

South Africa: Activist Groups Work to End Violence against Lesbians

Special Report by Evan Barton Edited by Aisha Mohammed

With the battle for marriage equality taking precedence in the U.S., it's easy to forget that in many countries, including parts of the United States, gays and lesbians are denied their basic right to life and liberty. In South Africa, where gays and lesbians have been able to marry since 2006, many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) organizations are mobilizing to curb the tide of "corrective rape" against lesbians.

"There's a very particular motivation around attacks on lesbian women," said Emily Craven, co-coordinator of the [Joint Working Group](#) (JWG), which is a coalition of LGBT organizations across South Africa.

Craven, who is based in Johannesburg, cited testimonial statements by South African sex offenders who felt that by raping lesbians, they could "fix" them and make them realize how sex with men is good. Craven suggests that the motivation for lesbian rape stems from how lesbians upset traditional notions about gender. "All gay and lesbian people undermine patriarchal society, but lesbian women do something quite specific in making a statement that they don't require men, either for economic support or for sexual pleasure. I think many men find that threatening."

The South African Constitution [protects gays and lesbians from discrimination](#), yet its ideals are not always enforced by government officials. Deep-seated traditional values remain with many people in the country, and rape charges are often ignored by lesbians living in the South African townships.

Roughly comparable to the banlieues of Paris, the townships are urban residential areas surrounding the city center. During apartheid they were set aside for non-white racial groups, and many of the nation's poor and working-class blacks still live in them. Craven and others implied that lesbian rape could be ameliorated if township officials took the charges more seriously.

“We’ve got this beautiful constitution with beautiful rights, but to be honest with you, they are not implemented,” said Dikeledi Sibanda, a program manager with the [Forum for the Empowerment of Women](#) (FEW) in Johannesburg.



The issue of corrective rape in South Africa gained international attention after the rape and murder of Eudy Similane, the former star of South Africa’s female soccer league. Yet corrective rape is only a subset of South Africa’s systemic problems concerning violence against women. According to the NGO [ActionAid](#), for every 25 men accused of rape in South Africa, 24 walk free.

According to [Triangle Project](#), an LGBT organization based in Cape Town, Thato Mphiti’s conviction based on charges of raping and murdering Similane is the first conviction out of 30 lesbian murder cases in the past decade. Every month, dozens of lesbian corrective rapes are reported in Western Cape Province alone.

Sibanda said the non-LGBT community must be informed about LGBT issues in order to curb the rate of lesbian corrective rape. “We must make sure that when we do our workshops, our conferences, our awareness campaigns, that we include the

community as well. They want to know, they want to be part of it, but we are not giving them that space to express themselves, or say why they have this hate with the LGBT people.”

Many activists in the South African LGBT rights community suggest violence against lesbians stems in part from South Africa’s patriarchal culture and values, along with its endemic problems with violence. Kamohelo Malinga, an archivist with [Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action](#) in the Johannesburg suburb of Braamfontein, said many people think homosexuals arise out of the Western influence in the country. “There’s the thought that homosexuals aren’t African. That they’re a Western decadence.”

Muhsin Hendrix, who directs a Muslim LGBT organization called The Inner Voice in Cape Town, cited cultural differences in explaining his views on the prevalence of lesbian rape in South Africa. Most of the reported violence against lesbians was committed by South Africa’s black majority, who Hendrix feels hold different values about gender than the largely Muslim Cape Malays. “The kind of violence that we experience is more of families ostracizing their kids and disinheriting them. We haven’t had an incident where a family has physically attacked anyone,” he said.

Much of The Inner Voice’s work in Cape Town concerns getting Muslim families to accept their LGBT children, and to encourage mosques and other Islamic organizations to reserve a place for gays and lesbians. Hendrix suggests that anti-LGBT violence is more cultural than religious, however, citing the honor killings of women in the Near East. Many cultures in the Arabian Peninsula, he suggests, hold a pre-Islamic tradition of familial honor, and men from those cultures are more likely to feel justified in “honor killing” female family members who threaten the family’s honor by engaging in any type of relationship deemed inappropriate.

Malinga, however, suggests that gays and lesbians do sometimes have a place in traditional African culture. Sangomas, the female shamans and medicine women of the Xhosa people, may sometimes take a female spouse, based upon the interests of their lead ancestor, for whom they act a conduit. Anthropologists from the early 1900s also found that there were sometimes

same-sex marriages in the rural parts of the country.



Carolyn Bowley, a program director at Cape Town-based [Gender Dynamix](#), spoke about transgender/transsexual people in South Africa, citing how they are sometimes the victims of rape and assault due to their visible position outside the gender dichotomy. Gender Dynamix campaigns to create employment opportunities for transgendered people, and also works with schools to keep transgendered students from being kicked out because of disputes about gender-appropriate uniforms and behavior.

In addition to working directly with those affected by LGBT discrimination, Craven suggests that raising awareness is critical to reducing lesbian rape and sexual violence in general. The [Triple-7 Campaign](#), which was started by JWG but includes non-LGBT women and HIV/AIDS organizations, holds the goal of ending hate crime in South Africa. The campaign uses incidents of hate-motivated violence as a platform to engage both communities and the judicial system, and to push their message of tolerance into the media.

Photos from [blackchristiannews.net](#) and [change.org](#).