

WOMEN UNABLE TO ACCESS RIGHTS IN A WAY EQUAL TO MEN, FINDS RESEARCH

Invisibility of black women in SA

Azille Coetzee

IN THE past two decades we have witnessed waves of xenophobic violence through which the distinction between South African citizens and non-citizens is brutally maintained, reinforced and patrolled, a boundary that separates those who have a claim on South Africa's resources and protection against those who do not.

However, the discourses around immigration obscure the fact that in day-to-day South African life, the dividing line between citizen and non-citizen is tenuous at best.

Research shows how the country's women (and especially poor, black women) remain unable to access their rights as citizens, in a way equal to men.

Already in 1999, Stellenbosch University's legal scholar Sandra Liebenberg wrote: "(T)o the extent that poor black women are excluded from effective access to social services, economic resources and opportunities we have failed to achieve full citizenship for all in South Africa." Today more than 20 years after the transition to democracy, not much has changed.

Black women remain the poorest group in South Africa. Poor black women are most exposed to the precarity of the low-skilled labour market, disproportionately affected by HIV infection, disproportionately burdened with the care of children, the sick and the elderly which often pushes them further into poverty or deprives girls of education.

These things make black women less able to claim and realise their rights and participate as citizens.

This exclusion manifests strikingly in the political discourse around immigration in South Africa. The justificatory narrative common to the xenophobic attacks is "they steal our jobs and our women".

This narrative reduces (black) South African women to property or a commodity reserved for South African men and migrant women to the property or baggage of migrant men. This discourse tells us some-



AZILLE COETZEE

thing about citizenship in the new South Africa: it remains a male affair. A major way in which the second-class citizenship of women in South Africa manifests is the epidemic of ceaseless sexual violence, which goes mostly unreported in the media, unpunished by the criminal justice system and overlooked by politicians and the citizenry.

In her book *Rape: A South African Nightmare* (2015) Pumla Gqola looks to the colonial history of South Africa in an attempt to explain the woeful inadequacy of the new South African nation's response to the problem of sexual violence.

She argues that throughout the country's history of slavery, colonialism and apartheid, the rape of black women was legally, morally and socially sanctioned.

This is because the bodies of black women were regarded to be the property of slave owners, or even when they were not slaves, black women were constructed as primitively hyper sexual and therefore no sexual act perpetrated against them was regarded to qualify as non-consensual.

Gqola contends that in this way a "register of rape" informed with the stereotype of the "unrappable Black woman" was introduced into South African society by slavery,



INJURY: Throughout the country's history of slavery, colonialism and apartheid, the rape of black women was legally, morally and socially sanctioned, says the writer.

Picture: AP/African News Agency (ANA)

entrenched by colonial conquest and further cemented by apartheid.

Today we have not yet managed to dismantle this colonial paradigm in terms of which human subjectivity is modelled on (white) masculinity and in terms of which the black woman, on account of her difference to this standard, is not politically apprehended as fully human, and is not regarded to fully own her body.

Gqola's concept of the unrappable black woman can be understood in terms of American philosopher Judith Butler's concept of ungrievability.

Butler makes a distinction between grievable and ungrievable

lives. She argues that we apprehend the world through politically saturated frames through which only some lives appear or register to us as fully human.

In other words, what we are able to perceive as a human life is limited by the prevailing political paradigm and public discourse through which the cultural conditions of a fully human life are established.

The violence done to those who do not appear as fully human fails to injure or negate those lives, it leaves a mark that is no mark, because these lives never really "were".

Injury to such lives is not publicly grieved. This does not mean that such people do not exist and do

not suffer terrible injury or loss of life, it is just that the injury done to these lives is not recognised as such in society, because the life at stake is not apprehended as fully human.

Gqola's argument can be restated in Butler's terms: the injury caused to the bodies and lives of black women in South Africa, produces no publicly grievable loss or harm.

It leaves a mark that is no mark, because, in the political frame through which the world appears to us, still saturated with colonial logic and slave history that have the white male at its centre, the black woman falls outside the cultural contours of being fully human with full political agency.

The ongoing crisis of sexual violence in South Africa, and enduring second-class citizenship of especially poor black women, reflects our failure to dismantle the legacy of colonial modernity through which the humanity of the black woman is doubly negated (on account of being black and woman), and according to which the injuries she suffers fail to produce publicly grievable harms.

Butler argues that the public grieving of a life is nothing less than an act of nation building.

The lives that register as grievable in our society publicly signals which lives qualify for recognition, as lives worth noting, valuing and

preserving in the nation at stake. In so far as it reflects the cultural conditions of being fully human, the lives we grieve and those we don't articulate something fundamental about our self-understanding as humans and as citizens.

Every time we fail to grieve publicly and collectively for the injuries suffered by black women, we are taking part in building a nation according to a vicious colonial paradigm, in terms of which maleness and/or whiteness remain requirements for full citizenship and a truly human life.

● Coetzee is a postdoctoral fellow at the SARChI Chair in Gender Politics at Stellenbosch University.

