

Women's Fear and Survival in Inner-city Johannesburg

by

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Lisa Vetten and Joy Dladla speak to women about the threat of sexual violence and the strategies they employ to ensure their safety

How do women ensure their safety and recognise danger in a country where rape has become all-pervasive? In pursuit of some answers to these questions, we conducted focus groups and interviews with a variety of women living and/or working in inner-city Johannesburg. These included homeless women, commercial sex workers operating from the hotels in Hillbrow, female security guards working for Central Johannesburg Partnership (CJP) in central Johannesburg, and women waste management workers. The descriptive preliminary findings outlined here form part of a larger, ongoing project exploring the relationship between space, time and sexual violence in inner-city Johannesburg.¹

Women's Experiences of Sexual Violence

Exploring women's experiences of sexual violence highlighted a continuum of coercive sexual behaviours² that ranged from sexual harassment to rape. For the commercial sex workers, the coercive nature of some of their experiences was aggravated in no small way by, the illegal, stigmatised nature of their work.

Observed one woman of her experience of being arrested:

If you do not have a boyfriend to pay to bail you out, they (the police) ask to fuck you and promise that they will let you out He will fuck you and then call his friend and tell him 'She'll let you do it because she wants to go out.' He tells you he is coming and then another one comes in and wants to sleep with you and the next thing, they knock off in the morning. (C, commercial sex worker, 3 February 2000)

Commented another woman of her experiences with clients:

Some take you to their house and if you refuse to do what he wants he threatens

to make you jump out of a window. He'll tell you to decide, 'Either jump or do what I want you to do.' ... One may take you to his place. He might want to call his friends... . The next thing he doesn't want to use condoms because already you are at his place you can't tell him anything. Some of them stay with other people, maybe there are four men in a flat. After making love to you he expects to call the other ones to come and do whatever because he has paid you. He tells them 'You can do whatever you want, the money has been paid already'. (D, commercial sex worker, 3 February 2000)

In addition, women had experienced a range of other forms of violence including mugging, robbery at either gun or knife-point, and assaults. They had also witnessed murders, rapes, robberies and assaults on others. However, not all of these incidents had occurred in inner-city Johannesburg.

Negotiating Safety and Danger in Inner-city Johannesburg

Not all women shared the perception that central Johannesburg is extremely dangerous. For at least one woman, Johannesburg was safer than Soweto, which she moved from after a man attempted to rob her at knife point, of her salary. Lesbians living in the surrounding townships also found central Johannesburg safer. Expressing, or acting on an attraction to other women, was seen as less risky in Johannesburg than in a township environment.³

Avoidance was perhaps the most common strategy women adopted, even when it resulted in inconvenience to themselves:

Where I get off a taxi in the morning, there is a passage where there are people who are just standing around. I don't go through the passage because they will rob me. It takes me longer to get where I am going because I have to go around but I would rather do that than be robbed. (E, security guard, 18 February 2000)

The regulation is that I have to limit the time that I spend outside of the place because I am afraid that if I stay out beyond a certain time - six o'clock - I may get hurt. It is because the area is unsafe that makes us limit the time we spend outside. If I am late I sleep at the place wherever I am to save my life. (J, homeless woman, 30 April 2000)

Sometimes negotiations may be entered into with other people:

I live on Louis Botha. My bus stop is near the building. The bus stop is also next to a disco, 24 hours. As a result I have asked the bus driver of the bus that I take to pick me up in front of the flat. I asked him because I was afraid to wait for the bus in front of the nightclub. It is worse on a Saturday because transport is scarce. Sometimes while you wait for transport people come out of the club and they are stabbing each other and you are afraid because a person may also stab you. (B, waste management worker, 22 February 2000)

These avoidance zones were constructed around particular streets and spaces, based on the associations created between people, activities and events. Every group, for instance,

highlighted Quartz Street in Hillbrow as being dangerous while Hillbrow and Joubert Park as a whole were also frequently described as unsafe areas.

This particular waste management worker highlights how Beit Street became associated with danger for her:

Another place, it is in Doornfontein on Beit Street Week before last week, we were working there and we heard a girl screaming there. She was screaming, asking for help. Saying that they were raping her. We went over there and found the woman. The police came and the man was caught. (D, waste management worker, 22 February 2000)

The presence of men, whether alone or in groups, was also associated with danger:

When you get in there to use the toilets you find a man standing on a hill near the bridge. He is just waiting there so that if you get inside the toilet he will jump you Rape you and finish with you. If you are unlucky he will also stab you. (C, waste management worker, 22 February 2000)

Where I live I don't use the train station in front of my flat. I don't use it because it is usually deserted and quiet and most of the people who walk there are men. Women are very few. Most of the time if you go there, you are alone. (B, security guard, 18 February 2000)

On the other hand, men was also thought to offer a degree of protection and some women ensured that they were accompanied by men while walking home.

Certain women - specifically commercial sex workers and homeless women - were also seen as signifying danger, perhaps as a result of the kinds of activities associated with them.

Quartz is worse, there are places that are occupied by prostitutes. (A, waste management worker, 22 February 2000)

I live in Bertrams. The shop next to where I live has people who sell drugs right next to it so you are afraid to come out of the room at night, you are afraid because you do not know what could happen to you when these people are high because not only do they sell drugs, they also use them. The radio blares the whole night. When it is dark, they would not leave you alone, they could grab you. There is no safety also because there are prostitutes who live in the area. (D, waste management worker, 22 February 2000)

The creation of fear is also the result of social processes. Women became afraid of particular places not only through hearing about events on the news but also through talking to one another. In the process fear became generalised:

Sometimes it is gossip. Most of us haven't experienced rape. When people mention that something happened in Hillbrow, in your mind the whole of Hillbrow becomes unsafe. (A, commercial sex worker, 3 February 2000)

Possessing local knowledge of what has happened in particular spaces was also identified as important:

In the toilets on President and Delters a girl who had been raped was found inside the public toilets. There is also a street at the corner of Market and Delters where there are public toilets. A girl was raped in that place and she was killed. So a woman who does not know may walk into that place not knowing that it is unsafe, but there are taxis and a disco in that area and so the place is not safe. (A, waste management worker, 22 February 2000)

Holding myths about the causes of rape also served to provide women with a (false) sense of security.

It is women who drink that get raped. They drink so much and in the end they do not even know where they are. The way I see it, a person who sits at the disco until 10 at night, she is dancing and has to go home around 11. At that time it is late for a woman to be outside We also do not take care of ourselves. The way some women dress makes it easy for men to want to rape. Like the woman who was found raped and dead at the toilets, she looked like she was a prostitute. They sit at the discos, drink with the men and then when they are drunk, they leave the disco these men rape them. It is alcohol, a lot of women drink too much. A woman should look after herself. (A, waste management worker, 22 February 2000)

Rape happens when you walk in a place where it is very quiet. You meet a person in that place and he overpowers you and takes you to another place where he rapes you. I think that to avoid that from happening, women should not walk where there are no people, they should walk where there are a lot of people to be safe. (C, security guard, 18 February 2000)

However, another woman challenged this attempt to contain and isolate danger within strange men and deserted places:

But rape doesn't only happen in quiet places, sometimes even people you know, or a colleague could rape you. So it can be anywhere, so you must be careful about everyone. If you have been raped by someone you know, the police won't believe you. If it is someone who you know who rapes you it is also dangerous because he could rape you and threaten you and let you go or he could rape you and kill you so that you do not tell anyone. People will also say, we saw her walking with a person who is known to her. (A, security guard, 18 February 2000)

Finally, when confronted by imminent danger women employed a variety of strategies to protect themselves. These included attracting attention by shouting for workmates, keeping quiet and ignoring threatening individuals, fighting back, and lying (particularly about whether or not they had been paid).

Occupational Dangers

Municipal waste management workers (rather like the sex workers) often faced dangers that seemed heightened by the nature of their work, sometimes being caught in the cross-fire between the police and drug dealers or robbers. In addition drug dealers often hid their wares in dustbins. When the women unwittingly removed the rubbish bags and threw them away, they were threatened and harassed by the dealers. However, it seemed at least one woman had little sense of control over the occupational hazards of her job:

When you have to go and work in a place that you are afraid of you must put in a report so that if something happens, they know that you have reported. Besides that there is not much that you can really do. (C, waste management worker, 22 February 2000)

The sex workers employed quite particular strategies. Working from hotels, rather than the streets was a conscious decision to ensure safety. Not only are security guards present in all the hotels, but clients are expected to pay beforehand. Otherwise women warned one another about difficult men, or tried to ensure that they carried enough money to pay a taxi fare. In the event of a client refusing to pay for services, women would not have to take the chance of hitch-hiking or walking.

As was also highlighted by a number of women, the daily travel to and from work often exposed them to danger. The walk between workplaces, transport terminuses and homes, often after darkness had fallen, presented a number of opportunities that assailants took full advantage of.

City Improvement Districts

While a number of inner-city projects have been put in place to address the many concerns around safety and security, the deterioration of the inner-city and the flight of businesses, space does not permit their full discussion here. Instead we will focus briefly on the City Improvement Districts (CID) managed by CJP.⁴

A CID is a geographic area within which property owners and tenants agree to pay for certain services over and above those provided by local government. Services provided are determined by the needs of each particular area and include security, clean up, maintenance, marketing, and physical improvements. CIDs aim to turn around existing urban decay and decline by providing managed services that offer the friendly, clean and safe conditions thought necessary for investment and growth. The presence of mobile and foot patrols is thought to contribute to the maintenance of order, as well as provide reassurance of safety and security in public areas. The patrolling security guards constantly move around the blocks to ensure continuous surveillance of these areas and provide an additional uniformed presence on the streets.

However, given that property owners and tenants are expected to carry the costs of establishing a CID, it is no accident that CIDs are concentrated around Johannesburg's Central Business District (CBD). Areas highlighted by many of the women such as Quartz Street and Hillbrow are residential areas. With many of the residential blocks in this area

already failing to keep up with the costs of rentals and rates and owing large sums of money to the council, payment for any further costs or services is highly unlikely. Consequently, those areas benefitting from this service are the areas where business can afford the associated costs. Thus the privatisation of safety has the very real potential to further entrench inequalities between neighbourhoods and people.

A further aspect of the relationship between business and safety is the choice of when security guards are placed on the streets. By and large the security guards maintain their presence during working hours - a limitation the CJP security guards themselves acknowledge:

During the day when we are patrolling people are safe. It is when we are not around that these places become unsafe. When we leave at night then these places become unsafe, things happen. (B, security guard, 18 February 2000)

As for the police, women generally expressed contempt for their ability to ensure women's safety. In both the security guard group as well as the waste management group, instances of corruption and general unhelpfulness were put forward.

Conclusions

When you say that you are safe you are talking about living in a place that the government has given you where you can do what you like because you are living there legally. Then you can decide when you go out and when you come back. You are free. That is being safe, when you can make decisions yourself. (J, homeless woman, 30 April 2000)

For this particular homeless woman, safety is intrinsically bound up with having a home. By contrast, implicit in many sex workers' accounts, was the sense that notions of safety are intertwined with condom usage. Thus any strategy claiming to address women's sense of safety would, at the very least, have to take into account how a sense of safety is shaped by sexual orientation, occupation, socio-economic status and involvement in activities defined as either legitimate or illegitimate. A sense of safety is also relative, defined according to experiences in other places, as well as at other times. Feelings of safety or danger are also developed through complex associations between events, people and activities. Relationships of inequality between men and women, between women, and between neighbourhoods, are also expressed spatially. These dimensions of safety are not addressed by strategies which emphasise visible policing or changes to the built environment alone.

Finally, there is the distinction between public and private space to consider:

Yes it is more dangerous outside than when you are inside your home. This is because when you are working you have a constant worry because you don't know what is going to happen. (E, waste management worker, 22 February 2000)

Traditional approaches to safety often warn women to avoid certain public spaces at certain times, implying that women are safest in their homes. Yet, as a number of studies highlight,

⁵ home is frequently the most dangerous place for women to be - a fact consistently neglected in the design of safety strategies. Thus strategies aiming to address women's safety would need to address risk and danger in both private and public spheres. Paradoxically, public environments experienced as dangerous and chaotic may, in effect, drive women indoors - precisely the space where they are less safe.

References

Central Johannesburg Partnership (2000). 'Making Cities Safe, Clean and Vibrant Places', <http://www.cjp.co.za>

Hirschowitz R, Worku S and Orkin M (2000) Quantitative Research Findings on Rape in South Africa, Pretoria: Statistics South Africa.

Kelly L (1988) Surviving Sexual Violence, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Notes:

¹ This in brief is a shorter version of a paper presented at the Urban Futures conference held in Johannesburg, 10-14 July 2000.

² See Kelly (1998) for further discussion of the notion of violence against women as a continuum.

³ Interview with Pastor from Hope and Unity Church in Hillbrow which specifically caters for a gay and lesbian congregation (7 April 2000).

⁴ Information from this section is taken from the website address: <http://www.cjp.co.za/cids.htm>

⁵ See Statistics South Africa's report (Hirschowitz et al, 2000) for a summary of these studies.