

# Coercive sexual practices and gender-based violence on a university campus

Lindsay Clowes, Tamara Shefer, Elron Fouten, Tania Vergnani and Joachim Jacobs

## abstract

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When a 22-year-old University of the Western Cape (UWC) female student was stabbed to death by her boyfriend (another student) in her room in the university residence on 25 August 2008, the entire campus was left reeling. Bringing the stark reality of gender-based violence (GBV) so close to home, the tragedy was a powerful reminder of the limits of more than a decade of legislative change, concerted activism, education, consciousness-raising and knowledge production aimed at challenging gender-based power inequalities. This article reflects on the relationships between violence, coercion and heterosexuality on a specific campus by drawing on data generated by a qualitative study at UWC that explored student constructions of heterosexual relationships in the light of national imperatives around HIV/AIDS and GBV.

Involving 20 focus groups with male and female students over the course of 2008 and 2009, the study revealed that unequal and coercive practices are common in heterosexual relationships on this campus. The study underlined the necessity of understanding these relationships as produced through power inequalities inherent in normative gender roles, and also drew attention to ways in which gender power inequalities intersect in complex and sometimes contradictory ways with other forms of inequality on campus – in particular, class, age and geographical origin.

While both men and women students appeared to experience pressure (linked to peer acceptance and material gain) to engage in (hetero)sexual relationships, it seems that first-year female students from poor, rural backgrounds are particularly vulnerable to the transactional and unequal relationships associated with coercive and sometimes even violent sexual practices. Alcohol and substance abuse also appear to be linked to unsafe and abusive sexual practices, and again it is young female students new to campus life who are most vulnerable. This article draws on the data from this larger study to explore experiences and understandings of the most vulnerable – young female students – in unpacking connections between (hetero)sexuality and violent and coercive sex in an educational institution.

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## keywords

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sexuality, gender, coercive sex, gender-based violence, university students



*Lithemba Jama (left) was murdered by her boyfriend in her room at res at UWC. From the Facebook site In Memory of Lithemba Jama.*

The murder of a 22-year-old female student at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) by her boyfriend, another student, in her room in a university residence on 23 August 2008 (*Cape Times*, 25 August 2008) left the entire campus community reeling. Bringing the stark reality of gender-based violence (GBV) so close to home, the tragedy was a powerful reminder of the limits of more than a decade of legislation, activism, education, consciousness-raising and knowledge production aimed at challenging gender-based power inequalities.

The ways in which gender inequalities continue to intersect with economic and other forms of social inequality such as age and status in the negotiation of heterosexual have been widely illustrated. Studies have shown that the articulation of gender with

age and class in particular tends to position poor, young women as more vulnerable to coercive sexual practices as well as HIV infection (Harrison et al., 2001; National Progressive Primary Health Care Network (NPPHCN), 1995; Shefer et al., 2000; Strebel, 1993; Varga and Makubalo, 1996). The latest National HIV Prevalence, Incidence, Behaviour and Communication Survey (Shisana et al., 2009) foregrounds intergenerational sex between young women and older and better resourced men ('sugar daddies') as a significant risk factor for young women with respect to their vulnerability to both HIV and inequitable relationships. Notably, the percentage of women with sexual partners more than 5 years older than them has increased from 18.5% in 2005 to 27.6% in 2008.

A number of Southern African studies suggest that peer pressure combined with the material aspirations of young women in contemporary consumer cultures also contributes to and reinforces trends towards transactional sex with older and better resourced men (Dunkle et al., 2004; Leclerc-Madlala, 2004; Masvawure, 2009; Shefer, 2009, Harrison, 2008; NPPHCN, 1995; Varga and Makubalo, 1996). Such findings emphasise the vulnerability of young and poor women to transactional relationships in which they are increasingly at risk of unsafe, coercive and abusive heterosexual practices.

Reflecting on the relationships between violence, coercion and heterosexuality at a specific educational institution, this article draws on data generated by a study conducted at the UWC over the course of 2008 and 2009. Employing a feminist qualitative methodology the study explored student constructions of heterosexual relationships in the light of national imperatives around HIV/AIDS and GBV.

### **Unequal and coercive practices are reportedly common within intimate heterosexual relationships on this campus**

Participants were recruited to a total of 20 focus groups each containing 6-10 students through a convenience sampling method via lectures and practical groups. Although we attempted to stratify the sample across age, gender, language, 'race', class and culture, as a qualitative study the sample was not representative of the full body of the student population. Run by experienced facilitators with backgrounds in counselling and research and who matched each focus group's demographics as far as possible, discussions explored student discourses around heterosexual practices on campus. Students were not asked about their own sexual practices.

All standard ethical procedures for conducting research were adhered to, with particular attention

to issues of confidentiality and anonymity given the stigmatisation of HIV and the sensitivity of issues that may have inadvertently emerged through group discussion.

In revealing that unequal and coercive practices are reportedly common within intimate heterosexual relationships on this campus, the study also exposed some of the complex ways in which gendered power relations intersect with other expressions of social inequality, as well as ways in which these consistently privilege men at the expense of women students. The study underlines that unequal gender relations need to be understood as mutually intersecting with a variety of expressions of social power inequalities in ways that generate and maintain normative practices, positioning younger and poorer women students in locations of increased vulnerability to threats or manifestations of abuse or violence.

The abuse, coercion and violence apparently characterising so many intimate heterosexual relationships on this campus are particular expressions of much broader forms of GBV that consistently threaten and/or limit women's life opportunities relative to men.

### **The sexualisation of campus**

The students involved in this study reported that they experienced the campus as a highly sexualised space, reinforcing Ergene et al.'s (2005) observations that young people become more sexually active after arriving at university. As at tertiary institutions elsewhere (see, for example, Page et al., 2000; Seloilwe, 2005; Adam and Mutungi, 2007), not only was it perceived to be easier to engage in casual sexual interactions on campus than off, there was also considerable pressure to engage in such interactions on campus:

"It also makes sense to come party here, because of the vibe that's created on campus, they are more open. I don't want to say it's

easier to have sex on campus, but there's a certain flow of things, easier to click into certain groups, certain kinds of girls. Off campus it's more individual; on campus you know where to get it." (Group 1)

"You get here and it's a different culture. He thinks everyone's having sex but him. He feels the pressure, he needs new sneakers, also feels that pressure to look a certain way, to dress a certain way to attract a girl, to fit in. His friends think he's odd because he hasn't had sex yet, he's been here 2 months and he hasn't had sex yet." (Group 1)

"There is great pressure in the relationship to have sex ... a big concern, a big problem is that sex is a must now these days, it's a must basically." (Group 14)

"As a student there is a lot of pressure to engage in sexual activities. There is a common 'idea of what a student should be like.' This image includes having fun and having sex. Those that don't appear to fit this mould are labelled nerdy." (Group 15)

"I suppose, because what people really think is that when you come to college, you're definitely going to have sex. You're going to have the time of your life. That's what most people tell you when you're in high school, like everything – you get sex easily. So they spread that kind of pressure on you that, 'I need to get this, I need to get sex more' and stuff like that. So ja, there's some kind of pressure there." (Group 17)

Understandings of campus as a sexualised space were articulated in a variety of ways. On the one hand, students observed that there was relatively open discussion around sex; at the same time, there was limited privacy, feeding into the

imperatives to conform to the peer pressures hinted at above:

"Sex and sexual activities are openly discussed amongst friends. There is a lot of discussion about sex which makes sex seem casual. Video clips of people engaging in sex are common. There is little privacy around sex, sex is frequently in the public arena." (Group 15)

"We do talk about sex, I mean in my block we've got those condom trailers and every time I refill them from the supply in the office. Like this Monday there was nothing left in the condom trailers and everyone knows who's dating who, who's having sex with who. People know, guys talk, guys are worse than girls." (Group 1)

The sexualisation of campus was also linked to specific activities and spaces:

"But I think on campus there are a few venues where you can have sex"

"Like the toilets"

"Definitely the toilets"

"I think one of the tu[orial] rooms in GH"

"I heard about the one on top of the caf[etaria].

My friends actually saw/caught people having sex on the top of the caf. There's like a room there somewhere – a lot of people spoke about it." (Group 2)

Particular spaces – and the activities that accompanied them – were understood as more highly sexualised than others, such as 'Condom Square', the vacant ground adjacent to the student bar, known as 'The Barn':

"What I've heard also... is that the GH lecture halls is a very popular place, the ground floor

by C Block is also a very popular place, where else, oh, Condom Square where the cars are parked." (Group 1)

"There's a place called The Barn on campus where basically people hook up from there, you know what I mean like. And then they go to res[idence] and it happens in that way." (Group 3)

As noted by Zuckerman and Kuhlman (2000), in the context of the pressure to be sexually active in a space that is relatively free of adult limits, alcohol (and other substances) were understood to further contribute to the sexualisation of particular spaces and locations:

"... and smoking dagga and things. You know, then, then the people, it become a norm, you go there, that spot is there where we smoke dagga, you go [there]. So [giggles] it just becomes a norm to party on campus." (Group 19)

"I think especially, in res, where, you know like, with people in res, it's just the case of they don't have the confinement of 'mom and dad', and 'granny and grandpa', or whoever they are living with. It's just a case of it's free for all, there's The Barn, I can go party until whatever. And, and, like she said, the smoking and the drinking, it's something that they weren't allowed to do in their mom's house... And also because everyone else is doing it, there's pressure to do it too." (Group 20)

### Age and gender

As outlined above, a common theme emerging out of focus group discussions was the extent to which all students report themselves to be touched by the sexualisation of campus, although the specifics of this are shaped in different ways. As suggested above, those living in residence are

perceived to be more vulnerable to pressures to conform than those living off campus. However, as Shisana et al. (2009) have observed in other contexts, age is another important mediator in student understandings and experiences of the sexualised campus. First-year female students were understood to be the particular targets of older male students, highlighting their increased vulnerability to unwanted and possibly coercive sexual practices:

"Especially like all the older guys they go to The Barn 'coz they know all those first years will be there. Then they buy them drinks and drinks and wait till they're drunk then they know the ladies will just be vulnerable and not know themselves, they can sleep with them." (Group 7)

"They were all over me, it's like they can smell fresh blood, it's like I don't know if they think you gonna give in easily 'coz you first year and you're naive or what." (Group 8)

"The whole thing behind that is in first year you're naive, still trying to find your ground so being seen with someone of that calibre that will boost you up a bit and boost your self-confidence." (Group 1)

If age and newness on campus is foregrounded in the comments above, so too is gender. This emerges strongly in the connections between alcohol and sexual interactions, which tend to be experienced differently by male and female students, specifically in ways that position female students as vulnerable relative to male students:

"When people go to the bar, nè, you find that chicks are going to find guys that are going to buy them booze and everything. And then after that they – the guy – they wanna go with you to their rooms. It doesn't just end there." (Group 17)

"I have a friend, like when we at The Barn, she leaves with guys, like every week it's different guys. Because she drinks, she's out of it she doesn't remember a thing, she's out of control." (Group 1)

"Ja, I've heard my friends saying that if you want girls you should just get to The Barn, then you'll get whatever that you want, because they just get drunk and they throw themselves at the guys like you know, and they said it's very easy to get a girl if the girl is very drunk." (Group 3)

In contrast, older male students (and in particular those with access to financial or other resources) are positioned in ways that privilege them while simultaneously placing them at the increased risk associated with multiple partners:

"Yes, you'll see at the beginning of the year now first years, these kids come, they're vulnerable. A lot of seniors and people from off campus and the seniors are like lions they come into our residences. And you know you feel flattered, like 'oh he likes me, I'm gonna have a steady boyfriend'. Then they go into it for a short-term relationship. And not knowing that this guy's got a steady girlfriend... he's been here for ages and done this before. And so they use the girls." (Group 1)

While it is clear that all students experience campus as a sexualised space, it is also clear that whether a student lives on or off campus, as well as a student's age, class and gender are all important signifiers of how individual students are likely to understand and experience this. Of these gender is particularly important in shaping experience and we explore this in more detail below. As discussed below historically specific processes of gendered socialisation mean that men and women enter into intimate sexual relationships with differential

access to resources and to power as well as with different expectations, hopes and obligations. These differences lay the foundations for sexual interactions that position young female students as increasingly vulnerable to unsafe, coercive and abusive heterosexual practices on campus.

## Gender, sexuality and culture on campus

Essentialist understandings of gender permeated and underpinned discussions around sexuality on campus, with male sexuality perceived to be a 'force of nature', as dominant and assertive, as difficult to control and often requiring more than one partner. In contrast, women were generally imagined to be more interested in relationships than sex, to be passive, submissive, monogamous and nurturing:

"...men have to initiate sexual contact." (Group 13)

"There are so many factors that lead to sexual encounters, especially in students, most of them are adolescents, influenced by peer pressure .... And also some of the reasons is like force, force of nature like, they may force, the ladies like, their dress, their lives, the way they dress, normally makes the man go wild, like, they go for it, so sometimes it can be forceful nature that leads to sexual, you know." (Group 6)

"And you see little signs of domination all the time on campus, with guys and girls like, just the way a guy holds the girl, it's almost like 'She's mine,' you know and 'I'm resting my arm here.'"

"I think females have, have more monogamous relationships. But males, because of our society, like or, or we have to be like, males if

you, if you have more than one sexual partner, you're like cool." (Group 5)

"... the girls, they do want to be in a stable relationship. But you know how guys are? Guys they get what they want and then they leave." (Group 11)

"This girl was calling him and he said 'we only had sex once or twice' and he never asked her out and now she thinks they're dating. He just goes there if he's hungry, and he gets himself satisfied and then he leaves." (Group 1)

Women who challenged these stereotypes risked being stigmatised:

"Girls are easily labelled slutty, whereas it's ok for men to sleep around. Men can sleep with lots of girls." (Group 15)

"We've been taught a woman can't ask, even if you feel like, you won't ask, you won't make the first step." (Group 6)

"It's not just your family, what they think of you, also with your friends, what they think of you. If you're a girl and you're always sleeping with a lot of guys, your friends might get the wrong impression, so it's also the community at large, the people you link with, you'd like them to get a good impression." (Group 1)

Students recognised the double standards inherent in these differing expectations of young women and men, and linked these with culturally specific normative expectations around gender. At the same time they also understood this gendered and sexualised culture to be implicated in high levels of male violence against women:

"There are double standards. Men, like I said, men can have many sexual partners, but we

as girls. And I will know that my boyfriend is this and this, it's fine. But if he can find out about me it won't be OK." (Group 7)

"I have a friend that has those kind of theories that 'No a man is built to be violent and I'm there to nurture him, not to soften him but to put him on the straight and narrow'." (Group 3)

"I think it's our culture, our roots, it's the main thing that has polluted us and polluted our minds. We believe that guys are always right, they are always guys. Like the mother will say if he's cheating on you it's you doing something wrong, you are to blame." (Group 7)

"Well, I think this whole loving being in abusive relationships goes back to where we grow up. You know, because most of the time we grow up in societies where abuse is there, you know, abuse is so there... we've been raised and have grown up in families or in societies where abuse has been part of that; you see this father beating the wife, and it's not wrong – it's what a husband should be doing anyway, so I think to some extent we tend to have that in our minds, that as the woman it's my responsibility to be there for a man irrespective of what is happening." (Group 3)

Culture, these students seem to be saying, is both gendered and sexualised in ways (albeit different) that are damaging to men and women. Men are able to draw on this gendered and sexualised culture in ways that expose them to higher risk of becoming a perpetrator of violence, and a higher risk of picking up sexually transmitted infections and/or HIV through an assertive sexuality and multiple partners. While women may not be encouraged to have multiple partners, they remain exposed to a variety of risks, having less bodily integrity and limited autonomy over their sexuality.

They are tasked – often at high personal cost - with the nurturing work involved in maintaining intimate relationships, and tend to be on the receiving end of violence within these.

It is within this context of multiple, competing and mutually constitutive inequalities built around gender, class, age, sexuality and culture that younger female students are located in very particular positions of vulnerability on campus. As we discuss below, one very specific expression of this is the inherently unequal interactions that occur through transactional sexual relationships on campus.

### Transactional sex

Supporting some of the observations of Adam and Mutungi (2007), focus group discussions revealed that age, class, gender, culture and sexuality operate together to generate a context in which, in exchange for the material benefits residing in their positions of seniority or privilege, older male students are able to obtain sexual favours from younger female students. For benefits as concrete as food or money, as intangible as ‘status’ or as nebulous as help with assignments and assessments, female students are reportedly willing to provide sex:

“I can see at residence when you come from your home you are used to, I don’t want to say a primitive life, but you are used to whatever, not very materialistic, and now you come here and you meet people who come from very well-off homes and they dress up and everything, and you also want to fit in and everything, and that’s why they date older men, date guys with cars. They know they can get cash, they can buy clothes, because there’s poverty at residence. You live on bread and peanut butter.” (Group 1)

“Especially females who live at res, they have transactional sex, they do it for money. And

there’s also this phenomenon where they speak about ‘friends with benefits’.” (Group 2)

“Ja, cars and money. But not like money, but more the status.” (Group 13)

“... for coloured guys if you’re Capetonian and you have a car, it doesn’t matter, you can look like Shrek but if you have a car you’ll get a girl. It doesn’t have to be your car or your money, but as long as you have it in your possession you’ll get the girl.” (Group 1)

“Some of them they use their portfolios from within the university, ‘No I’m on the SRC’, ‘I’m this on the Law Students Council’, ‘I drive the Venture for the SRC’ - some power, some position, that’s how they get it.” (Group 1)

“I’ve heard friends of mine say ‘You know, I will go for him, he will help me, he will write my thesis’. It happened.” (Group 6)

It was not simply older male students who took advantage of their privileged positions to obtain sexual favours. Reinforcing the findings of Shisana et al. (2009), adult men employed off campus apparently also exchanged money and food for sex with female students:

“Especially on res, this new thing of having Sugar Daddies, and having rich men actually taking care of them. ... And then later on, they would be, they would like [write] them their love, so the men would call them, and like ... ‘I don’t have money to come to you’. So that’s the first transaction.” (Group 9)

As outlined above, the daily lived experience of a sexualised, gendered and patriarchal culture presents young women on campus with particular sets of choices. While these are mediated by age



and class, the structural and systemic limitations to women's opportunities that they express need to be understood as a form of (the very essence of?) GBV. The connections between gender, transactional sex, economic inequality and violence can sometimes be very direct:

"I might be with a guy who hits me all the time, and I just want to be with him ... because of his car." (Group 13)

That they can also be far less overt does not detract from their power to constrain, and from the discussion above it is clear that a wide variety of unequal and coercive practices are common and normative within heterosexual relationships on this campus.

## Conclusion

While it may be suggested that university represents an opportunity for young women and men to explore their sexuality and construct equitable relationships given the insights they are offered with respect to critical perspectives on gender and sexualities, focus group discussions suggested that traditional gendered sexual roles in which double standards on sexuality prevail are still evident on campus. Thus women students who challenged sexual norms on this campus tended to be punished. Heterosexual practices were characterised by inequality and coercion, according to the participants in this study. In addition, student discourses reveal how inequality and coercion cannot be understood outside normative gender roles and gender power inequalities as well as their complex intersections with other forms of inequality, in this case primarily class and age.

The study foregrounds the way in which (in common with campuses elsewhere), campus life at UWC appears to be highly sexualised, with pressure on both men and women to engage in (hetero)sexual relationships. This imperative appears to be linked to peer acceptance as well

as material gain. Thus it seems that first-year female students from poor backgrounds, who are new to campus life, are particularly vulnerable to transactional and unequal relationships that are associated with coercive sexual practices and violence, and that alcohol and substance abuse are further factors implicated in this vulnerability. For young women students in particular the daily lived experience of these multiple inequalities and the particular context of campus life may constitute a form of violence through the constraints on choice and opportunity: these inequalities operate together to generate systemic and structural limitations to female students' options on campus.

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LINDSAY CLOWES is a Senior Lecturer in the Women's and Gender Studies programme at the University of the Western Cape. An historian by training, her research explores power inequalities as expressed through the mutually intersecting binaries of gender, sexuality and race, with a particular interest in masculinities. She is a public representative on the Press Council of South Africa. Email: [clowesl@mweb.co.za](mailto:clowesl@mweb.co.za)



TAMARA SHEFER is director and professor of the Women's and Gender Studies Programme at the University of the Western Cape. Her research and publications are primarily in the areas of (hetero)sexual relationships, HIV/AIDS, gender and sexual identities, masculinities, the politics of knowledge production, authorship and higher education, and critical, feminist psychology. She has published four academic books, the most recent being *The Gender of Psychology* (2006) and *From Boys to Men* (2007), two popular texts and a wide range of journal articles. Email: [tshefer@icon.co.za](mailto:tshefer@icon.co.za)



ELRON FOUTEN lectures in the Psychology Department and on the Women's and Gender Studies Programme at the University of the Western Cape. His research interests are Social Identities and Oppression, Psychology of Men and Masculinities, Gender, Stigma and HIV/AIDS. His areas of teaching are social psychology, human development and research methods. Email: [efouten@uwc.ac.za](mailto:efouten@uwc.ac.za)



TANIA VERGNANI is currently the Director of the HIV and AIDS Programme at the University of the Western Cape. She is a registered clinical psychologist and also an associate professor in the Faculty of Education at UWC. She has extensive experience in training teachers in sexuality, life skills and HIV and AIDS education, writing of school textbooks in this field, programme evaluation, curriculum design and project management. She also has expertise in the design, management, delivery and evaluation of HIV and AIDS prevention programmes, with a special focus on youth risk behaviour and behaviour change interventions. Email: [tvergnani@uwc.ac.za](mailto:tvergnani@uwc.ac.za)



JOACHIM J. JACOBS is a Programme Manager in the HIV & AIDS Programme at the University of the Western Cape. His primary field of specialisation is HIV and AIDS Peer Education with a strong focus on programme design. He has extensive experience of working in a collaborative context in the sub-Saharan region and has presented the findings of these projects at a number of national and international conferences. Email: [jjjacobs@uwc.ac.za](mailto:jjjacobs@uwc.ac.za)

