

## Course-Correcting the Conversation Surrounding ‘Corrective Rape’

Written by John Bavoso, Contributor  
Wednesday, 28 March 2012 12:07

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Last May, 24-year-old Johannesburg resident Noxolo Nogwaza was brutally raped, stabbed repeatedly with shards of broken glass, and beaten with rocks by a group of young men, then left to die from her injuries. Her body was subsequently dumped in a very public part of her township. Despite living and dying in a country where it is said that the percentage of women and girls that will become sexual assault survivors is greater than the number that will be taught to read, Nogwaza's murder made national and international headlines because of her sexuality. She had been on her way home from dropping off her girlfriend when she was attacked, and neighbors reported hearing her attackers shouting homophobic slurs throughout the crime. Noxolo Nogwaza wasn't just a target of rape; she was a target of so-called "corrective" rape – a crime in which gangs of heterosexual men commit a sexual assault with the stated purpose of "curing" or "correcting" their victims' sexuality.

The similar rape and murder of well-known and openly queer South African soccer player, Eudy Simelane, in 2008 introduced this highly fraught term into the global lexicon. While Simelane's rape was among the most visible, the reality is that as many as 86 percent of the lesbians living in the Western Cape say they live in constant fear of sexual assault.

Because of the taboo nature of these crimes, the first step toward stopping them may very well be to raise awareness of their existence and draw attention to them by talking about the issue in a way that no one can ignore. Yet, while consciousness-raising exercises can be beneficial, the way in which they're performed has a direct effect on the outcome.

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One important component of this fight for both activists on the ground in South Africa, as well as international observers and journalists is to retake control of the narrative. This may well begin at the most basic level: with finding a new name for this type of crime.

"I do find the term troubling, in the sense that it is too narrow and even misleading," says Sanja Bornman, an attorney at the Women's Legal Centre in Cape Town who specializes in cases concerning sexual violence. "Technically, corrective rape only describes rape that takes place because the rapist is supposedly trying to ‘correct’ the sexuality of a particular individual. It focuses only on sexuality."

"However, the term fails to convey the gender dimension and hate element of the crime, which is the true underlying reason for these rapes. What these rapists are in fact doing is punishing their victim(s) for not conforming to a stereotype hetero-normative gender role." This means that while the majority of the victims are lesbians, transgender men and heterosexual women who defy traditional roles are also at risk, yet not necessarily being included in the conversation. As a result, any strategies devised to put an end to this horrific practice are obviously limited in scope and therefore effectiveness.

Beyond a semantic change, emphasizing that hate is the true motivating factor behind these assaults is a major part of the strategy to increase the prosecution of the perpetrators. Using the word “corrective” privileges the point-of-view of the rapists, lending their crimes – be it tacitly or explicitly – an air of benevolence. By calling these attacks what they are – hate crimes – it will not only hopefully help to shape society’s attitudes, but also aid in the conviction and punishment of the attackers.

"The idea is that the motivation for the crime should either be recognized as an element of the crime, so that evidence about it may be lead in criminal court when such cases are tried, or the motivation should be aired as an aggravating circumstance at sentencing," Bornman explains. "Either way, civil society wants to see the element of hatred exposed and specifically taken into consideration."

This gets at another crucial component of the fight against corrective rape: there needs to be a true dialog between the government of South Africa and the activists and organizations on the front lines combating the attitudes and stigmas that create an environment that allows these crimes to continue. This means giving groups like the Women’s Legal Centre access to agents of the government at all levels.

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“Often police officers have not received any sensitization training, and the way they treat victims causes secondary human rights violations,” says Bornman. “Unwittingly, this sends the message to the LGBTI community that being hated for your identity is not something the government particularly cares about, even where that hate results directly in rape.”

There has, however, been some success with fostering a give-and-take between the government and civil society. South Africa’s Department of Justice and Constitutional Development has set up a task force specifically dedicated to focusing on gender- and sexuality-based crimes. There’s also been, at the urging of various activists and experts, a Hate Crimes Bill introduced, the fate of which is yet to be seen.

The discussion must also include a broader look at the cultural and societal factors that allow these crimes to exist. The first thing to remember is that, despite the protections from discrimination enshrined in the country’s constitution and the legalization of same-sex marriage, South African society is in many ways still deeply traditional when it comes to issues of sexuality and gender. As Bornman says, “we are still learning not to fear that which is different.”

One important role of civil society is to bring different commonly overlooked factors to light in order to create a holistic solution to this deeply rooted problem. Inequality is often cited as one of the greatest challenges facing post-apartheid South Africa, and unsurprisingly, it plays a role in perpetuating corrective rape. According to a report released by Human Rights Watch in 2011 called *“We’ll Show You You’re a Woman”: Violence and Discrimination against Black Lesbians and Transgender Men in South Africa*, “The economic and social position of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender people in South Africa has a significant impact on their experience. Lack of access to such things as secure housing and transport options greatly increases people’s vulnerability to violence.” That’s why it has proven vital that representatives of civil society bring a variety of perspectives and insights into their talks with the government.

Finally, the agenda-setting power of the media cannot be ignored. In the case of corrective rape, the media has mixed record when it comes to elevating and promoting the dialog.

“In many ways the media have greatly assisted the cause by reporting on it, and without the help of the media we would never have got the attention of the Department of Justice and

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Constitutional Development in the first place. We are very grateful for this, and continue to rely on the media as allies,” Bornman notes. “However, I do feel that the media sensationalizes these crimes at times and, in the same way as the term ‘corrective rape,’ fails to interrogate and expose the underlying social reasons behind these crimes. Sensationalism promotes a superficial panic response as opposed to a strategic and consultative one.”

Both South African and international journalists can, with small tweaks to the language we use and issues we choose to emphasize, have a very real impact on the lives of members of the queer community in that country. And, at the very least, by discontinuing the use of the term “corrective rape” itself, we can refrain from suggesting that there was anything about Noxolo Nogwaza, or any of the women like her, that ever needed fixing in the first place.

*Photo: Luleki Sizwe*