ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to reflect on a case study highlighting the experiences of a trans woman engaging in sexual and reproductive health and rights spaces. It is through this woman’s experience that we begin to decipher and illustrate what it means to be a trans woman in post-apartheid South Africa. Core identity issues inherent in the transitioning phase are explored throughout this article. Curiously, trans people have remained an enigma to this day due to their relative invisibility, even within the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersexed community. Thus, this article highlights the gaps evident in the assimilation of transgendered women in South Africa in the presence of laws and organisations striving to empower minority groups. The authors wish to articulate trans women’s experiences of engagement in mainstream feminist spaces.

Keywords: discrimination; feminism; gender; identity; LGBTI; patriarchy; sexuality; trans women

In introducing this article it is important to note that there are many approaches to feminism (Crotty, 1998; Sands, 2004). Feminism has experienced many iterations and permeations. As such, feminism as a social and political ideology is not limited to the heterosexual, cis-gender, white, middle-income, working class women. For far too long feminism has been viewed as being a concept from the West limited to individuals who comply with set criteria. Those who do not display typical feminine
characteristics are frowned upon. An alternative feminism dictates that feminists can also be black, poor, transgender, disabled, unemployed, sex worker, homosexual, and the list go on. While feminism is thus concerned with women’s rights and upliftment, it is also all inclusive.

In as much as the main premise of feminism is fundamentally informed by the quest for female empowerment, it is a term lumbered by the unfortunate historical background of South Africa (Romany, 1996; Steyn, 1998). One’s economic situation tends to be either directly or indirectly influenced by one’s race. Thus the quest for empowerment tends to be limited to those above the low socio economic status group. Feminism was initially designed to be a movement that protects women; it is a movement for women and by women and in support of women (Minichiello & Kottler, 2009). It was in the few years preceding democracy that trans people, mostly trans women, became more noticeable in our society. However, post 1994, the South African Constitution sought to protect all native citizens of the country from discrimination. This did not explicitly mention trans people but their protection is however, intrinsic in the Constitution. The Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status Act, passed in 2003 (Act 49 of 2003) allowed for trans people to modify their gender codes in identity documents. However, even with all the legal protection offered, the societal reality is that trans people are either mistaken to be homosexual or they remain completely unnoticed (Hames, 2007; Klein, 2009). In the case of the former, trans women tend to face the same discrimination as do other members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersexed (LGBTI) sector. Thus, the feminist movement appears to be failing these women in some way. In the latter case, the relatively concealed identities of trans women create a particularly arduous environment in which they could belong to any great movement, least of which is the feminist movement (Klein, 2009).

Various social identity theories point towards gender being a complex concept that has taken many years to construct and that will consequently take even longer to change. Common notions of what gender is, or more accurately, what makes one male or female stem from socially constructed ideas which can lead to stereotypes (Taylor, Peplau, & Sears, 2006). These stereotypes become a convenient way of organising people into their appropriate categories for easy reference (Taylor et al., 2006). Thus, there are certain characteristics that are considered inherently masculine, for instance: strength, stature, power, success, et cetera. When one steps outside the confines of what they ought to be, based on physical appearance, it challenges these norms, which may lead to negative attitudes or discrimination (Taylor et al., 2006).

One’s biological composition tends to determine both one’s gender and sex simultaneously (Taylor et al., 2006). Hence, a child born with female genitals will be assigned the sex of a girl as well as the matching characteristics that are expected of someone who ought to possess the matching gender identity: femininity (Taylor
et al., 2006). This is one of the greatest challenges faced by trans people with regard to how people perceive them and their access to health facilities.

Current research focused on the trans communication shows, which even within cyber space, communication within the trans community is limited and even more so to those who do not have access to the internet as a result of their socioeconomic status (Prinsloo, 2011). Thus, many trans women are forced to live a somewhat secretive life if they do not have a strong support system (Prinsloo, 2011). Moreover, the presence of legal states granting trans people the platform to acquire surgery is particularly problematic in that the surgery is not only expensive, but it is also performed by a very limited number of hospitals in South Africa (Klein, 2009). With endless people on the waiting lists, most trans women have to live for long periods without alteration surgery. This exerts a direct impact on the pervasive nature of the moral issues enshrined in the decision to grant such surgery. This is evidenced further by a greater number of intersex people receiving preference for surgery before trans people would, even though the surgery involves essentially the same procedure (Klein, 2009).

The fact that one needs the surgery to officially have one’s Identity Document altered, means that many trans people endure a challenged existence, which in turn renders their identification with the feminist movement all the more intricate (Klein, 2009). The ridicule and mockery experienced by trans women throughout the country is sheer proof that the presence of statutes enforcing equality and non-discrimination do not filter through to the communities in which these women live. Largely, knowledge about trans people in acquired by means of access to such knowledge. Often, people in these communities possess neither the resources nor access to such resources. Furthermore, much of the discrimination stems from cultural and/or religious beliefs held by individuals. Thus, even with the presence of various LGBTI organisations seeking to help all trans people, very few members belong to these organisations for the reasons mentioned above. Therefore, it would be beneficial to create a movement for trans women, especially in lower socio-economic communities.

**METHOD**

The article reports on a reflective case study highlighting the experiences of a trans woman engaging in sexual and reproductive health and rights spaces. The article is based on the first author’s observations and lessons learnt.

**How the “data” were collected**

The first author participates in varied trans movement activities within South Africa, in the broader region, and the continent of Africa. In this article, the aim is to
communicate that the lives of trans women are understudied and their involvement in the movement, in particular, civic leadership, are neglected. Thus by means of this reflection, we hope to stimulate the interest of readers and researchers with respect to this topic.

**Reflexivity**

Qualitative work values researcher reflexivity in order to assist readers in understanding the nature and perspective of the source of the content. In terms of my background, I, the first author, am a young black African trans woman of coloured descent from the rural Eastern Cape Province in South Africa. I have worked as an activist within the trans movement mainly as a volunteer and it was during my engagement with different organisations in the field and from conference attendants that I draw the reflection presented here. The co-author of this article is a cis-gender researcher based at the University of the Witwatersrand. Her work includes working with sexual and reproductive health of young people. She also conducts participatory action research from a feminist perspective within LGBTI community, and is thus conversant with the field and the community which this paper addresses. The co-author conducted the literature review, examined documentation in the field and prepared the manuscript for publications.

**REFLECTION ON FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

**Gender and transitioning**

The first author observed, in the trans spaces, that transgender men seem to often become invisible, and blend into society with better ease. What is meant by “invisibility” here is that men are less likely to be identified as trans and quickly assume a male role without much attention to their gender identity shift by society. The authors suggest that this could be linked to a phenomenon that trans men do not present a challenge to heteronormative powers and can choose a patriarchy route. Transgender men and transgender women will mirror patriarchy and heteronormative frameworks and expressions within society. However, transgender women constitute a challenge within heteronormative and feminist spaces (Serano, 2010).

**Trans and sexuality**

Based on the first author’s personal experiences and engagement with trans women, the authors observed that trans women sometimes experience unique challenges in terms of expression of sexuality. These are varied expressions that relate to relationships, sexual harassment and sexual violence. This has led the authors to
believe that sex positive expressions need to be enhanced in South Africa, not only for trans women, but for all women, given the harsh environment of endemic sexual violence and violence against women. Similarly, expressions of femininity and discussions regarding power need to be engaged with in order to understand these issues more clearly. For instance, transgender women who dress up, explore, and celebrate their new found feminity are frowned upon for dressing up and pleasing patriarchy. This delicate expression is complex as transwomen learn about the power of feminity and feminity for themselves in the process of their transition. This is more so for trans women in their youth as some of the mainstream interventions marginalise this community (Mdletshe & Nduna, 2011). There is also a lack of youth specific interventions targeting trans women since gender identity is integrated in sexual orientation responses, even though these are separate entities.

Literature of trans women’s sexual expression, based on the experiences of local women, is underdeveloped. The response of feminist researchers is weak and inexcusable; hence it is important for feminist work to begin to engage with the sexuality struggles of trans women. For instance, there appears to be a general feeling that “corrective rape” is a feminist issue claimed exclusively by lesbians, and yet it is an issue that affects transgender women as well. Exclusion of trans women from studies on such injustices suggests that researchers may be unaware that trans women are also subjected to abuses. There is a common phrase used by researchers that “if it is not counted it does not count”, and when it does count, any phenomenon is thus excluded in policy and implementation; hence certain papers presented in this Special Issue raise the lack of responses to transgenderism (Hamblin, Nduna, & Padi 2011; Mdletshe & Nduna, 2011; Nduna, 2012; Nkoana & Nduna; 2012).

**Trans movement**

In the first author’s perceptions of activism in South Africa, the greatest struggle for transgender women lies in working with organisations mandated for LBT female issues as very often the T is silent within that acronym. Very often, one would find lesbian identified individuals presenting at conferences. The question then is: How many transgender feminists are given the opportunity to present their issues at LGBT conferences?

Another observed process that may contribute to the marginalisation of trans women is that cis-gender feminists make no room for transgender feminist opinions in their spaces. “I have written to two LBT organisations proposing a possible collaboration engaging feminist issues. One of the organisations wrote back to say they simply do not have the capacity while the other did not reply to my email at all” – first author, coordinator of Social, health and empowerment coalition for transgender women in Africa (S.H.E). Social problems such as gender based violence, HIV and AIDS, unemployment, discrimination and other inequalities seem exclusively reserved for cis-gender women, and yet there are so many intersections regarding the challenges
experienced by both trans and cis-gender women.

What society does not appear to realise is that transgender women, in their transition, are faced with the same challenges and inequalities that women in previous generations have experienced. It seems almost fortunate that the transgender men make their transition into the privilege of patriarchy. This is reflected in the manner in which the transgender movement in Africa is steered by transgender men. If readers disagree with this statement, maybe one can arguably consider these reflective questions:

• How many transgender women in Africa direct organisations in this movement?
• How many transgender women in Africa are in leadership positions within this movement, or any other movement for that matter?
• If one looks at the statistics and media reports, how many transgender men experience gender-based violence compared to transgender women?
• If one looks at the issue of medical access, why does it appear that transgender men are higher on the list for surgery, the argument being that some of the surgical procedures for transgender men constitute more general kinds of surgeries like hysterectomy and breast surgery? Revelation said: “I have been to hospital several times, but they refuse to treat me because I have not been assessed and referred by their contracted private psychiatrist” (Mapumulo, 2012).
• How many transgender men in South Africa are sex workers?

These are questions that need to be reflected on sincerely and honestly.

CONCLUSION

At the time of writing this article one grassroots organisation had been established to carry out advocacy work establishing the link between the transgender and the feminist movements.

Social, health and empowerment coalition for transgender women in Africa (S.H.E) is not only the pronoun by which transgender women identify themselves, but is also an acronym for this organisation reflecting their focus on social, health, and empowerment coalition of transgender women in Africa. There is a need to create visibility of transgender women in feminist circles by adopting a feminist approach to fight patriarchal systems in Africa and create a support and development network for transgender women in Africa.

Some of the areas of work that need engagement in order to advance trans women are:

• Exploring language, systems, and processes in the area of trans feminism.
• Exploring linkages, and synergies with the areas of sexual and reproductive health and rights, including reproductive justice.
• Linking with the transgender sex worker movement and also the HIV women’s sector given the intersections of vulnerabilities and the inclusion of transgender persons as MARPs (Most at risk populations).

• Seeking to engage with organisations working on the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Gender Protocol in order to look at the concept of female development and empowerment going beyond the conventional feminist framework and to facilitate the inclusion of transgender women in this particular protocol.

• Looking at international human rights mechanisms developed to create protective measures with regards to sexual orientation and gender identity. This speaks firstly to the constitutions within our different countries and global guidelines such as the Yogyakarta Principles. The same can be said for the United Nations (UN), World Health Organisation (WHO), World Pathological Association for Transgender Health (WPATH), and particularly civil society organisations working hard to create change.

• To explore how we can engage trade unions and donor agencies for research projects in order to provide both qualitative and quantitative evidence describing the inequalities and vulnerabilities including discrimination in the workplace and addressing the alarming statistics of unemployment amongst transgender women.

• Generally just looking to create synergies with partner organisations furthering the mission, vision and objectives of coalitions of trans organisations in the region.

NOTES

1. The term cis-gender was coined to describe non-transgender people. It stems from the latin prefix cis, which translates into English as meaning: the same side. It seems less derogatory than describing someone as biologically or naturally male or female.

2. Two such organisations exist in South Africa, namely, The Coalition of African Lesbians (CAL) and The Forum for the Empowerment of Women (FEW) both based in Johannesburg, South Africa.

3. For example, the bi-annual ILGA (International Lesbian and Gay Association) conference in Stockholm, Sweden.

4. Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender feminist organisations.

5. In South Africa and the region, the existing transgender organisations are mostly steered by men. Gender Dynamix, in South Africa – directed by a cis-gender woman; Transgender and Intersex Africa, South Africa, is directed by a transgender man; Trans-Bantu in Zambia is directed by a transgender man; and so is Transgender, Transsexual Initiative in Uganda.

6. A number of trans women have been killed in South Africa this year alone, including the transgender sex workers Sasha Lee Davids and Vuyisa Dayisi.
7. Some populations are most at risk of contracting the HI virus, including transgender women, Men sleeping with Men (MSM), drug injecting users, and sex workers.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Leigh Ann van der Merwe is a black transgender woman of coloured descent, born and bred in the rural area of the Eastern Cape Province. Leigh Ann matriculated from Blackhealth High School, Cape Town, in 2000. She became involved in transgender activism through Gender Dynamix in Cape Town. She is also the founder of S.H.E, a trans and intersex feminist collective (www.transfeminists.org). She has represented transgender women at various forums including international conferences and meetings. Leigh Ann has a strong interest in research, feminism, gender studies, public health and the law. She is now working towards the completion of a B.A in Communication Science with the University of South Africa. She advocates for the human rights of minority groups including sex workers. Leigh Ann holds positions on various executive boards for NGO’s. She is currently the secretary of the board for the East London Child and Youth Care Centre, a board member at the East London High Transmission Area Project and was recently nominated for a seat on the African Sex Worker Alliance (ASWA) board. She is very much interested in exploring the ways in which mainstream feminism include discourses on alternative identities, e.g. the issue of sex workers, HIV positive women, transgender and intersex women, refugees and migrants. She sees herself as an international citizen with a strong rural background, a Pan-Africanist, a feminist, a mentor, a protegee, a mother and custodian.

Tidimali Padi is a Bachelor of Arts graduate from the University of the Witwatersrand. She is currently working as a consultant. She previously worked as a research assistant at the University of Witwatersrand in 2012 and through this job, she was able to write and publish academic papers as well as facilitate workshops on gender-based violence. Prior to that, she volunteered as a counsellor at the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) from 2009 to 2012.
REFERENCES


