

“Foreigners know how to treat a woman. Our South African brothers are players, abuse physically and emotionally; you can’t depend on them”: Interrogating the links between xenophobic attitudes, gender and male violence in Du Noon, Cape Town.

Nadia Sanger, PhD.

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## **Introduction**

The intention in this paper is to discuss the links between xenophobic attitudes, gender and male violence by focusing on discussions held with both South African and migrant women and men living in Du Noon, Cape Town. The discussion hopes to highlight the ways that conflict, in the form of xenophobia against the ‘African other’, is mediated by constructions of gender (and sexuality) which rely on notions of otherness and difference. These binaries of difference are articulated in multiple ways in the discourses of South African women and men, and migrant women and men. This paper therefore attempts to foreground the ways that gender (and sexuality) operates to shape the complex relations between migrant and South African men, as well as between migrant and South African women and men.

## **Background**

Warner and Finchilescu (2003) focus on the ways that xenophobia is racialised and reveal the particular gendered dimensions of xenophobia in South Africa. The analysts note the racialised dimensions of xenophobia in South Africa, arguing that xenophobic incidents as reported by the media are “perpetrated against black (im)migrants and asylumseekers/refugees from other African countries” (2003:

36). But studies have also noted that it is black South African *men* who are the most hostile (Morris, 1998; Warner and Finchilescu, 2003: 36).

In a different study, Fuller (2008) notes that “[m]igrant and refugee women in the townships have been disproportionately affected by the recent xenophobia, not only because the violence has played out on the site of their bodies (through beatings and rape), but also because the violence has been directed towards their homes (through burning and looting), which in many cases is symbolic of a woman’s family and is perceived as a place of safety and security” (2008: 8, my emphasis). Fuller (2008) also argues that the daily pervasive sexual violence in South Africa suggests that “it is difficult to distinguish how many rapes [of migrant and refugee women] have been motivated by xenophobic attitudes and how many rapes have been perpetrated because the general atmosphere of violence and lawlessness has allowed for it” (2008: 9, my emphasis). In other words, “rape can be used to punish and humiliate women from different nationalities and ethnic groups as a political tool of xenophobia; and rape can be perpetrated as an act of criminal violence against a woman because of her gender, under the guise of xenophobia” (Fuller, 2008: 9). While the focus of this paper is not on the ways that (migrant) women’s bodies are used as battlegrounds for male violence, I hope to highlight the ways that xenophobic attitudes - not only expressed through xenophobic violence – is mediated by gender and sexuality.

The Human Sciences Research Council recently conducted a rapid response study, with the aim of investigating the causes of the xenophobic attacks in South Africa. Focus groups took place in Alexandra, Mamelodi and Tembisa in Gauteng. Interviews were conducted in Imizamu Yethu in the Western Cape.

Five themes were identified as being critical to the emergence of tensions. These included the role of government; the scale of the influx of ‘migrants’; the impact of migrants on gender dynamics; the pace of housing policy and the administration

of housing, and the politics of economic livelihoods and the competition for resources.

While the HSRC study was not focused on gender, the study revealed however that South African women and men perceive 'foreign' men in particular ways, ways indicating a link between xenophobic attitudes, gender and sexuality. Men in the 26 to 33 age group in particular and from 33 upwards, appear to be the most overtly antagonistic toward foreign nationals, suggesting a connection between particular constructions of South African masculinity and xenophobic attitudes, leading to violence. Additionally, there appeared to be specific mechanisms of 'othering' in the discourses of South African men in the study, revealing that they see 'their women' as part of a collective *against* male migrants and refugees. In contrast, the narratives of South African women in the study suggest that the notion of 'us-them' is subverted in ways where these women locate themselves as outsiders to South African men as perpetrators of xenophobic attitudes and violence against migrant and refugee men. The following perceptions are some examples of the gendered dimension of xenophobic attitudes emerging from the narratives of South African nationals:

- Anger that foreign arrivals are 'showing up' local men by earning more, working harder and take whatever work they can get. This diminishes the locals in the eyes of local women
- Young women admire foreign men for creating opportunities for themselves and being prepared to do whatever work is available to make a living
- South African men seen as acquisitive and materialistic
- Women believe South African men are complicit in criminal activities and corruption

The literature suggests that there are critical links between xenophobic attitudes and gender, reflecting a need for more in-depth interrogation of these links. For

this reason, focused follow-up research was needed in an effort to explore the gendered dynamics of xenophobic attitudes and practices.

Often, violence in South Africa, and globally, is perpetrated by men – whether this is sexual violence against women and children or violence against other men for diverse reasons. The naming of male power within a patriarchal state and society is often hidden. Analytical discourses on violence, ranging between academia and the media, often hide the ways that masculinity is constructed in a patriarchal society and operates in invisible ways. While not the only focus of this paper, the pilot study conducted hoped to visibilise the gender dimensions of xenophobic attitudes and the masculinist face of xenophobic violence in Du Noon, South Africa.

## **Methodology**

The focus group interviews concentrated on the links between xenophobic attitudes and actions mediated by gender, particularly ideas about masculinity, femininity, and the relationships between migrant and South African women and men. The pilot study consisted of four focus groups which were conducted in an informal settlement, Du Noon, in Cape Town. The first two focus groups consisted of local women and men, respectively, between the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> August 2008. The last two focus groups consisted of migrant men and women, respectively, between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> September 2008.

The intention was to bring different generations into one space in the form of a focus group, to have a conversation about xenophobic attitudes, xenophobic actions and its links to gender and sexuality. As a pilot study to a broader project we hope to conduct at a later stage, my intention was to focus on what appears to be a current gap in the research on xenophobia in South Africa – the gendered and sexualised dynamics underlying attitudes which have led to violence. The

rationale behind the splitting of the four focus groups into local and migrant residents lies in the focus of the pilot study to explore in a comprehensive manner, the ways in which the links between xenophobic attitudes, gender and male violence might be interpreted and understood by the two groups of residents. Simultaneously, there is a paucity of research focused on the views and experiences of South African migrants as targets of xenophobic attitudes and violence (Warner and Finchilescu, 2003), resulting in a particular lack of understanding of “how targets manage aspects of their social world rather than how they are only manipulated by the prejudice of others” (Swim et al., in Warner and Finchilescu, 2003: 36). The pilot study therefore hoped to partially address this gap by exploring the ways in which female and male migrants understand their experiences as targets of xenophobic attitudes and actions.

The rationale behind the separation of focus groups by sex – female and male – lies in my theoretical framing which understands gender as a central and significant system in which people understand their worlds and experiences. This premise sees gender as inseparable from sexuality, and other significant markers of subjectivity such as ‘race’, geographical location, ‘culture’ and so on. The recent xenophobic attacks in South Africa, in many ways reflective of fear of the African ‘other’, what Gqola calls “negrophobic xenophobia” (2008: no page) revealed that physical violence is often a battle between men. This points to the ways that xenophobic attitudes and actions are mediated by constructions of gender. Consequently, this paper hopes to extricate some of the ways that xenophobia might be understood from a gendered perspective.

The focus group interviews were semi-structured and centred on the specific experiences of the four respective groups of residents. All participants were asked to complete a registration form which included their names, age, nationality and sex. As articulated to the participants, this form also served as consent for their contribution to the focus group discussion.

	South Africans	Migrants
Women	13 participants	7 participants
Men	11 participants	13 participants

Not all participants felt comfortable providing their names and ages, or their places of birth. Migrant participants were born in Zimbabwe; the Democratic Republic of Congo; Somalia and Mozambique. The facilitators managed to get an overall idea of participants' ages, which ranged between thirty and fifty years. Some participants were married, with South African participants married to South African nationals. Where migrants were married, their partners were migrants from their home country. Most male migrants, however, described themselves as 'single' with Xhosa girlfriends or female partners.

#### *Sensitivities and fear*

It was clear that in the recruitment phase of the study - which took place over the entire period of the focus groups – that migrant women and men felt particularly sceptical of being called for interviews to discuss xenophobia. Participants appeared to feel anxious about the rationale for such an interview, and this was linked to informal talk in Du Noon, that migrants would be asked at such an interview to leave Du Noon. This was resolved by the facilitators at the start of the interviews. It was explained why the study was necessary, which institution was responsible for the study, and that the interviews were a safe space to express their feelings and experiences. Female migrants seemed particularly reluctant to talk about the recent xenophobic attacks, with some women choosing to remain silent throughout the interview. In many ways, their reluctance and silence reflects the feelings of vulnerability felt by female migrants, particularly when compared to the robust focus group discussions with male migrants.

#### *Language and discourse*

One of the facilitators spoke fluent Xhosa and English. The first two focus groups, consisting of South African female and male residents, were conducted in Xhosa. The third focus group, consisting of male migrants, spoke English, and the final focus group with female migrants, was conducted in mostly Xhosa, with some English being used.

It is important to note that both South African and migrant residents used the term 'foreigner' to describe those who came from African countries outside of South Africa. Even though this is not the preferred term within this paper, the terms used by participants is important in revealing their attitudes. It is therefore necessary to accurately reflect the narratives of the participants' by quoting them directly. However, all analyses in this paper will use the term 'migrants' when referring to participants who have migrated from other African countries to reside in South Africa.

## **Findings**

### **'Different in mind': constructions of masculinity for male migrants and South African men**

Overwhelmingly, South African women articulated what they understood as differences between South African men and 'foreign' men, claiming that the latter were more respectful of women, were willing to take on the responsibility of South African women's children, grandmothers and families, as well as their houses: "Even if they are boarding they take care of the broken thing like doors; they fix those things."

Male migrants had the same view, relating that Xhosa women "like foreigners because the mind is different." The men explained this difference 'in mind' to character, arguing that "local men don't have character"; "local men like to drink"

and “beat their women.” Male migrants stated unequivocally that unlike local men, they treated women respectfully, and took ‘care of them’:

Foreigners don’t beat women. We are caring. We look after you like an egg.

We buy you clothes to make you nice because you are a queen.

We handle [women] nicely; give them a chance to make decisions.

Both South African and migrant women appeared to agree with these sentiments, the former stating that local men “are very jealous – they will beat you if you are even talking to men, whether he is local or a foreigner.” Female migrants echoed this statement, claiming that they had witnessed local men beating and kicking local women, sometimes “with a bottle of beer.” These women claimed that they were not interested in having intimate relationships with local men because of fear: “We see them beating their women – we’re scared that they’ll beat us.”

However, South African men had a different view, asserting instead that male migrants treat local women with disrespect, physically abuse them; “use them as strippers”; “employ them to sell drugs in clubs”, “get involved in sexual relationships with young small girls”, “use [local] girls as slaves”, and “use [their] girls as prostitutes at the age of fourteen to sixteen years.” Local men also mentioned the use of “magic” by male migrants to “boost their manhood” as well as protect themselves from being caught by the police when using local women as drug dealers, strippers and prostitutes. These kinds of views were limited to the male South African focus group, and were not mentioned in the other focus groups at all.

South African men seemed to lament this ‘magical’ control migrant men appeared to have over the local women, claiming that migrant men were “taking over [our]



women and now there is no respect from [our] local sisters and children.” Further, they complained that male migrants were “taking our girls and daughters and leaving them with kids with no support.” They linked the loss of ‘their women’ to the influx of ‘foreigners’ into South Africa who were being employed, resulting in the apparent loss of jobs for South African men. The consequent lack of inability to financially provide for ‘their’ women, meant, in their minds, that they were “no longer providers to [their] families – our dignity is gone.” Essentially, then, South African men felt that their “daughters, wives and children are having relationships with foreign men because they have money and provide.”

It became clear that the relationships between male migrants and South African men were strained. One male migrant noted that while some “local brothers like them [male migrants]”, he preferred not talking to them at all and didn’t trust them. One male migrant participant stated that “I can’t like somebody who doesn’t like me.” Male locals were described as “unpredictable” with one male migrant admitting to being fearful of local men after the recent xenophobic attacks. It also became evident that male migrants blamed local men’s lack of education; “laziness”, effortlessness at finding employment, and insufficient knowledge about the city where employment existed, for their attitudes towards male migrants. As Morris’ (1998) study revealed, and as the pilot study similarly revealed, migrants blame South Africans for their lack of knowledge about other African countries, and the world at large. Local women, however, appeared to be exempted from such statements, with a few male migrants agreeing to the statement that “I like the local ladies, not the men.”

South African males, however, felt that they were undermined by male migrants who “treat them like animals”; use English as a means to demoralise them, and “never listen and obey [the] rules [they] set as a community so that [they] can find ways of working together.” One male participant unequivocally stated that “we really do not like them and trust them.”

## **Double standards**

South African women objected to the double standard practiced by local men, claiming that they are left for “girls who wear jeans and tights while as their wives we are not allowed to jeans.” The translation of *lobola* into male ownership of women, and their subsequent right to women’s bodies was mentioned by a number of South African female participants:

“They claim they own us because they have paid *lobola*<sup>1</sup> and we are their property.”

“They [are] still head of the families even if [they are] not working.”

“[A]fter coming from shebeens they want sex.”

“They also claim the grant money belongs to them as well since they are fathers.”

## **Policing and regulating women: Similarities between South African men and migrant men**

Local men narrated how they felt emasculated due to an apparent espousal of women’s rights in South Africa. These men lamented feelings of emasculation, claiming that the government was “oppressing men’s rights.” Consequently, they complained of a lack of respect by their wives and girlfriends, who were believed to have more rights that they have, which affected how they were able to ‘discipline’ them:

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<sup>1</sup> **‘Lobola’ or bride-price refers to** a century-old tradition - common in Africa – where economic exchanges are made between families on the union/marriage of a man and a woman.

In the past I used to sort my family - whether I was beating her, it's the way I solve my house problem.

South African male participants felt that government "interference" in family life, through the setting up of constitutional courts, hampered the ways in which men could control their wives and families; control they felt was an entitlement built through *lobola* processes and negotiations.

These kinds of beliefs were not restricted to South African men. Male migrants similarly believed that South African women were 'allowed' too much equality. They spoke of local women's independence, autonomy, lack of respect for men, and revengeful tactics. Unlike female migrants,

Xhosa women will kill you for money and sell your stuff if you're rich, not a Zim woman.

Local women will take revenge on you because you are a foreigner.

In my country, my dad can beat my mum, but she won't go to the police. Here, in South Africa, it's fifty/fifty, women will call the police.

It is for these reasons, according to male migrants, that they would not marry local women, even though they desire them:

She's full of shit.

Girls here don't respect foreign men.

Local women will swear at you.

Young ladies here use *tik*.<sup>2</sup> [They are] young, beautiful women but you can't trust them. If she doesn't drink, she uses *tik*. And she will have sex here and there for drugs.

In other words, while male migrants articulated that they found Xhosa women desirable; they found them to be “disobedient”, similar to local men's feelings about Xhosa women. Hence, migrant men would have sex with these women, but would not be willing to marry them. This echoes notions of the virgin/whore dichotomy, which feminists have been discussing for decades – women are constructed as desirable as virgins and worthy of heterosexual marriage. Simultaneously, women are constructed as ‘dirty’, abhorrent, ‘used goods’ if they are no longer virgins, and not worthy of heterosexual marriage, even though, as the male participants reveal above, they are desirable enough to have sex with. This kind of binary helps reinforce patriarchal control over women's bodies.

### **‘Better men’: Constructions of migrant masculinities**

In many ways, ‘foreign’ men were set up by South African women, ‘foreign’ women, as well as ‘foreign’ men themselves, as ‘better men’. The narratives emanating from the interviews were that foreign men were hard workers, they made plans to make money, and they provided for their (mostly) Xhosa girlfriends, and this was the reason for local women's interest in them: “ladies like foreigners because of money.”

At the same time, ‘foreign’ men appeared to pride themselves on a sense of hypermasculinity which was reinforced by both local and ‘foreign’ women. Ideas about heteromascularity mediated the discourses of South African women and ‘foreign’ men in particular, with the latter claiming for instance that unlike local men,

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<sup>2</sup> The term ‘tik’ is the local term for crystal methamphetamine, crystal meth or speed, popular in the Western Cape in South Africa.

We learn real sex at home – brother learns from father. We know how to sex. Sex with a foreign man lasts for five hours. Local men sleep after sex.

The same male participant also claimed that local women often talk to each other about their sexual relations with ‘foreign’ men, claiming that many local women approach ‘foreign’ men, desiring sexual intercourse with them, without ‘strings attached’:

“Local women say ‘I just come to *fuck* – don’t need your money or anything.”

These kinds of beliefs serve two purposes – to construct the male self (in this instance, male migrants) as hypersexual, echoing colonial discourses around the *difference*, excessiveness and abundance of black bodies. Simultaneously, these kinds of beliefs construct Xhosa women as ‘loose’, again reflecting the ways in which virgin/whore dichotomy has been internalised within a patriarchal system.

### **‘Othering’ heterofemininity**

Despite male migrants’ views that they are desired by, and desire, local women, they also articulated stereotypical notions of Xhosa femininity, which were linked to ideas around the ‘dirty vagina’:

Local women don’t shower or bath; [they are] not clean. [Girls must be taught] to clean the sex.

And despite male migrant’s sexual desire for local women, they simultaneously articulated that South African women were promiscuous:

Too many South African women have HIV, so I’m scared.

Similar beliefs were expressed by South African, when asked if they would have an intimate relationship with about 'foreign' women:

I do not like them; I do not trust them; I can inherit some disease.

They do not wash. As a man, I can only wash once, but a woman should wash twice. The foreigner women do not like water – they smell.

And similar to male migrants' constructions of the attractiveness of Xhosa women, South African men stated that they believed 'their' local women to be beautiful – "that foreigner women, they are ugly."

These kinds of utterances by both local and 'foreign' men are clearly mediated by ideas about heterofemininity and notions of cleanliness and purity. In both instances, these men link femininity to ideas about cleanliness, echoing popular discourses about gendered binaries – men are rough/women are clean and pure. These utterances clearly reflect that across the 'othering' of African foreigners, there are particular constructions of black femininity which rely strongly on the logic of heteronormative sexuality.

### **Money and belonging: transactional relations between local women and 'foreign' men?**

Local women claimed that migrant men would "leave their girls" because they found South African women to be "beautiful and [to]dress well". This was echoed by male migrants when they too stated that South African women were "beautiful ladies."

There appeared, however, to be some kind of rationale for relationships between local women and migrant men, on both parts. For reasons related to survival,

access to money appeared to be central to women's choice in a male partner, with a South African woman stating that migrant men "know that we need money - they bribe us with money." Similarly, male migrants argued that local women also attach themselves to migrant men because they are believed to have money and to provide for women. It became clear though that male migrants manipulate women's apparent desire for money for a sense of belonging in Du Noon, and South Africa, more broadly. Consider one male migrant's view:

To know the country, I have to get a woman here, to become a citizen. For security, protection and guidance from local women. She will defend me.

Local women protected our stuff while we left/ran during xenophobia.

South African men, however, felt that male migrants were exploiting local women, with Nigerians in particular "rob[bing] our children by marrying them and pay[ing] them R3000 so that they can have SA citizenship", even though many migrant men "have wives in their countries." In many ways, it appeared that money for local women, and feelings of belonging for male migrants, played a significant role in developing intimate relationships.

### **Male violence**

Both male and female migrants were clear that it was men who were responsible for the violence against migrants. South African women stated that for instance that:

There were fights between Amashangane<sup>3</sup> and Xhosa brothers.

Foreign brothers were beaten and some of the goods were taken out of their houses by local people.

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<sup>3</sup> The term 'amashangane' refers to Mozambican 'foreigners'.

We rushed to get food for homes and we did not take part in house breaking because men will take things that they can sell and not think about the family.

Similarly, female migrants related how it was indeed young males who looted the shops of Somalians, in particular:

Young men were beating foreign men, women were not beaten.

The local guys beat the foreigners; took their belongings and burned their shacks.

Little [local] boys were doing the robberies, not grown ups.

The male migrants similarly stated that “it was men, in particular, who attacked us.” They also claimed that it was local men who were abusive towards male Somali shop owners, in particular.

South African women, however, blamed male migrants for bringing guns into Du Noon and selling them to local men, resulting in the latter using the weapons to beat and rape their wives and girlfriends:

They sell the guns to our brothers and then we also get robbed and raped in our own homes.

Because of these - too many guns - we get killed and raped by local men.

While relationships between migrant and South African women in Du Noon appeared to be relatively healthy, with women helping each other in times of need - local women taking care of migrant women’s household goods during the



xenophobic attacks, for instance - this was clearly not the case between South African and migrant men.

## **Conclusion**

This paper hoped to highlight some of the links between xenophobic attitudes, gender and male violence. There is clearly a need for more research, which would extend beyond Du Noon, Cape Town, to the rest of South Africa, and perhaps Africa. Based on the findings from the pilot study, however, it seems clear that notions of masculinity and femininities underlie perceptions of 'otherness' and difference based on fear of the African 'other', in multiple ways. It is hoped that this paper has been able to identify some of these ways, and will help to shape the kinds of research and preventative strategies we need to take up when dealing with xenophobic attitudes.

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