not unique to South Africa (see Magnussen, 2020), for the majority of the country's population, this role has been constituted by the migrant labour system upon which apartheid's racist segregation policies depended (Helman et al., 2019). Although it is certainly not only men who participate in South Africa's labour force today, patriarchal gendered expectations that women are to perform reproductive labour (e.g., childcare, household maintenance) as well as so-called productive labour mean that the masculinised breadwinner role remains stubbornly persistent in the context of South Africa's massive unemployment rate and levels of poverty. It is thus because people's livelihoods depend on 'breadwinning' that this role was valorised by most participants, thereby speaking to the sexual division of labour and the perpetuation of patriarchal notions of male dominance (Benjamin 1988, 1995; Boonzaier et al., 2021; Connell 1987, 1995, 2007; Gqola, 2015; Shefer & Ratele, 2023). The valorisation of this role sometimes saw participants excuse or justify the violent masculinities attached to this role. As one participant from the Johannesburg community proclaimed:

If you're a family man, father, and unemployed and my wife is employed, it lowers your self-esteem. You will find some of them [in the community] talking and saying you are being fed by a wife and [you are] useless, only to find that you are also looking for a job and there are simply no opportunities available. This leads to anger and anger leads to gender-based violence, with women being the victims, because a man will resort to heavy drinking and a wife will provoke him because of his uncontrollable drinking habit because of stress. (JP14, Male)

The language used here was common across the two communities. Violent expressions of masculinity are said to be "provoked", "uncontrollable" and "resorted to", and while it is recognised that women suffer in their everyday lives because of this, such suffering was usually tempered or read against the stress that men feel in their role as breadwinners. This sentiment is echoed by another participant from the Johannesburg community who stated:

There is a gunshot week in [and] week out, and when we look at it statistically it is not women who are shooting, it is men and they do so because some are under a lot of peer pressure which is caused by these issues that we outlined today. (JF3, Male)

Many participants constructed male violence as constituted intersubjectively between men and women, albeit under unequal patriarchal social conditions. As one participant recalled:

As women we are provocative, we do provoke men ... we put them under pressure to make him feel like, you know “I am nothing here at home” and then I on the other hand, as a woman, what do I do? I get proud that I told him off, but I don’t see that I am hurting him, do you understand? And then at the end of the day this person changes to become something else and will go and get drugs or even alcohol and turn into something that I as a woman will not be able to control. (JF1, Female)

Here, men are said to be driven to violence because of their investment in a particular kind of violent masculinity that, because it relates to material provision, is valorised and connected to power. The participant expresses a degree of empathy for men who feel pressure or ‘stress’ to provide in trying economic circumstances, whilst acknowledging men’s feelings of failure and inadequacy that relate to being unable to fulfil the breadwinner role. Although participants did not frame it in this way, we might read excerpts like these as engaging a masculinised form of shame that men may feel when they are unable to provide and embody the gendered subjectivity expected of them. Shame, as feminist scholars have noted, can reflect the individualising mechanisms of coloniality that, through the racialised and gendered logics of coloniality, place responsibility for structural failures onto specific individuals (Shefer & Munt, 2019). When functioning as an apparatus of what Ratele (2021, p. 773) refers to as “internalized colonial domination”, shame can disallow pro-feminist masculinities that refuse the impositions of the coloniality of gender (see Boonzaier et al., 2021). For some, shame can underscore violence as a socially sanctioned – and even socially valued – means through which to defend against feelings of vulnerability and regain a lost sense of patriarchal power (see Gilligan, 2003). Indeed, in the South African context, Kruger (2019) found that men prioritised the feelings of respect that were attained by fulfilling the gendered expectations of provision, with the shame of being unable to fulfil this role experienced as a kind of psychic injury; a wound to their (gendered) sense of self. Notably, Kruger (2019) also reported that there were instances where male violence was, itself, a cause for shame among men.

Most participants expressed that the feelings of pressure, inadequacy, and shame that men experienced are compounded by how few outlets are available for men to express

their frustrations. However, these struggles that men faced were oftentimes used to explain and understand women's experiences of male violence in the everyday. Indeed, despite the acknowledgement of male vulnerability and their desires to positively participate in reproductive labour, many of the participants pointed out that the failure to provide is what motivates male violence. As one participant put it, "So in our area, yeah, I would say 90% of the men [are violent] — uhm — like I say because they — they drinking or they using drugs or they doing something" (CP13, Female).

Many participants noted that men's unemployment oftentimes structures male violence in domestic settings. Again though, this sentiment was undergirded by patriarchal logic that displaces responsibility for male violence onto women. One participant shared the following:

We get into each other's nerves, we see each other everyday and the woman speaks too much and the men cheat a lot ... He then cheats on me and it happens that I see a message on his phone and when I ask him then he starts getting violent with me. That's how these fights start. (JF1, Female)

Phrases like "we get into each other's nerves"; "the woman speaks too much, and the men cheat a lot"; and "that's how these fights start" (all expressed in JF1) appear to decentralise responsibility for male violence by rendering such violence a supposed product of 'shared' practices between men and women. Thus, because participants shared similar experiences of the hardships of unemployment (e.g., not having money to buy groceries for their families, school stationery for their children, and/or basic municipal services), the kinds of physical male violence that were understood to result from such structural limitations were, in a sense, constructed as implicating women too. Studies have shown that, when compared to women, men may have a greater chance of accepting beliefs that justify the use of violence against women, posit a limited range of behaviours as violent, and perceive violence against women as not especially serious, harmful, or unacceptable (see e.g., Rollero et al., 2021). Although our study seems to confirm this, we also found that some women shared these beliefs, which perhaps points to the normalisation of GBV in South Africa as well as the internalisation of heteropatriarchal doxa. It may also point to women's attempts at asserting their agency in meaning-making practices of male violence.

For several other participants, unemployment was understood as affecting men and women differently. As one of the participants stated:

Okay one thing that I would like to address is this thing, especially when you are a man and live in the house with a woman and you are not working, it becomes painful because sometimes you may want some money, but when she responds she would say 'you want money that you worked for where?' (JF3, Male)

Another proclaimed that unemployment:

Affects men directly as I mentioned that psychologically through this verbal abuse because isn't it there is no difference between men and women and the issue that we as men usually like pretending to be strong, but when this violence also affects us directly, we behave very different, some of us as she has already mentioned [how] we become, we use alcohol wrongly and drugs wrongly and some of us we end up contributing to this gender-based violence that we see ... (JF3, Male)

When rooted in patriarchal logic, material hardships were expressed in gendered terms, and although the behaviour associated with violent masculinity was never condoned, it was often excused by the male participants. Thus, several participants appeared to make clear how patriarchal logic hurts men and women; however, there seemed to be a refusal for men to take responsibility for this violence, rendering it a seemingly structural inevitability for which all are responsible (see Ratele, 2016). Male violence is naturalised through statements such as, "I think it's how they are, and how they think, and for what, just what they want in life. I think it's how they, how they are and how they think ..." (CP2, Female) and "(Men) do things that are just fast and hurried, and it seems their conscience doesn't bother them. I don't know how, man, how a man is, a man is just, he does a thing, then he is done" (CP5, Female). Gendered naturalisation, when read through the colonality of gender, seeks to stabilise hierarchal gender relations through the regulation of gender roles and practices rooted in colonality (Connell, 1995; Ratele, 2021). Violence then becomes a way to communicate, garner respect, and – in contexts of structural violence – to protect (see Kruger, 2019).

Participants repeatedly underlined that men used violence to discipline, communicate, and exert power over women. This is evident in extracts such as "The only way for them [men] to discipline someone is to beat them" (JP4, Female) and "Men do not really care about women at all. They abuse us" (JF2, Female). Another participant proclaimed that:

And the women might be inside the house, they wouldn't want to still be on the street because a woman's life is more dangerous, uhm, in danger than a man's. You, see? Like our women, they are used, abused, abused on the streets... (CP10, Female)

Notably, and against the essentialising logic that underwrites the colonality of gender, female participants in this study refused to be fixed in relation to how male violence was understood. They asserted their agency in relation to such violence – rejecting it, denouncing it, and refusing victimhood, enacting subtle revolts against colonial meaning-making regimes. Other studies have found that, like men, women may enact

violence when they feel unable to cohere with the gendered expectations imposed on them (see e.g., Kruger et al., 2014). The point here is not to blame women for patriarchal expressions of masculinity and male violence, but to recognise how women seek to exercise agency in relation to the coloniality of gender. If people are products of violent social systems, they are also actors in these systems (Boonzaier et al., 2021).

Interestingly, several participants sought a way out of patriarchal logic through culture. Although a stultified or static notion of culture can be drawn on to justify violence (e.g., on the grounds that violence is part of ‘their’ or ‘our’ culture), for some participants, the malleability of culture served as an important, relevant, and visceral site of meaning-making within which to potentially transform and push back against the patriarchal everyday (see e.g., Bhabha, 1994). As one participant articulates it:

I don't think that people understand how deeply entrenched certain activities and actions are culturally. For example, even up to today, notwithstanding who says what within a Xhosa culture, for example, abafazi [women] cannot tell the men what to do. It's un — it's culturally unacceptable ... So so they also sit in groups and not talking against it, if it's acceptable which I mean, we know, we were taught, culture doesn't contribute towards man, man is the one that contributes culture which means man can change culture. (CP12, Male)

Although it is acknowledged that referring to cultural constructions of gender can reinforce static ideas of masculinity and femininity and ascribed gender roles (see Boonzaier, 2023), it is also through culture that these ideas can be challenged and changed. Here, culture is always open to inclusion and transformation despite those struggling to fix culture in time and place (Said, 1993). This emphasis on changing cultural mores around male violence is important for how we conceive of resistance to the patriarchal everyday.

Vulnerability as a pathway to violence

Concerns about people's safety in contexts of everyday violence presented as a salient theme in the data. An important nodal point of this theme was the notion of vulnerability, and the ways by which one's vulnerability – most often the vulnerability of women – served as a pathway to physical violence (see also Kruger, 2019). When rooted in the logic of the coloniality of gender, women are attributed blame for this vulnerability and are rendered responsible for transforming it or protecting it.

One participant noted, when speaking about men, that, “people are scared of you, as to respect you. ... Because if they are scared of you, respect comes with it” (CP3, Male). Here, the idea of being feared is used synonymously with being respected, thereby suggesting a progression from being vulnerable, to being feared, to ‘earning’ respect. Likewise, another participant recognised the alliance of fear and respect by proclaiming

that “I think the whole thing is about wanting to be a tough guy. But I know many who want to pretend to be a tough guy, then they’re just a gentle boy on the inside” (CP1, Female). Toughness worked in conjunction with fear to avail protection which was, itself, required because of one’s vulnerability. In this, responsibility for protection was confined to patriarchal logic. As one participant admiringly noted of one man in the community, “Everyone is afraid of him, and he acts macho” (CP1, Female). If fear is fundamental to reproducing an atmosphere of male violence (see Gqola, 2015), it is also part of garnering respect within this atmosphere.

There were, however, acknowledgements of the uncontainability of ‘protective’ patriarchal violence (see Kruger, 2019). Such violence, some participants made clear, could not be relied on for an instrumental kind of protection, with many participants acknowledging how violence and violent protection form part of a cycle of community-wide masculinised everyday violence. As with the preceding theme, participants constructed this masculinised cycle of violence as existing in an interplay of gendered relations. As one participant noted:

... obviously it is us women who make men go do a lot of crime. Yes, they do crime, but is us women who push them to it because they end up doing it because of words like “you are sitting here at home and we are hungry” and what would the man say “obviously I am the man in this house. I am the breadwinner. I have to do something so that they can have food before they sleep”. Then he goes out and commits crime. (JF1, Female)

Another shared that:

On issues of crime, mostly its men who do that, but the masterminds are women, because mostly when you come into the house as we had COVID and were confined to the home, all of us, the woman would be the one who swears at him and say, “you are useless. Other men are busy and they bring food into the house and all of that”. She is the one who make him to go out and steal from a person he knows somewhere and also makes him to sell drugs. (JF1, Female)

The destructive character of violent masculinity is recognised in both of these extracts. However, the participants noted that violent masculinity is, in some instances, part of men’s enactments of protection and provision – expressed here within patriarchal logics. It would then seem that for many participants, the reality of living without a stable income meant that men as providers, protectors, and breadwinners collapsed under the singular banner of violent masculinity. Here, it is important to remember that in South Africa, poor Black men are routinely associated with violence (Langa et al., 2020; Ratele, 2016) and tend to be always already assumed as violent (Boonzaier, 2023). It may

therefore be the case that participants are speaking back to these kinds of dominant narratives that are rooted in the colonality of gender.

In contrast to the *Patriarchal Everyday* theme, within the *Vulnerability as a Pathway to Violence* theme, men were not described as uncontrollably violent. Rather, environments constituted by structural violence necessitated violence as protection from vulnerability. As one female participant notes:

About the matter of guns and crime, it's not easy. The thing is girls these nowadays don't feel safe when approached by a boy. Even though she doesn't like him, but she will agree to the proposal because he has a gun. (JF1, Female)

Protection from male violence is offered here as a mode of survival. Once again, the kinds of male violence that informed this sort of violent protection were not necessarily condoned. It was, however, fixed to masculinity, offered as part of the problem and the solution to everyday violence. As one participant articulates:

It's part of the masculinity because ... the man ... he wants to prove himself more, which women can't do. He proves he has more power; he proves he can use his mind, but he uses it in the wrong way. (CP10, Female)

Violent masculinity was in this sense spoken of as a pragmatic undertaking; a destructive force reluctantly taken up for the purposes of protection. Although women were said to be vulnerable, they were not without agency and could make use of violent masculinity (identified always in men) to protect themselves. Therefore, protection functioned as part of a violent assertion of masculinity, making it, paradoxically, a dangerous value.

Men's potential for violence is emphasised by Jordan et al. (2022) who note that protective masculinities can slide into violence due to the close relation of these masculinities to social constructions which ascribe toughness to masculinity. For instance, for many participants, protection was sought by joining local gangs that promised some kind of protection against material deprivation. As Breen et al. (2019) contend, in South Africa a lack of access to resources – such as food and clothing – can increase the risk of young people joining gangs or becoming involved in criminal activities. Moreover, as Kruger (2019) highlights, men also join gangs to attain a level of respect that they feel they do not have, and to take responsibility for escaping cycles of violence, poverty, and shame (see also Seedat et al., 2009). Participants in our study were aware that unemployment in the family influenced young people to become involved in violence. As one participant states: “They [gang members] specifically look out for those children who, uhm, whose parents are unemployed,

where the child isn't going to school, specifically those types of children" (CF3, Female). Another participant concurs that, "Our children are being used, they are now buying the children a pair of ... Nike shoes, a pair of Adidas ... You get a pair of Adidas tekkies [shoes], quickly shoot someone dead" (CF1, Female).

Recent studies have shown that young women are likely to get involved in gangsterism and violence for the same reasons as young men, such as the need for status, protection, and income (Dziewanski, 2020; Geldenhuys, 2020). As with our first theme, some of the women refused the patriarchal fixing of female subjectivities within cycles of masculinised violent protection. The respondents showed how their association with powerful figures, such as gangsters, influenced them to participate in acts of violence. One participant stated that:

If I had a gangster [as a romantic partner] now, I'm going to carry myself [as] strong too. Because I have a gangster boyfriend, and then I come past you, and I feel like giving you a few slaps, or attacking you. And, so, you can do nothing to me, because I have him. (CP4, Female)

Therefore, participants often associated violence with masculinity, but violence was also said to be taken on and moulded by other genders, thereby gendering violence in different ways. As such, several participants claimed that the function of violence within their communities was to assert dominance and ensure that others, rather than the self, was subjugated. The function of violence is, in this regard, multi-layered in that it serves as protection and to stave off the vulnerabilities engendered by the structural violence inherent to coloniality.

Nonetheless, participants emphasised that violence could only retain authenticity or legitimacy when it was undertaken by men. Some participants pointed out that although fewer women engaged in violence and that it was men who led on violent protective action, it was important that women's engagement in violence was not overlooked. For instance, many participants highlighted that due to some women's involvement in crime and drugs, there was a likelihood that they participated in violence. As one participant recounted:

Women are also involved because they're the ones who commit crimes with men. Women are always with men. In my observation, these men are the ones who send women to go forth and commit these crimes, a person would come and stand in front of you, pretending that they are trying to help you. When you are not observant, they just grab what they want from you, and they run away. They run away with these male accomplices. (JF2, Female)

Another stated that:

We as women play a role in that, like during COVID, because of point number one: In drugs we are found there, in alcohol we are there. Yes, the percentage of men as much is higher, but we also play a role there, in crime we are there. I remember, I will speak about a lady ... who hangs around with the gangsters, and she is also the one who contributes a lot on crime when it comes to going into people's houses to steal things, steal phones and other things – she is the one. Let's not accuse men only in this. (JF1, Female)

Here, the violent protector role is driven and shaped by masculinity, but it was never the sole product of those gendered as men.

In short, participants noted that protection – related to people's physical safety – was oftentimes secured through a mode of masculinised violence. However, participants emphasised that women can, and in some cases do, unsettle gendered assumptions underlying such violence, and while it was not the case that violence was entirely decoupled from masculinity, it was gendered somewhat differently precisely because violence could protect everyone and, indeed, endangers everyone (see Langa, et al., 2020). In this, people required violent protection from those enacting violence.

Conclusion

The relationship between constructions of masculinity and femininity can be observed through a dominance and submission lens. Within such a framework, violence is used to assert male dominance and is an instrument offering 'protection'. Moreover, patriarchal violence is instrumentalised in impoverished communities to construct gendered identities, such as breadwinners. These gendered constructions can be read as ideals that flatten the complexities that accompany impoverished communities, placing undue burdens on gendered subjects to perform certain functions in relation to their gender. Male violence was, in this study, seen as a necessary kind of protection in contexts marked by structural violence. Furthermore, patriarchal violence connected to the coloniality of gender (Lugones 2007, 2016) highlights the gendered complexities undergirding violent masculine constructions precisely because these constructions are necessary for survival in impoverished communities. For example, many participants in this study observed how living without a stable income meant that men as providers, protectors, and breadwinners failed in their gendered duties, thereby compounding the vulnerabilities associated with male dominance.

The inordinately high levels of racialised poverty and inequality in South Africa – a legacy of the apartheid and colonial regimes – are fundamental to understanding the high rates of violence in the country (Boonzaier et al., 2021). People feel safe

and reclaim feelings of lost power – both psychic and material – by investing in and supporting violence. Structural and political changes geared towards addressing lingering systems of coloniality are therefore fundamental to addressing violence. Feeling safe can and must be engendered at the systemic level, rather than only through individualising reformist measures. Participants in this study noted that addressing material barriers, such as structural poverty, is necessary to shift out of the hangovers from colonial violence. They also made clear that resistance to patriarchal logic can be observed in shifts within cultural values.

Future research should probe further into the potentialities of cultural interventions to disrupt patriarchal logic and what this could mean with respect to shifting practices that wed masculinity to violence. Cultural interventions of this sort could assume organised formations (e.g., campaigns, festivals), be enacted through artefacts (e.g., art), and/or take place in people's everyday acts of meaning-making (e.g., ceremonies, rituals, language). Work of this kind, we suggest, could benefit from a participatory approach that takes seriously how people make culture and, indeed, how they might remake culture to reflect various gendered conceptions of everyday peace. At the same time, these cultural interventions should be complemented with more structural interventions into the various aspects of people's lives that they identify as perpetuating gendered violence in the everyday (e.g., poverty, unsafety). In this, everyday violence, we suggest, should be tackled at the levels of meaning-making and understanding, as well as through people's socio-material realities.

Acknowledgements

The research reported in this article was supported by the South African Medical Research Council.

References

- Babbie, E., & Mouton, J. (2001). *The practice of social research: South African edition*. Oxford University Press Southern Africa.
- Benjamin, J. (1988). *The bonds of love. Psychoanalysis, feminism, and the problem of domination*. Pantheon.
- Benjamin, J. (1995). *Like subjects, love objects. Essays on recognition and sexual difference*. Yale University Press.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.

- Bhana, D., Janak, R., Pillay, D., & Ramrathan, L. (2021). Masculinity and violence: Gender, poverty and culture in a rural primary school in South Africa. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 87, 102509.
- Boonzaier, F. A. (2023). Spectacularising narratives on femicide in South Africa: A decolonial feminist analysis. *Current Sociology*, 71(1), 78–96.
- Boonzaier, F., Huysamen, M., & Van Niekerk, T. (2021). Men from the South: Feminist, decolonial and intersectional perspectives on men, masculinities and intimate partner violence. In L. Gottzén, M. Bjørnholt, & F. Boonzaier (Eds.), *Men, masculinities and intimate partner violence* (pp. 52–65). Routledge.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Breen, A., Daniels, K., & Tomlinson, M. (2019). Adolescent's views on youth gang involvement in a South African township. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 98, 171–177. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.12.010>
- Connell, R. W. & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2007). Hegemonic masculinity. Rethinking the concept. *University of Southern Maine*. <http://www.usm.maine.edu/crm/faculty/jim/hegemonic.pdf>.
- Connell, R. (1987). *Gender and power: society, the person and sexual politics*. Stanford University Press.
- Connell, R. (1995). *Masculinities*. Polity Press.
- Dziewanski, D. (2020). Femme fatales: Girl gangsters and violent street culture in Cape Town. *Feminist Criminology*, 15(4), 438–463.
- Essed, P. (1991). *Understanding everyday racism: An interdisciplinary theory*. Sage.
- Geldenhuys, K. (2020). When street gangs hijack communities. *Servamus Community-based Safety and Security Magazine*, 113(2), 18–25.
- Gilligan, J. (2003). Shame, guilt, and violence. *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, 70(4), 1149–1180.
- Gqola, P. D. (2015). *Rape: A South African nightmare*. Jacana Media.

- Hartman, S. (2019). *Wayward lives, beautiful experiments: Intimate histories of social upheaval*. WW Norton & co.
- hooks, b. (1992). *Black looks: Race and representation*. South End Press.
- Helman, R., Malherbe, N., & Kaminer, D. (2019). Young people's reproductions of the 'father as provider' discourse: Intersections of race, class, culture and gender within a liberal democracy. *Community, Work & Family*, 22(2), 146–166. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2018.1433636>
- Hope, E. C., Brugh, C. S., & Nance, A. (2019). In search of a critical stance: Applying qualitative research practices for critical quantitative research in psychology. *Community Psychology in Global Perspective*, 5(2), 63–69. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336854836>
- Jordan, A., Anitha, S., Jameson, J., & Davy, Z. (2022). Hierarchies of masculinity and lad culture on campus: “Bad guys”, “good guys”, and complicit men. *Men and Masculinities*, 25(5), 698–720. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4640051>
- Kruger, L. M. (2019). Of violence and intimacy. The shame of loving and being loved. *The Philosophical Journal of Conflict and Violence*, 3(1), 55–81.
- Kruger, L. M., van Straaten, K., Taylor, L., Lourens, M., & Dukas, C. (2014). The melancholy of murderous mothers: Depression and the medicalization of women's anger. *Feminism & Psychology*, 24(4), 461–478.
- Langa, M., Kirsten, A., Bowman, B., Eagle, G., & Kiguwa, P. (2020). Black masculinities on trial in absentia: The case of Oscar Pistorius in South Africa. *Men and Masculinities*, 23(3-4), 499–515.
- Lugones, M. (2007). Heterosexualism and the colonial/modern gender system. *Hypatia*, 22(1), 186–209. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4640051>
- Lugones, M. (2008). The coloniality of gender. *Worlds & Knowledges Otherwise*, 2.2. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-38273-3_2
- Lugones, M. (2010). Toward a decolonial feminism. *Hypatia*, 25(4), 742–759.
- Magnussen, M. L. (2020). Men's family breadwinning in today's Norway: A blind spot in the strive for gender equality. *NORA-Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 28(4), 302–313. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2020.1790658>

- Maldonado-Torres, N. (2007). On the coloniality of being. *Cultural Studies*, 21(2), 240–270. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162548>
- Mfecane, S. (2018). *(Un)knowing MEN: Africanising gender justice programmes for men in South Africa*. CSA&G Press.
- Mfecane, S. (2020). Decolonising men and masculinities research in South Africa. *South African Review of Sociology*, 51(2), 1–15.
- Mupotsa, D. (2017). Being/becoming an undutiful daughter: Thinking as a practice of freedom. In R. Osman & D. J. Hornsby (Eds.), *Transforming teaching and learning in higher education*. Springer/Palgrave.
- Olson, J. D., McAllister, C., Grinnell, L. D., Walters, K. G., & Appunn, F. (2016). Applying constant comparative method with multiple investigators and inter-coder reliability. *The Qualitative Report*, 21(1), 26–42. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2016.2447>
- Oosthuizen, M., Martin, L., & de Villiers, D. (2024). *Towards a gender-based violence index for South Africa: An overview and proposed way forward*. Commission for Gender Equality.
- Ratele, K. (2016). *Liberating masculinities*. Cape Town, South Africa: HSRC Press.
- Ratele, K. (2021). An invitation to decoloniality in work on (African) men and masculinities. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 28(6), 769–785.
- Robinson, C. J. (1983). *Black Marxism: The making of the Black radical tradition*. Penguin. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469663746_robinson
- Rollero, C., Bergagna, E., & Tartaglia, S. (2021). What is violence? The role of sexism and social dominance orientation in recognizing violence against women. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 36(21–22). NP11349–NP11366. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260519888525>
- Said, E. W. (1993). *Culture and imperialism*. Random House.
- Seedat, M., Van Niekerk, A., Jewkes, R., Suffla, S., & Ratele, K. (2009). Violence and injuries in South Africa: Prioritising an agenda for prevention. *The Lancet*, 374(9694), 1011–1022.

- Shefer, T., & Munt, S. R. (2019). A feminist politics of shame: Shame and its contested possibilities. *Feminism & Psychology*, 29(2), 145–156.
- Shefer, T., & Ratele, K. (2023). South African critical masculinities studies: A scan of past, current and emerging priorities. *NORMA*, 18(2), 72–88.
- Wekker, G. (2016). *White innocence: Paradoxes of colonialism and race*. Duke University Press.
- Wekker, G. (2020). Afropessimism. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 28(1), 86–97.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506820971224>

Appendix A: Individual Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

1. What are the most challenging parts of everyday life in your community?
2. Are these experiences violent?
3. Who or what is responsible for these experiences?
4. What is the role that men in particular play in these experiences?
5. Are there ways out of these experiences? Have you tried anything?
6. Do these experiences of everyday violence affect others in your community?
7. Are other people doing anything to resist these experiences?
8. Is there a way of resisting violence that is particular to men?
9. Does the community support people who face these experiences?
10. What are the challenges of providing support during COVID-19?
11. Does the government support people who face these experiences?

Appendix B: Focus Group Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

1. What are the most challenging parts of everyday life in your community?
2. Are these experiences common in your community?
3. Would you describe any of this as violent? Why?
4. Do men play a particular role in these difficulties/violences?
5. Do/can you resist these daily challenges/violences?
6. Are people's everyday violences connected to each other? How?
7. Do men experience everyday violences in particular ways?
8. Who are the people involved in everyday violences and challenges?
9. Is it men who perpetuate everyday violence?
10. Can/do you support others who face everyday adversity?
11. What are the challenges of providing support during COVID-19?
12. Are you more likely to support men or women here?
13. Does the community support people experiencing everyday violence?