

Women and the HIV/AIDS Epidemic in South Africa

“The ways in which ‘issues’ emerge in various national contexts, and the contextual factors that shape the specific issues that are named and addressed, affect the information that is readily available for such connection-making,”¹ states Uma Narayan. She further states that when information crosses national borders it loses context and issues then become vulnerable to interpretation. I experienced this first hand when doing research for this paper.

I had assumed that I would be able to avoid problems of transnational translation as I am from South Africa and have a good understanding of local knowledge and conditions. I thought I would easily be able to find information on South African non governmental organizational (NGO’s) that addressed the specific plight that women with HIV/AIDS faced. My assumptions were incorrect and I was too removed from South Africa’s problems of violence to realize I was searching for information in South Africa based on my understanding of American feminist organizations.

The real issue relating to women and HIV/AIDS in South Africa is rape. Shockingly there is a rape every 26 seconds² and “as 40% of young men in the age range of 20-29 (most common age of rapists) are infected with HIV/AIDS”³ rape victims are at high risk of being infected. I redefined my search within the field of gender and violence and at last found the information I was looking for. Wanting to test Narayan’s statement that contextual factors shape the issues and the information

¹ Uma Narayan. *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third-World Feminism*. New York: Routledge. 1997

² People Opposing Women Abuse. Accessed at <http://www.powa.co.za/Display.asp?ID=2>

³ Ibid

available, I did a secondary search for HIV/AIDS and rape, focusing within the USA this time.

There was limited information available as the connection between rape and HIV infection is not as large an issue in the USA; the sites I did find were for American NGO's addressing rape and HIV/AIDS in Africa.

This paper shall compare two websites that both address the link between HIV/AIDS and domestic violence within South Africa. The first website is *CSVR: Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation*.⁴ Interestingly if one leaves off the word 'gender' from the website address it is very difficult to get to the 'gender section' from the home page; I presume that the users of this website must already be familiar with the organization and its many divisions.

The visual representations on the opening page utilize clean, simple lines and several photographs of smiling faces. The central photograph is of a large group of men and women all wearing the same t-shirts at a protest, giving the impression of solidarity and unity. The photographs on the right hand side are of two black women; one woman appears to be from a lower economic class but it is cheerful and suggests hope; the other picture is a close up of a more pensive woman and suggests empathy. Two simple caricatured brochure covers are placed between these two photographs and their symbolism is easily interpreted at a glance: how to prevent HIV after rape within a medical setting and how to counsel the issue of HIV after a rape. The pink strip on the left hand of the webpage and the pictures of women immediately give the impression that this site deals with issues of a feminine nature.

The textual representation is aimed at an audience who understands of the broader impact of violence and rape. The mission and organizational goals address the problem of a lack of training for those service providers, in the health and judicial field,s that deal with rape victims. CVSR suggests the macro solution to solving this problem is to partner with other NGO's and state

⁴<http://www.csvr.org.za/gender/>

organizations who also deal with the rape victims directly and so build a strong coalition. “It is important to remember that human rights instruments only occur within politics, not outside them, so that it is essential to understand political and ideological contexts”.⁵ CSVr appears to be addressing the political inadequacies of the government, first the inability of state hospitals to train and equip medical staff who counsel rape victims, and secondly the inadequacies of the criminal justice system to provide justice to rape victims and to prevent the escalation of rape crimes. However, it is difficult to evaluate how extensively they are integrated within hospitals and police stations, which groups are solicited into partnership, and which groups and individuals were unable or unwilling to participate in their studies and research⁶. There is no quantifiable evidence to evaluate the impact of their mission to date or whether their cultural capital of being integrated with state organizations is serving the political goals of their organization or serving the organizations mission to educate a cross section of South African service providers.

The text refers only to women as victims of rape and violence, there is no mention of males either being raped or being rapists. The profile of rape victims is specified as follows: those who are marginalized, in conflict with the law, rural or homeless women, adolescent girls, and women infected or affected by HIV and AIDS. “The question of who represents and interprets is an important one and cannot be ignored”⁷ as it gives perspective as to situated knowledge and the relations of power. No data is given regarding the profile of people within CSVr itself or regarding the staff who deal with rape victims within medical facilities and the criminal justice system. It is difficult to analyze whether they have a bias or are in any way homogenizing the situation.

I would argue that the information in this website gives only a cursory overview of the organization’s mission and I found the site to be deficient in addressing cultural differences and

⁵ Inderpal Grewal. “Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age”. Ed by Ella Shohat. New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art. 1998. p.521

⁶ Ibid. p.503.

⁷ Ibid. p.521.

lacking in recognition of historical feminisms. There is no mention of whether CSVr provides its training manuals in languages other than English, or whether the manuals include guidelines of how to be sensitive to the cultural differences of rape victims. South Africa has 11 official languages⁸ and 8 non-official languages; not only is there diversity amongst the various tribal groups but there is also a history of animosity between many groups based on cultural and racial differences. This is an important consideration when training service providers who will counsel rape victims from other ethnic groups. My final critique of this site is that there are no links to sites offering rape victims help; if a rape victim were to access this site looking for help it does not redirect the viewer to alternative resources which could more ably help victims.

The second website to be analyzed is *POWA: People Opposing Women Abuse*.⁹ By contrast this is a very professional and comprehensive site addressing audiences at many levels. The visual representation is sparse and the pictures on the right hand side of the page are all of women, however, the pictures of white women have a slight majority which I found odd in a country where the white population is less than 10%. The pictures of the white women appear to be affluent and self assured; one picture that seems out of context is of a white ballerina. At the top of the page is a simplistic animated black and white cartoon of a girl with folded arms, when clicking on this image the girl goes to the corner of the box, kneels and starts sobbing. I found this to be most disturbing and a jarring juxtaposition to the ballerina; I am unsure of how to interpret this.

The textual representations of feminism are superb. The opening page has a large colored flashing sign that switches languages frequently and advocates for individual rights and disavows abuse of any sort. Even the acronym POWA sounds like 'power'. An entire section is dedicated to defining abuse and its various forms, dispelling excuses abusers might use and giving suggestions

⁸ Accessed from CIA World Fact Book: <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/sf.html#People>

⁹ Accessed at: <http://www.powa.co.za>

on what abused women can do. Resources available to rape victims and their families are well marked, easy to navigate, comprehensive and covers a diversity of geographical areas. At no time does this site portray any sector of the society as victims of culture, poverty or race.

This site does not presume homogeneity of rape victims and does a wonderful job of addressing culturally and historically situated feminism. It recognizes intersectionality of class, race, sex and different cultural groups and consequentially addresses an extremely wide spectrum of stereotypes, myths and problems faced by South Africans. It does not presume to know its audience and when addressing a problem such as the stigma attached to AIDS, examples and statistics are drawn from a wide geographical area; a diversity of income and age groups ranging from truck stop prostitutes to college students to urban wives; and different racial groups which often corresponds with geographical areas. Incorrect historical myths, such as having sex with a virgin cures HIV/AIDS are addressed and given that one in four South Africans does not know that this is myth and not fact, there is a good chance that 25% of the viewers will be empowered.

There are two problems regarding this site. The first is that this site is only in English and as a result much of the information may be lost on South African viewers who only have a basic command of the English language. At the very least it should be translated into the two primary languages of Xhosa and Zulu. The second problem is it does not take into account the international viewer. The examples, the statistics and contextual information all presume that the reader is familiar with South Africa and a suggestion would be to add an 'international section' to explain the history of HIV/AIDS in South Africa, the breakdown of South African cultural groups and data as to why crimes such as rape are so high in this country. Furthermore, this site does not appear to solicit international donations even though there are some large international firms such as British Airways on their donor list. If the suggested international section addressed why and how the issue

of South Africa having the highest HIV/AIDS rate in the world impacts the international community, perhaps this would attract more donors and more international interest.

In conclusion, both sites address the very real problems related to rape and HIV/AIDS in South Africa. "Feminism arises out of practical problems in the world and is in response to material conditions [...] it addresses the scandals of status quo's that should not be."¹⁰ CSVr addresses inadequacies found within the formal governmental institutions, while POWA increases the individual woman's agency by providing knowledge and resources. By analyzing these websites through a feminist lens I have learnt more about the problems women face in South Africa in relation to both abuse and HIV/AIDS; I have also realized how my paradigms have shifted during this quarter. I now am aware of bias in the way feminism is represented and interpreted, how the 'other' can so easily be constructed by using situated knowledge and so alter or establish bias, and lastly I have realized that agency is contextual. This new understanding will certainly help me when I go to South Africa in person in July to build on this research and the role of NGO's within South African civil society

¹⁰ Lecture: Sasha Su-Ling Welland. 2 June 2005. University of Washington.