CHAPTER 19

Addressing Sexual Violence in South Africa: ‘Gender activism in the making’

Claudia Mitchell, Naydene de Lange and Relebohile Moletsane

Introduction

“What would it really mean to study the world from the standpoints of children [adolescent girls] both as knowers and as actors?” asks sociologist Ann Oakley (1994, 24). To this we add the questions: What approaches, mechanisms and structures would make it possible for girls and young women, as knowers and actors, to influence social policy and social change in the context of sexual violence? To what extent might this work deepen an understanding of gender activism amongst youth? This chapter seeks to deepen an understanding of girls and young women’s political activism in relation to sexual violence by studying what we term here ‘gender activism’ and ‘in the making’ in relation to a group of 14 girls and young women from rural South Africa enrolled at a university in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. The young women participated in a project, Girls Leading Change, which aimed to address sexual violence on campus. We use the term ‘activism in the making’ as a way to signal the nature of our own involvement as adult researchers, but also to problematize the public face of activism in the area of sexuality and sexual violence carried out in a mainstream institutional environment. While Girls Leading Change builds on a number of different components of community involvement in relation to sexual violence, in this chapter we focus on the ways that the young women engaged with a number of different campus-based policy makers in looking at sexual violence. In so doing, we consider the significance of gender and political activism as critical to altering the policy landscape for addressing sexual violence in institutions.

As has been highlighted in numerous studies, South Africa has one of the highest rates of sexual assault in the world, and while absolute numbers are unreliable because of under-reporting, adolescent girls and young women are particularly at risk. Compounding the under-reporting of sexual assault is the fact that rates of prosecution are low; a 2005 study indicates that fewer than 1 per cent of cases actually result in a conviction. According to the ANC
Women’s Caucus (1998), “before her 18th birthday one in three South African girls will be sexually assaulted”. There is a consistent (and unrelenting) possibility of sexual violence that runs counter to girls’ safety and security in schools and communities, and to their reproductive health, particularly in the context of HIV and AIDS (Moletsane, Mitchell and Lewin 2015). As Gqola (2016, 5) highlights in *Rape: A South African Nightmare*, the situation is very much one of what she terms “pornography of an empire”. As she notes: “although all women are in danger of rape, Black women are the most likely to be raped. It is not for the reasons that would seem to be ‘logical’ or obvious. It has little to do with numbers and much to do with how rape and race have historically intersected in mutually reinforcing ways” (ibid. 5).

There is clearly no one initiative or set of interventions that can be regarded as the answer to addressing the widespread incidence of sexual violence in the lives of girls and young women, and indeed – as we highlight in an introductory essay in an issue of *Agenda* meant to focus on interventions addressing sexual violence (Mitchell and De Lange 2015) – there are many more articles about the situation than there are about sustainable interventions. A promising area, though, is the fact that various governments in both the Global North and Global South have begun to study how the development and implementation of a youth strategy might play out in relation to a variety of thematic areas of importance to youth. Some studies focus on participation, agency and citizenship (Alparone and Rissotto 2001; Camino and Zeldin 2002; Combe 2002; Denov and Gervais 2007; Fielding 2007; Gaunle and Adhikari 2010; Hallett and Prout 2003; Livingstone, Bober and Helsper 2004; Livingstone and Tsatasou 2009; Mackinnon and Watling 2006), while others look at targeted areas such as youth sexuality (Mitchell, Weber and Yoshida 2008).

Another angle on political activism is to consider the question of what form the public voice of young people might take. To date this has been studied largely in the arena of online activism. Rheingold (2008) and Jenkins (2009) note, for example, that when adolescents and young adults engage with online participatory cultures and digital communication (blogging, social media networking, instant-messaging and online sharing of user-generated content), they are learning to develop a public voice. Civic engagement (political activism, deliberation, problem solving) requires the effective use of a public voice (Levine 2008; Rheingold 2008). According to Levine (2008, 120), “a public voice is always one that can persuade other people – beyond the closest friends and family – to take action on shared issues”. Levine differentiates a private voice as one that is not intended to interest a community or to address their concerns. An example of a private voice, Levine explains, is an e-mail or a social networking site that is meant for people close to the author. In contrast,