Invisible Girls and Violent Boys:
Gender and gangs in South Africa

by

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The Limits of Available Research on Gangs

Women are almost completely left out of South African research on gangs (as researchers and researched). There is also no clear conceptualisation of what constitutes a gang, with writers sometimes treating a whole range of collective behaviours as the same phenomenon.[1] Writers also refer to different types of gangs without always specifying how they are similar to or different from one another.[2] Further, despite an emerging body of work on African gangs,[3] media and public attention remains focused on coloured gangs in the Western Cape. Additionally, apart from Glaser's work on *tsotsi*[4] gangs (1990), writers on African gangs have focused even less on women gang members than their counterparts writing on Western Cape gangs. Inevitably then, information in this article is mainly about coloured Western Cape gangs.[5]

Female gangsters are disrespected by male gangsters, researchers and police

Although the number of women drawn into gangs is increasing, they wield no power … Female gangsters have very little respect for anybody and seldom get respect from others. (NICRO and the Institute of Criminology 1990:6)

Unless featured in magazine articles,[6] the voices and experiences of women gang members are absent from writing on gangs. While some may highlight gender or women, this is typically confined to discussing the relationship between masculinity and gangs (discussions that are rarely comprehensive or rigorous) or to referring to women in their more traditional roles, including:

The victim.[7] This role emphasises the numerous ways in which women are abused and exploited, either through rape and other forms of sexual assault, or in the violent relationships they are frequently coerced into by male gang members.

The status-seeking and/or showpiece girlfriend.[8] Status seekers are said to gain prestige from being a gangster's girlfriend as well as a better standard of living. It has been suggested that women's materialistic demands and expectations of their boyfriends may be playing a part in young men's criminal activities (Segal, Pelo and Rampa 1999).[9] Showpieces - attractive girlfriends desired by many other men - confirm a gang member's

success as a man. As ornaments bolstering masculine egos, they were often dressed up in particular ways by their tsotsi boyfriends (Glaser 1990).

Property[10] or territory.[11] These closely linked perceptions of young women seem to underpin much of the victimisation young women experience. In much the same way that gang members 'own' their geographical territory, they seem to 'own' young women who live there. Gangs' control of territory has included preventing women from having relationships with men from outside territories (ibid), while schoolgirls crossing a gang's territory often ran the risk of sexual intimidation and rape by gang members (Bonner and Segal 1998).

Arguably then, the lack of respect for female gang members emanates not only from gang members but also from researchers. This marginalisation of female gangsters is part of the more general invisibility in South Africa of women engaged in violent or illegal activities.[12]

The South African Police Service's Crime Information and Analysis Centre cannot provide separate statistics on gang-related crime in South Africa (personal communication). However, an article in the September 1997 edition of *Marie Claire* quoted police sources stating that approximately 80 000 gangsters and 135 gangs[13] existed in Cape Town's townships.[14] Commissioner L Knipe, head of Serious and Violent Crimes in the Western Cape, is unable to place a figure on the number of women engaged in gang-related activities. He describes women as peripheral to gang activity and acting primarily as a support system to gang members (personal communication, 2000).

Women's Roles

Knipe identifies women's main role to be couriers, of drugs or firearms. This activity is particularly likely to be reserved for women because male police officers cannot body-search women. With too few female police officers available, women often do not get searched - a situation exploited as often as possible. In addition, women gang members shoplift, fraudulently use cheques stolen during housebreaking and robberies, and sell stolen goods. While also involved in gang-related murders and violence, women's use of violence is limited, compared to their male counterparts', a factor which apparently diminishes their prospects for promotion in gang hierarchies (Robertson 1996). Women gang members' greater involvement in economic rather than violent crimes would seem to correspond with patterns of female offending generally in South Africa (Munnik and Naude 1996).

The Past

An historical account of women's roles within gangs is provided by Glaser's 1990 study of tsotsi youth gangs on the Witwatersrand in the period 1935 to 1960. He records that the Berliners of Sophiatown had a 'women's wing', which was actively organised and in which women were trained to fight alongside the men and also wore the swastika, the gang tattoo.

The Berliners appear to have been the only gang then with a women's wing. Other tsotsi gangs drew on women in more peripheral ways. Termed '*noasisas*', these women were used as scouts, shoplifters and decoys. One noasisa, Stololo, who apparently had large breasts, would routinely distract shopkeepers by 'opening herself up' and then screaming that the shopkeeper was trying to rape her. In the uproar that ensued, tsotsis would rob the till (Glaser 1990:179). Girls would also fight girls from other gangs and act as spies. If a rival gang member took an interest in a gangster's girlfriend, she was sometimes encouraged to become involved with the rival. Her involvement was then used as an opportunity to gain information about the rival gang's strategies and secrets (ibid:178)

Older Women Do Have Power

Although the status of girls within gangs is low, it is clear that a few powerful and senior individual women gangsters have existed, and continue to exist. However, one gains the impression that the power of these women derives at least in part from their age. When ages are provided, they identify these more powerful women as being between their late 20s and 40s. However, whether it is age alone, or the confidence and experience associated with age - or merely survival - that grants women this greater status, needs to be further explored.

Mamang and Sinna emerged from the Berliners. Mamang was a boxer, weightlifter and gambler who was regarded as the head of the Berliners' women's wing. Sinna eventually headed up a gang in Meadowlands, which ruled the area for some time. Termed '*wildeperde*' or '*brekgat*' in Sophiatown (terms very similar to 'virgin'), they appear to have been some of the very few women able to exercise a certain degree of control over their sexual relations by not becoming either victims or showpieces - and so perhaps ensuring a certain amount of respect for themselves from the men (ibid:191). Sponono was another female gang leader; she led a gang in Alexandra in the 1950s. In an unusual reversal of gender roles, men were 'apparently scared of her and rarely risked refusing her advances' (ibid: 192). The other powerful female gangster that we know of was the remarkably named Bitch Never Die who operated during the late 1940s and 1950s. Those men she fancied, she too 'just took' (ibid:193).

More Recently

Mama America of the Americans gang in the Western Cape offers us a more contemporary insight into women in gangs. In her early 30s when she become drawn into gang activities, she cites unemployment and being a single parent as her reasons. A mandrax 'middleman' at one point, she has also become a legal assistant, arranging bail for gangsters. Mama America has also had her fair share of violent encounters, stabbing the wife of a rival gang leader who had shot at her son, as well as fighting with the police (Kiesouw 1997).

According to Pinnock (1987), the Mongrels, a Western Cape gang, had at least some women in leadership positions. One of these was the unnamed mother of Stone, the Mongrels' leader, and the other Fatima, Stone's 'extremely beautiful' wife. Both were

apparently crack shots with a hand gun and had taken part in shooting battles with opposing gangs. The Stalag 17s also had a woman in their leadership structure. Pinnock notes the presence of women at the 'centre of power', but he never explores why women enter gangs, nor their roles within them. Their voices are entirely absent from his otherwise illuminating writings.

Another powerful woman was 42-year-old Katie Ann Arendse, gunned down with her husband Faried Davids in 1998. Reputedly a senior member of the gang cartel The Firm, she was alleged to have run all the Heideveld shebeens as well as a network of shebeens running from the Cape Flats to the Boland[15] (*Cape Times*, 24 March 1998). Intelligence documents compiled in 1996 also listed her as a drug distributor (*Cape Times*, 23 March 1998).

Entering and Leaving Gangs

Data from the USA suggest that young women both enter and leave gangs at an earlier age than young men (Esbensen, Deschenes and Winfree 1999). It is impossible, given the lack of research, to know whether the same pattern exists in South Africa.[16] It has however been claimed that boys as young as 10 have been known to join gangs while 14 is the entry age for girls (Kiesouw 1997). Commissioner Knipe[17] suggests that girls enter gangs in their mid-teens, and Carol Munnik (Robertson 1996) says she was 15 when she entered the Mongrels. However, as the example of Mama America illustrates, women may also enter gangs as adults.

Women may limit their gang activities when they have small children and take them up again when they are older. Now in her mid-30s, Carol Munnik is apparently on leave from the Mongrels until her youngest child turns 10 (ibid). Women's involvement in gangs clearly changes over time, and perhaps not only in response to their child-rearing responsibilities. It may be useful to compare whether men's involvement is also affected by their child-rearing responsibilities. Mama America, for instance, speaks of how she told her son-in-law to curtail his gang activities once he had small children (Kiesouw 1997).

Why Don't More Young Women Join Gangs?

In an attempt to deal with boredom, youth such as the members of the Zebra Force look to the streets for entertainment, and often create their own forms of entertainment which invariably involve acts of bravado. This is also the place where youth are tutored into a life of violent crime and gangsterism. The Zebra Force also demonstrates that such gangs provide an alternative home for marginalised youngsters. They are a source of emotional and material support. (Mokwena 1991)

Dangerous Streets

Mokwena's comments give some of the reasons why young men are attracted to gangs - and illustrate perhaps why young women are less so. It seems unlikely that young women

would look to the streets for entertainment. For many of them, the streets are sites of fear, where they are exposed to the threat of violence, and sexual abuse in particular (Hansson 1991). Hanging about on street corners for any length of time is likely to earn them the label 'prostitute' and it is likely that most would make some effort to avoid this stigma.

A Woman's Place

While the streets may be young men's sphere, the home with its attendant domestic chores belongs to young women. Given their domestic obligations, the amount of leisure time available to them is likely to be less than that available to young men. Consequently, they also have less time to hang about or go looking for entertainment. Young women may also be mothers, another factor limiting their leisure time.

Socially Isolated

In South Africa, many young women, and certainly more young women than young men, belong to church groups (Everatt and Orkin 1993). This, however, seems to be the extent of their involvement with groups. Girls experience greater social isolation than boys and belong to fewer groups - circumstances which are likely to reduce their opportunities for being recruited into gangs (ibid.). And parents seem to be stricter on girls, which would also reduce their opportunities (Glaser 1990; Wood and Jewkes 1998).

Role Models

Taken together, women's greater involvement in church groups and their limited use of violence could be interpreted to mean that women are more moral than men - hence their limited involvement in the illegal world of gangs. But this would overlook the influence of societal norms in shaping women and men's behaviour. Studies of gangsterism confirm the highly influential role played by movies in constructing male gangster identity. Mokwena's informants make reference to Tony Montana of *Scarface*, while the name Zebra Force (used by the gang who broke into a Salvation Army girls' home on Christmas Day 1990, abducted some girls and gang-raped them) is also taken from a movie. Morambula, the name of another prominent Soweto gangster, is a corruption of Rambo, the Sylvester Stallone character.

No equivalent cultural support for female gangsterism exists. Less than a handful of films focus on female gangsters. In the early 1990s director Alison Anders made *Mi Vida Loca* about female Hispanic gang members and in 1998 *Set It Off* was released, which starred female rapper Queen Latifah and explored the experiences of female African-American gangsters. Also in 1998 the local film *Sexy Girls* was released - probably the only South African film ever made about female gangsters on the Cape Flats. None were box office successes in South Africa and they hardly offer a cultural challenge to the diet of Rambos, Scarfaces, Tupac Shakurs and others of their ilk regularly served up to young men by the movie and music industry.

The church is also one of the very few institutions valuing self-denial, peace-making, and service, care and concern for others. As these are traits traditionally encouraged in women, it is unsurprising that women would be more attracted to a body where such traits are affirmed, rather than to the aggressive world of gangs. The church also provides women with relative safety and the company of other, older women.

Getting into Gangs?

It would appear that a number of young women are recruited into gangs through their personal involvement with gang members (Robertson 1996 and NICRO and the Institute of Criminology 1990). Certainly, these relationships sometimes provide the route to greater power within particular gangs. Nita from Hanover Park apparently took over drug smuggling when her boyfriend, the leader of the Genuine TV Kids, was killed in a gang fight (Robertson 1996). Katie Ann Arendse is alleged to have worked her way up through the ranks after her husband was imprisoned (*Cape Times*, 24 March 1998).

While the entry of women into gangs via their boyfriends is recognised, there seems less acknowledgement or understanding of how the mother-son relationship may facilitate the same - as with Mama America and Stone's mother. Mama America dates her involvement to the time her 13-year-old son began bringing money home. An unemployed, single parent, she chose not to question the source of his contribution to the household's finances (Kiesouw 1997). Given the general preponderance of single parent, female-headed households, and the greater poverty of these, it is very likely that gang-derived incomes provide a crucial source of financial support to many household members. To what degree are young men perhaps attempting to take up the traditional masculine role of breadwinner (rather than warrior, as Pinnock (1997) would have it) through their gang membership? Amongst women, how common is Mama America's route into gang activity?

But girls also join gangs independently of men, attracted by the opportunities for economic gain (Robertson 1996). Schools apparently serve as recruiting grounds and are said to be the one place where girls can run gangs (ibid). It is also possible that women may find a sense of family within gangs. Carol Munnik states that she was in awe of her gang leader, whom she regarded as a surrogate father (ibid).

In the USA, girls have been found to join gangs for many of the same reasons boys do. However, gang girls report a greater sense of social isolation from family and friends than gang boys do (Esbensen et al 1999). Whether or not this is the case in South Africa requires further research.

How to Stop Women Entering Gangs

South African writing on gangs assumes that explanations for male gang membership and activity are adequate explanations of women's behaviour. As a consequence, it seems to be assumed that interventions aimed at men will also be suitable for women. The workshop plan for working with gang members developed by NICRO and the Institute of

Criminology (1990:18 - 20) certainly emphasises the importance of gender in working with gang members. However, their examples are about exploring masculinity and manhood. Important and necessary as such explorations are, they neglect femininity and womanhood.

Gender is scarcely accounted for in the rites of passage programmes described by Pinnock (1997). Although carefully writing 'persons' and making the odd reference to female initiation, it is clear that the persons are actually male. All gang members quoted are male, and just over a page of a chapter on traditional rites of passage is given to female experiences (ibid: 22 - 23). Lines like:

(Y)oungsters have no magic rituals, no safe paths to warriorhood, no old men to welcome them into the ancient, mythologised, instinctive male world and, very often, no effective fathers who understand what it is they are being asked (ibid:27)

emphasise that programmes are likely to focus on men, and suggest an ahistorical, essentialist approach to masculinity. Being welcomed into 'the ancient, mythologised, instinctive male world' is likely to be of little relevance to women. It is not surprising that the year-long pilot study on the use of rites of passage only made use of young men and that the next training programme was planned for young men (ibid).

Gangs are undoubtedly a male preserve and interventions aimed at discouraging young men from joining or supporting gangs are of great importance. Yet this should not rule out creating programmes that take women into account. To do so requires far more research on women and not assuming that a model geared for young men will be suitable for young women (if they are included in programmes at all).

Women as Victims of Gangs

Young women are victimised by gangs in an appalling variety of ways.

Sex Work

In the Western Cape, some women are engaged in sex work controlled by gangs. According to Brener and Pauw (1998), these gangs may be more controlling and abusive than pimps, and also prevent health educators from reaching the sex workers (who have, reportedly, been beaten for wasting time by talking to them). Sex workers controlled by gangs are typically younger than most others (ibid: 27). They are also often addicted to drugs. It has also been alleged that some young women are gang raped by gang members before they enter into sex work (Robertson 1996).

Rape

Most notably in relation to the gang rape and murder of 14-year-old Valencia Farmer in 1999, it has been claimed that gang rape is a means of initiating young men into gangs (*Mail & Guardian*, 2 July 1999). Valencia Farmer was gang raped and then stabbed 42 times before her throat was slit by members of the Naughty Boys gang in Eersterivier.

There are also historical examples of the use of rape both by the Ma Rashea gangs of the 1940s and 1950s[18] (Bonner and Segal 1998:37), as well as by the tsotsi gangs of the same period (Glaser 1990).

Perhaps the most infamous example of a gang that made gang rape a central feature of its activities, is the Jackrollers. Made up of young men too old to return to school and unable to find jobs, this particular gang was active in the Diepkloof area of Soweto in the late 1980s. But according to Mokwena, as 'the abduction of women became fashionable, anyone who did it could be called a jackroller' (1991). Mokwena's research suggests that the jackrollers chose many of their victims because they seemed unattainable. Such women were called *amahaiza* (snobs) as they seemed to enjoy better social circumstances than the gangsters. Rape was a conscious tactic to keep women in their place, as well as a way of destroying their opportunities and potential.

Feminine Men and Masculine Women

Up to this point, I have provided a gender focus on gangs primarily through exploring the place of women within them. However, a gender focus is not confined to describing the situation of women, but should also explore the femininities that women represent.

Since femininity is a social construct and not an innate biological characteristic, it is possible for men to have feminine identities and women masculine identities. However, when these reversals of traditional gender identities occur amongst gang members, they seem to occur along very conventional lines. Thus (at the risk of simplifying a complex process) women tend to adopt the sexually-exploitative, aggressive behaviours traditionally associated with men, while men move into (or are perhaps forced into) the subordinate, caring positions usually occupied by women. In these subordinate positions, men also seem to become vulnerable to sexual victimisation.

The handful of women who achieved power during the era of the tsotsi gangs appear to have done so by dispensing with conventional femininity. There is little indication that they ever became wives or mothers, for instance (Glaser 1990). The manner in which they conducted their sexual relations seems to have followed a masculine pattern, with sexual partners perhaps being taken as and when the women wanted them, and securing the men's submission through fear.

A number of gangs exist within South Africa's men's prisons, but the most significant are said to be the 28s and 26s (Haysom 1981). (Whether or not gangs exist within women's prisons does not appear to have been the subject of investigation.) Each gang has its own goals, with the 28s' goals resembling, in part, those most closely and traditionally associated with women: pampering, protecting and organising catamites or *wyfies* (the passive partner in male-male sexual intercourse) (ibid:7). The 'blood line' of the 28s commits violence and supplies protection to members and their 'wives'; the 'private line' supplies the fighters with sexual partners and also performs such feminine chores as washing (ibid:8).

This division of labour parallels the sexual division of labour within the heterosexual non-prison world. The 'blood line's' functions are like those of men: fighting, supplying protection and being the penetrative partner in sex, and those of the 'private line's' are like women's: cleaning, caring and being the receptive partner in sex. Even within all-male environments, masculinity can still be affirmed in relation to its opposite - femininity.

Conclusion

This article has asked more questions than it has been able to provide answers for, highlighting the need for a great deal more research and thinking in this area, as well as engagement with women gang members. Not only would this provide a far better understanding of women in gangs, but it is also likely to deepen our understanding of men in gangs. While uncommon, women *do* commit violence and break the law. Ignoring these experiences not only dismisses them, but also renders negligible the effects and impact of this behaviour. Whether unintentional or not, the literature on South African gangs' emphasis on women as victims, girlfriends or property reinforces stereotypes of women as passive, somewhat parasitical, and living on terms predominantly dictated by men. While women's behaviour and activities are often on men's terms, it is clear that this is only part of the picture.

Notes:

[1] For instance Pinnock (1984) and NICRO and the Institute of Criminology (1990), include syndicates and mafias in their descriptions of gangs.

[2] These include defence gangs, reform gangs (Pinnock 1984), prison gangs (Haysom 1981) semi-gangs (Osaghae 1997) and street gangs (Mokwena, 1991).

[3] See Mokwena (1991); Bonner and Segal (1998); and Segal, Pelo and Rampa (1999).

[4] 'A usually flashily dressed African street thug, frequently a member of a gang, armed with a knife or other weapon' (Bradford 1980).

[5] Mokwena (1991) suggests that gangs in African townships differ in a number of ways from their coloured counterparts, being smaller, having a relatively shorter lifespan, and revolving around particular personalities rather than control of 'turfs' (1991: 23).

[6] This article draws on two, in *Elle*, June 1996 and *Marie Claire*, September 1997.

[7] NICRO and the Institute of Criminology (1990); Glaser (1990); and Mokwena (1991).

[8] Glaser (1990); and Segal, Pelo and Rampa (1999).

[9] See Penny Foley's article 'Working with young people: The Joint Enrichment Project 1986 - 2000'.

[10] (Glaser, 1990).

[11] (Bonner and Segal 1998).

[12] See Stern (1998) for a discussion on the position of women in prisons, and Heidensohn (1989) and Morris (1987) for critiques of gender-blind theories of offending.

[13] Eighty-thousand is also the figure cited by NICRO and the Institute of Criminology (1990).

[14] Residential areas reserved for blacks by the apartheid regime.

[15] Heideveld, the Cape Flats and the Boland are in the Western Cape Province. The Cape Flats is where people classified as coloured were relocated by the apartheid government. Heideveld is one of the townships in the Cape Flats. The Boland is a major wine-producing area.

[16] In a somewhat different phenomenon, female 'strollers' (street children) in Greater Cape Town have been found to be generally older than their male counterparts (Hansson 1991).

[17] Personal communication, 2000.

[18] Also known as 'the Russians', the Ma Rashea gangs were formed by migrant Basotho men after the Second World War.

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