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Denise Buiten & Kammila Naidoo

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Laying Claim to a Name: Towards a Sociology of “Gender-Based Violence”

Denise Buiten^{a,b} and Kammila Naidoo^b

^aSchool of Arts and Sciences, The University of Notre Dame Australia, Sydney, Australia; ^bDepartment of Sociology, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Terms such as “gender-based violence” are connected with a range of evolving discourses that are not merely descriptive, but interpretive and political in nature. Yet, what makes violence “gender-based” is often implicit rather than explicit. In this Debates we argue that there needs to be greater specificity about what is gendered about gender-based violence, while allowing for the continued elasticity of the concept for application across diverse contexts and forms of violence. Drawing on international scholarship and key insights from the evolving sociology of gender, we outline a framework for locating and defining the “gender” in “gender-based violence”. This framework, we suggest, makes for a clearer starting point for mapping the connections between gender and violence, by examining these connections at the three levels of identity, interaction and structure. As such, it invites a more comprehensive picture of gender-based violence, one that includes women, men, and non-binary people while still accounting for the ways gender-based violence disproportionately affects women. We argue that the rich contextually-specific scholarship being produced in South Africa and elsewhere in the global South reflects gender as operating at these three levels, and adds further layers and complexity with a genuine attention to intersectionality that is often lacking from international scholarship.

KEYWORDS

Gender-based violence; violence against women; theorising violence; sociology of gender; gender violence

Introduction: what is *gender based* about “gender-based violence”?

In February 2020, a 24-year-old geology student at Fort Hare University, Yonela Boli, was stabbed to death on campus in the early hours of Saturday morning by a fellow student. A statement to staff and students issued by the University said “the University of Fort Hare condemns all forms of violence on and off-campus” and called it a “Fatal Gender-Based Violence Incident”. This murder came on the back of a series of horrendous murders and rapes of South African students the previous year, and amidst what was called a broader “crisis of gender-based violence” in South Africa that received unprecedented media and political attention in 2019. The brutal rape and murder of Uyinene Mrwetyana, a 19-year-old

CONTACT Denise Buiten ✉ denise.buiten@nd.edu.au

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student at the University of Cape Town in a post office was what felt like the last straw after a string of horrific rapes and murders of women and girls in South Africa that year. Uyinene Mrwetyana's murder catalysed widespread protests and calls for a state of emergency on gender-based violence to be declared, as the hashtag #AmlNext trended on Twitter. But less than a month later in September 2019, 18-year-old theology student Jesse Hesse and her grandfather, Chris Lategan, were killed. Just the following month 21-year-old Precious Ramabulana, a Capricorn TVET College student, was raped and stabbed to death. Many more young women beyond universities were killed by intimate partners, acquaintances and strangers in 2019, which came to be known as one of the most devastating years for gender-based violence in the news in South Africa.

However, the student who had lost their life on Fore Hare campus early in 2020 was in one key respect different: Yonela Boli was a male student who had been murdered by a female student with whom he had an intimate relationship. While the case did not receive the same level of national attention, it did make media headlines and was named as gender-based violence by the University of Fort Hare and a variety of social media commentators. Calling it this referenced—and therefore tapped into the social currency of—wider discourses of gender-based violence in South Africa. One Twitter post on the case shared on the news stated the following:

Talking about the issue of GBV, my friend Yonela Boli was brutally stabbed by a woman in University premises and died yesterday morning. This is the side of GBV that also needs to be told.

Is the murder of a man by his female intimate partner gender-based violence? While little is known from media reports about this specific case that could help to answer this question, the fact that it was quickly labelled as such raises questions worth asking. This is not to negate or minimise the seriousness of the crime or the anguish it has caused. It is also not intended to suggest that violence by women is not, or should not, be an issue of concern for feminist and gender scholars, or to assume in essentialising ways that women are inherently non-violent (Africa 2010). Rather, the question is whether there is clarity on what this means: what makes violence *gender-based*?

Language matters; the term gender-based violence is connected with a range of evolving discourses that are not merely descriptive, but interpretive and political. Increasingly invoked in discussions of violence in South Africa, the term gender-based violence (GBV) is sometimes used interchangeably with the term violence against women (VAW), and usually used to refer to sexual violence, domestic violence and femicide. However, how “gender-based violence” is understood in public and political discourse is often implicit, rather than explicit. It is not always clear what it means to call violence gender-based, and therefore whether for example intimate partner violence against a man, as was the case for Yonela Boli, can be understood in this way. While discussions of gender-based violence in South Africa often link it to “gender inequality”, what this means and how the two are connected is not always articulated.

As such, the meaning of the term is often taken for granted and equated with violence against women in public and political debate—and often also in policy and practice. As Jakobsen (2014: 538) notes, “in Sub-Saharan Africa, violence against women (VAW) as a policy, practice, and research field has mushroomed in the past two decades under the term ‘gender-based violence’”. This can have important repercussions. First, by implicitly synonymising gender-based violence with (heterosexual) violence against women,

gendered forms of violence against LGBTQI people are often sidelined. Assumptions that gender-based violence is violence against women further work to sustain “the argument that gender is irrelevant if violence is also perpetrated against men” (Jakobsen 2014: 537), casting obscurity and doubt on the utility of a gender lens in a context in which feminist analyses are under constant scrutiny. In addition, despite being associated with violence against women, the case of Yonela Boli reminds us that “gender-based violence” is an ostensibly gender-neutral term that could refer to men, women or non-binary people. This is potentially a strength, enabling issues such as the rape of men during wartime (Sivakumaran 2007) and violence against LGBTQI people to be identified as gendered (Kiss et al. 2020). However, without a well-defined basis for being termed gender-based this can strip it of its meaning. There needs to be clarity about what is *gender-based* about gender-based violence, while allowing for the continued elasticity of the concept for application across diverse contexts and forms of violence.

As part of this **Debates** article we draw on international scholarship to briefly outline a framework for locating and defining the “gender” in “gender-based violence”, a framework that takes its insights from major sociological theory on gender. In this framework, gender-based violence is violence that is fuelled by a combination of gender *identities, interactions* and *structures* (Anderson 2005, 2009). This framework we believe is useful for expressing what makes violence gender-based at a range of levels: micro, meso and macro. It enables us to move beyond an understanding of it as male violence against women while still explaining why these forms of violence disproportionately affect women. It can also account for LGBTQI and male victims, without making the term synonymous with intimate partner violence or displacing the central role of gender in constituting violence. We suggest that this framework makes for a clear starting point for mapping out and explicitly communicating the connections between gender and violence, and that the rich contextually-specific scholarship that is being produced in South Africa and elsewhere in the global South can contribute important layers and complexity to this framework. This includes looking at how intersectional forces such as race, class and sexuality operate simultaneously at these three levels of identity, structure and interaction.

A sociologically-informed framework for gender-based violence

In 2000, Jane Bennett of the African Gender Institute wrote in their newsletter about gender-based violence in a way that significantly shaped our understanding. Gender-based violence, she said, is violence in which being gendered as a “man” or a “woman” is significant to the presence and shape of the violence—who is hurt, by whom, how, and importantly why. While gender-based violence is diverse in its forms:

what the assaults have in common is the fuel of gender relations. Noting this takes us beyond an analysis that says women are vulnerable to men. It suggests that both women and men are vulnerable to the way dominant norms of gender relations, within their contexts, are working. (Bennett 2000: 2)

Scholars from other contexts, such as Boyle (2019) writing from the United Kingdom, have since provided similar definitions of gender-based violence as violence in which gender is highly salient to its existence, forms, patterns and meanings. Boyle (2019), like Bennett (2000), urges us to think beyond essentialising dichotomies of “women as vulnerable/

men as violent”, opening space for considering men as potential victims of gender-based violence while recognising that social conditions of patriarchy create highly gendered patterns of victimisation and perpetration. Therefore, much (but not all) gender-based violence is violence against women, and much (but not all) violence against women is gender-based. The term gender-based violence, for Boyle, enables us to see connections between different forms of violence without dismantling distinctions: it is an umbrella term that signals how gender traverses across a range of violence(s)—sexual harassment, domestic abuse, homophobic violence and rape of men during wartime, for example—while still recognising the distinctions between them. To define gender-based violence in this way, however, still articulates the connection between gender and violence in a general way, and more is needed to chart these connections in specific terms.

Sociological theory can provide useful tools to map out how and why gender-based violence has in common the “fuel of gender relations” (Bennett 2000: 2). Drawing on these sociological theories of gender, in conjunction with context-specific empirical work, can construct a more theoretically robust picture of causes and therefore better inform policy and interventions. It can also help to communicate more effectively and specifically how gender operates at multiple levels to produce and sustain violence, beyond broad or obscure claims about gender. Sociological accounts of gender have evolved significantly in the past few decades. While early sociological accounts focused primarily on gender socialisation, theoretical developments in the 1980s drew extensively on interactionist sociologists to theorise gender as a set of doings and interactions (Butler 1990; West and Zimmerman 1987). By the late 1980s and 1990s, theorists such as Connell (1987) and Risman (1998) made a significant mark on the field by urging sociologists to think of gender beyond the level of personal identity and interaction, to look at it as a social *structure* or *institution* that organises social relations and the distribution of resources. These theoretical insights, while emerging from critiques of earlier theories, also built on one another in important ways, leading some scholars to encapsulate gender at the individual, interpersonal and structural level within a theory of gender systems and showing how gender operates at these interacting levels (Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Risman 2004).

These sociological insights on the different dimensions of gender systems have been used by some theorists of gender-based violence such as Anderson (2005, 2009) to explain in more specific terms how various forms of violence, such as domestic abuse, are gendered. Others have used it to begin to trace and set a research agenda around the gendered dimensions of same-sex intimate partner violence (Cannon, Lauve-Moon, and Buttell 2015). Using the framework of gender as identity, interaction and structure, Anderson (2005: 2009) has drawn from a range of existing theoretical and empirical work on gender and domestic abuse to map out its connections at and between these three levels. In doing so, she was able to show how the drivers of specific forms of gender-based violence are gendered at the micro-, meso- and macro-levels.

At the micro-level, “a theoretical understanding of gender as identity recognises that people are socialized to identify themselves and others with a single sex category” (Anderson 2009: 1445) that is associated with particular roles and traits. Violence is gendered when cultural beliefs about gender construct identities in a way that normalises, encourages or justifies violence, such as constructions of masculinity as defined by control and dominance and of femininity as subservient. When deeply held sources of

gender identity are threatened, there can also be an attempt to reinforce them. This has been noted in numerous studies on masculinity and violence against women in South Africa, in which the cultural requirement to embody hegemonic masculine identity in a context that denies this structurally has been linked to violence against women (see for example Gqola 2015; Matthews, Jewkes, and Abrahams 2015; Salo 2007).

At the meso-level the second tier of the gender system involves gendered “patterns of behaviour at the interactional level” (Ridgeway and Correll 2004: 511), patterns shaped by hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender. For gender theorists such as Butler (1990) and West and Zimmerman (1987) individuals act in context; they perform in ways that anticipate the cultural expectations of their audience and require action of others in accordance with dominant gender norms. This, for example, has been used to explain how male violence against women can be an active enactment of gender identity (for example, Jakobsen 2014), and a way of policing those who transgress gender norms among both men and women (Mbisi 2009). Numerous scholars in South Africa have developed empirical work to show how rape and domestic violence operates in this way, and how lesbian women in particular are raped and brutalised in South Africa as a way to police norms of appropriate femininity and heterosexuality (Naidoo and Karels 2012).

At the third, macro-level of the gender system is gender as social structure (Connell 1987; Risman 2004). Culturally constructed hegemonic gender norms shape and organise not only personal interactions, but institutions, systems and practices. The sexual division of labour, gendered economic inequality, and gendered educational, health and political systems are all examples of gender as social structure, whereby gender is used to “organize daily life and to construct gender differences” (Anderson 2009: 1449). The compounding effects of economic inequalities experienced by women in South Africa has been of central concern to feminist scholars (Bennett 2001). Numerous scholars in South Africa have also written about the institutionalisation of impunity to gender-based violence, such as gender biases in law enforcement and responses to victims (Mpani and Nsibandwe 2015; Mshweshwe 2018) and how state politics contribute to the institutionalisation of gender inequality and violence (see Buiten and Naidoo 2016; Motsei 2007).

Identifying violence as gendered at these three levels provides a more theoretically-informed approach amidst often “under-theorised claims about the gendered nature of the violence” (Jakobsen 2014: 538) and “imposes some order on the encyclopedic research findings that have developed to explain gender inequality” (Risman 2004: 433) and its relationship to violence. As we have shown, too, work that interrogates gender at these three levels is consistent with and exists within the extant literature on gender and violence in Southern Africa. As such, acknowledging the breadth of work already looking at one or more of these levels of the gender system what we propose is that gender-based violence be more explicitly (and more consistently) defined in public, policy and academic discourses in relation to these levels of gender systems.

Empirically grounded context-specific research

Anderson’s model of applying gender systems theory to particular forms of gender-based violence provides a clear and systematic model. However, like much work on gender and violence emerging from the global North, the role of forces such as race and class in co-constituting identity, interaction and structure is not closely examined. While she

acknowledges how intersectional forces such as social class, race and disability intersect with gender in producing and sustaining violence, gender as a multi-level system remains largely conceptualised around gender as the primary social organiser. This makes sense writing from a context in which racial and economic dynamics remain more readily and stubbornly invisible—though not irrelevant. Constructs of gender are always classed and racialised, and violence accordingly gendered in racialised and classed ways. The privilege and invisibility of whiteness and middle-class, for instance, can operate to frame domestic violence in white middleclass households as an individualised pathology, in contrast to domestic violence perpetrated in stigmatised or marginalised communities which is more often framed as the outcome of problematic “culture” (see Helman and Ratele 2016; Kim and Motsei 2002). An intersectional lens is therefore relevant to all contexts.

What literature emerging from many locations in the global South can uniquely contribute, however, is a powerful tradition of seriously examining these intersectional forces in understanding gendered violence. African feminist scholarship provides a vibrant and rich set of analyses that can rework and add content to the gender systems framework for gender-based violence used by Anderson. Bringing in African feminism helps to negate simplistic theorising, strengthening insight into the ways race, class and sexuality co-constitute gender at the three levels of identity, interaction and social structure. Risman (2004) acknowledges that, like gender, race and class have been theorised as structural. Similar arguments have been made about sexuality (Cannon, Lauve-Moon, and Buttell 2015). Historical, cultural, and socially contextualised constructions and performances of racial, classed and sexual identities in relation to violence have been variously studied, showing great complexity and negotiation in lived experience at these intersections (see for example Brittijn 2013; Helman and Ratele 2018; Jakobsen 2014). Southern scholarship has tended to be more consistently attuned to these intersecting dimensions, and can add a lot of richness to the model proposed to define gender-based violence. Further, a deep grasp of contextual specificities is important to ground understandings of gender-based violence and sharpen definitions of what makes violence gender-based.

Conclusion

A rich array of studies on gender-based violence has been progressively produced in South African scholarship. While much current research is strongly empirical, with the potential to offer complex and nuanced insights into the dynamics of gender relations and the drivers of violence, gender-based violence arguably continues to be seen almost exclusively as a problem of heterosexual women. This Debates article places emphasis on the need to shift towards embracing a genuinely intersectional lens to study gender-based violence, and thus to encourage recognition of the elasticity of the concept in the way that it is and could be applied. Of particular mention is Anderson’s theoretical model highlighting different dimensions that operate to frame and explain gender-based violence specifically at the micro, meso and macro levels of gender. Engaging critically with how violence operates at these levels will invite a more comprehensive picture of gender-based violence—one that includes women, men, and non-binary people, and reflecting a spectrum of identities, interactions and structures.

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