

## **South Africa**

### **« Corrective rape » or how to set lesbians straight**

*Even though homosexuality is no longer outlawed in South Africa, some men found what they consider to be THE remedy to convert lesbians to heterosexual sex : a rape will do the trick. In the townships more than anywhere else, corrective rape is a big hit.*

In South Africa, one man out of four has already raped a woman : the NGO Action Aid estimates that around 500 000 rapes are committed every year. The numbers of violent assaults towards women are frightening. And knowing that the law of silence rules over the townships leads to thinking this “war” against women may be worse in reality.

A new kind of crime is drawing a lot of attention : corrective rape. “The increasing number of corrective rapes led us to carry out a survey on this issue,” says Phumi Mthethwa, director of the Lesbian and Gay Equality Project (LGEP). “What shocked us is that women are being attacked because they are lesbians. It looks like it is spreading. Black lesbians in the townships are the most targeted because of the social environment they live in.”

“Homophobia and the ever-present sexism are two reasons that explain why lesbians are the most vulnerable,” confirms Myriam Houssay-Holzschuch, professor at ENS Lyon (École Normale Supérieure de Lyon) and renowned specialist of South Africa. Cases of corrective rapes keep growing because homosexuality is no longer a crime. It is therefore possible to come out of the closet, a process that endangers people since visibility unfortunately increases confrontation and violence.”

#### **Raped to become “real women”**

Nomsa's story is striking. “She was over at some friends', everybody was having fun,” tells Ndumie Funda, her ex-fiancée. “She was too beautiful a girl to be a lesbian in the eyes of men. During the night, she went to the bathroom. When she came out, five boys ambushed her. They took her clothes off and raped her at gunpoint. She yelled. When they were done, they shouted : “Let's shoot and kill the bitch !” They hit her, kicked her, called her names and left her alone in a field.” After the attack, with Ndumie's support, Nomsa was tested for HIV. Positive. She died on a hospital bed in December 2007.

Ndumie is now 35 and lives in a township 15 km from Cape Town, Gugulethu, translated as “our pride” in the Xhosa language. As far as she remembers, violence has always been a part of her life. Her father died in 1983, her brother in 1990. Both were shot. But it is not before 2008 that she became an activist and refused to settle for this violent destiny. “Shortly after Nomsa died, I told myself : “I need to build a project”. So I completed my therapy and started to work on it.” Ndumie created the association LulekiSizwe in order to help black lesbians living in the townships surrounding Cape Town. For those who are rejected by their family she provides a shelter and for those who have been raped she even opens her door at night. “My mission is to change the negative perceptions through lobbying and advocacy. To do this, I must stay right here, where the problems are. It is only by working here that we can really understand the pain people feel.”

#### **The legacy of apartheid**

In Gugulethu, phantoms of the apartheid prowl. The streets were named NY 1, NY 146... which is not a trendy comparison with New York but a reminder of what was called the “Native Yard”, the black neighbourhood. Those names were chosen by the Whites. If this consequence of the apartheid lies in plain sight, others do not. “The deconstruction of the social fabric in the black communities during the apartheid partly explains the extreme sexual violence”, says Myriam Houssay-Holzschuch. “The men were working in the mines while the women stayed at home in the rural areas. Families got together barely one month per year.”

This sexual violence is now often directed at homosexuals, considered as “un-African”. “Stating that homosexuality is not African is a recurrent speech on the continent,” adds Myriam Houssay-Holzschuch. “We've had examples in Gambia, in Uganda with a law criminalizing homosexuality and also in Zimbabwe with President Mugabe's speeches.”

In South Africa however, describing homosexuality as un-African also means that it became more visible while living with the Whites. Homosexuality became less marginalized during the apartheid, a time when black men were gathered in the mines owned by the Whites. And because it supposedly appeared after “contamination” by the Whites, it was easy then to consider this deviance as un-

African. Hence the beginning of rapes targeting either men or women to cure them of their inadequate sexual orientation.

Today, the problem is openly discussed but it remains difficult to estimate its importance : few women dare report these crimes in a country where the law changes faster than mentalities. "South Africa became a democracy in 1994", explains Myriam Houssay-Holzschuch. "A new constitution, extremely progressive regarding discrimination was adopted in 1996 and same-sex wedding is authorized since 2006. Change happened very fast."

In spite of this favourable legal background, blameworthy crimes do not always set the legal system in motion. This is the reason why rape victims would rather go to Ndumie's than to the police station. Phumi Mthethwa makes the same observation in Johannesburg : "victims who report to the police fear they might loose their place in their community because the men who assaulted them are often part of this same community. They are scared of retaliation." Nomsa, Ndumie's ex-fiancée, never even tried to testify against the five men who raped her because she knew them. "A friend of hers had set her up that night. She learnt it after," remembers Ndumie. "Her roommate had arranged the whole thing because she wanted the guys to show Nomsa what it is to be a real woman."

### **The dynamism of the associations**

According to Myriam Houssay-Holzschuch, awareness is rising thanks to the feminist movements and the local LGBT activists (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered), and she is rather optimistic about the evolution of the situation. Activists are tightly connected with their foreign counterparts and nine South-African associations are members of the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA). "Information travels and corrective rapes are horrible enough to trigger off a reaction of the media."

The bravery of these women is overwhelming. Phumi and Ndumie intend to keep on fighting to hand over power to women. "Building a culture of respect in my country is a challenge that takes a lot of energy !", adds Phumi. Both have on-going projects : Phumi and the LGEP are currently working on hate crimes and Ndumie coaches her football team with girls from the townships. Her goal ? The Gay Games in Australia next August. Ndumie dreams of "empowering women. I want them to fight for their rights, to have careers and to be independent." By achieving this, she hopes it will at the same time cure the mad rapists of South Africa.

**Esther Leburgue**

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### **Eudy Simelane, a symbolic corrective rape**

Gang rape and 25 knife wounds. This is the sentence for being a lesbian and an activist. Or at least it is the fate Eudy Simelane met in 2008. She was a member of the South Africa women's national football team and a vocal LGBT-rights activist. She was also one of these few women to live openly as a lesbian in the township of Kwa Thema. Four men were tried for this crime. One of them pleaded guilty and was sentenced to spend 32 years in jail in February 2009. The three others were brought to court last September : two walked out free since it appeared they had not taken part in the rape or the murder, but had only witnessed it. The third one was charged with murder, theft and collective rape. He was condemned to a life sentence.

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### **Gay and African : Mugabe's nightmare**

Homosexuality is not viewed as a crime by the Zimbabwean law. But President Robert Mugabe's opinion is altogether different. His first remarkable feat happened in August 1995. Attending the international book fair held in Zimbabwe, Mugabe explains that homosexuality degrades human dignity and banned the Association of Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ) from the event. "It's unnatural and there is no question ever of allowing these people to behave worse than dogs and pigs. If dogs and pigs do not do it, why must human beings ?" According to the Zimbabwean President, homosexuality is nothing but "a scourge planted by the white man on a pure continent." He also

encouraged his fellow-citizens to hand over to the police any gay or lesbian openly living their sexuality. 70 US Congressmen sent a letter of protest to Robert Mugabe, whose reaction has not been what was initially expected : "Let the Americans their sodomy, bestiality, stupid and foolish ways to themselves." Later, in December 1998, as Harare was hosting the Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Robert Mugabe congratulated the gay and lesbians who attended the meeting, saying they "had come to the right place" to be "purged" of their homosexuality.