

# Challenging Ciscentric Feminist Margins: A South African Study on Gender-Based Violence in the Lives of Black Trans Women

## Abstract

*Feminist discourses around the scourge of gender-based violence (GBV) have historically prioritized the voices and contextualities of cisgender heterosexual women, often to the exclusion of trans persons. In light of the continual invisibility of black trans persons and in particular black trans women in anti-GBV activism, this paper explores black trans women's experiences of violence in post-apartheid South Africa. The study was undertaken from a transfeminist framework that asserts that the stories and histories of trans persons are central to the development of trans epistemologies within an inclusive gender liberation. The study followed a narrative methodological approach. Unstructured individual interviews were conducted with eight black trans women living in South Africa. Narratives of gender policing and punitive sexual violence in addition to narratives of cissexism as well as of the paradoxical hypervisibility and invisibility of black trans positions revealed violence meted against black trans women in South Africa as structural, grounded on a patriarchal matrix of cisgender power representing trans women as devalued others. Apartheid legacies of racialised economic marginalisation manifest as bearing a strong mediating role in shaping black trans women's sustained vulnerability to violence. By addressing anti-trans violence as a feminist concern, this paper disrupts the ciscentricism of feminism, enabling more nuanced and inclusive constructions of GBV.*

## Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) is increasingly recognised as a global social problem (Graaf, 2021), with South Africa

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being reported as a country that is heavily impacted by this social injustice (Enaifoghe et al., 2021). The focus of the public discourse that defines GBV over the years has tended to predominantly remain almost exclusively on cisgender men's violence against cisgender women (Graaff, 2021). Owing to this limiting ciscentric framing of GBV (Wirtz et al., 2020), black trans<sup>1</sup> women – and the LGBTQIA community more broadly – have tended to experience invisibilisation in scholarship, activism and programming targeted to combat the persistent scourge of GBV in South Africa and other parts of the world. Across gender scholarship and development practices driving discourses and interventions on GBV, we have witnessed particularly minimal epistemic considerations of the unique contextual positions of black trans women in narratives around GBV, particularly as they stand among the intersections of being women, trans and black. As a function of this invisibilisation, the epidemic of GBV is seen to have been largely approached from a hegemonically cisgender perspective that typically marginalises the plight and needs of trans women (Wirtz et al., 2020). This disposition to view women as a homogeneous group (Munro, 2013) and construct GBV in terms of ciscentric and heteronormative ideals has led to the failure to address the full range of gendered violence (Graaf, 2021).

In the recent past, however, we have seen gradual developments toward assembling more inclusive considerations of GBV that include the LGBTQIA community, including trans women. This has occurred under intersectional understandings such as those purported by the United Nations' Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) GBV Guidelines that note GBV to be an “umbrella term for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person's will, and that is based on socially ascribed (gender) differences between ‘males’ and ‘females’” (IASC, 2015: 5). Yet, inclusive notions – that approach gender in more expansive, nuanced and flexible ways – continue to largely encounter subjection to more dominant social representations of GBV, with the translation of these definitions into meaningful feminist practice remaining compromised. In endeavouring to work against the subordination of trans epistemologies in feminist practice, this paper seeks to centre black trans women in discourses around the GBV epidemic. We utilise narratives as a way to explore black trans women's experiences of violence at the intersections of being black, women and trans in post-apartheid South Africa. The foregrounding of trans women, of historically silenced experiences and perspectives, in this manner, is a vital step toward putting together inclusive considerations of GBV. Central to the objectives of this contribution to the discussion on GBV is to engender a trans inclusive feminist framework that engages and addresses the violence meted against trans communities as a critical human rights issue and one of serious feminist concern.

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<sup>1</sup> In line with the transfeminist manifesto written by Koyama (2020), this paper uses 'trans' as an inclusive term encompassing an expansive range of gender diverse identities and expressions that violate gender norms, particularly violations that involve discontinuities between one's assigned sex at birth and one's self-determined gender identity and/or expression. We use 'trans women' to refer to women whose self-defined gender does not align with the identity label ascribed to their assigned sex at birth.

## **The intersectionality of gendered violence in context**

Shaped by feminist thought, GBV is largely construed as a structural and institutional phenomenon. Gender, within this framework, is framed as inescapably embedded in the political arrangements of society (Montesanti, 2015). Third-wave feminist scholars have pioneered and continue to cement an intersectional analytical framework that brings attention and gives respect to the intragroup differences that exist within the gendered category 'woman' (Evans, 2014). This framework emphasises how points of difference reproduce and shape unique experiences of interlocking oppressions (Bilge, 2010). South African work on GBV has, for example, prioritised intersectional subjectivities through its advancements of feminist and post-colonial psychologies in context. Boonzaier and colleagues have, for example, foregrounded black women, women of colour, poor women of colour, women living with HIV, women in sex work, young black lesbian women, and more (Aulette-Root et al., 2013; Boonzaier et al., 2014; Boonzaier & Van Schalkwyk, 2011; Boonzaier & Zway, 2015). They have explored GBV through an intersectional lens, more recently taking a decolonial feminist perspective on this work (Boonzaier, 2017). In a similar way, Gqola has also almost exclusively centred her work on black (cisgender) women, advancing African feminist scholarship in connection with critical questions of South African post-apartheid democracy (Gqola, 2001; Gqola, 2007; Gqola, 2010). Such scholarly undertakings are significant for their ability to capture the contextualised nuances of the heterogeneity of the subjectivity of womanhood in context (Gouws, 2017), where the multidimensionality of social identity and subjective experience is carefully considered as an analytical tool (Kiguwa, 2019). However, a demographic that continues to be marginalised in feminist scholarship and feminist activism against GBV are black trans women.

## **Silenced voices: Centring black trans women**

Insofar as we know in 2023, there is no official quantitative research output painting a picture of the rate of violence against black trans women in the South African context. This dearth of knowledge arguably, in and of itself, speaks to the systemic erasure of black trans women in feminist and anti-GBV epistemology. Be that as it may, nascent epidemiological research estimated a global prevalence rate of gendered violence among trans women that ranges from 7% to 89%, suggesting a disproportionately high degree of violence within the community (Wirtz et al., 2020). Despite the high statistics, trans women have not been adequately considered and accommodated in anti-GBV prevention and survivor support services (Wirtz et al., 2020). There is a need to be expansive in the ways we talk about and understand what gender-based violence is, what it can look like and who outside of cisgender women and girls are also affected. To a marked extent, black trans women have not had the privilege of being given undivided scholarly attention that is dignifying (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). In both practice and scholarship, the trans community is commonly addressed as merely part of a broader ostensibly monolithic "LGBTI" or "Queer" collective (Fassinger & Arseneau,

2007). Literature often fails to distinguish between sex and gender whilst overlooking the needs specific to trans women and the many identities that fall under the trans umbrella (Fassinger & Arseneau, 2017; Fiani & Han, 2019). Consequently, the needs that are unique to trans persons and trans women more specifically have not been afforded significant regard in scholarship. Mavhandu-Mudzusi and Sandy (2015), for example, unpacked “lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans students’ experiences” of religion-related stigmatisation and discrimination at a South African rural university. Their study revealed how lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans students are labelled, stigmatised and discriminated against by heterosexual students and university employees. Findings of the research were important for amplifying the common societal struggles that LGBTIQ+ persons face related to their overarching marginalised statuses. However, there are also distinct socio-political and cultural differences within the LGBTIQ+ group that layer and uniquely shape their experiences of violence and oppression (Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007). To exemplify this point, an exploratory cross-sectional study conducted by Muller et al. (2021) on sexual and gender minorities in nine African countries showed that sexual and gender minorities in Southern and Eastern Africa face high levels of violence. In particular, the study highlighted that the gender minority persons in the study were found to have experienced significantly higher rates of violence compared to cisgender sexual minority participants (Muller et al., 2021). This research indicated that trans women and gender non-conforming people are at a relatively greater risk of being exposed to violence. Yet, research examining trans persons’ experiences of gender-based violence continues to be scarce.

Often, when trans women do emerge in literature as an independent social category, they are typically constructed as a public health burden (Brown & Knopp, 2014). In light of the AIDS epidemic gaining a strong presence in public health literature, the scholarship of trans populations has tended to focus on the prevalence of HIV/AIDS as well as risky health factors that debatably underpin this crisis (Farvid et al., 2021). Yet, in consideration of all these well-researched supposed health vulnerabilities, trans communities continue to experience violence through their encounters with compounding barriers when it comes to access to safe and gender affirmative healthcare (Langley, 2006; Wilson et al., 2014; Connell, 2021). Additionally, the hyperfocus on HIV has tended to come at the expense of overshadowing other critical health concerns rampant within the community, such as mental health problems (MacCarthy et al., 2015) along with discrimination and violence.

In addition to the violence of exclusionary healthcare, Langley (2006) explained economic violence as a phenomenon that is also categorically present in the lives of trans people. In many states and jurisdictions around the world, it is legal to dismiss a person from employment who undergoes gender transition. This reality exists within the background of numerous nations that have made gender transitioning legally

impossible. These are institutional gendered legalities that constrain trans people's bodily and spiritual autonomy on the basis of conservative ideologies of gender (Langley, 2006). Although South Africa has progressive and equitable legal frameworks in respect of the human rights of gender and sexual diverse persons, emergent empirical research, media reports and personal narratives of trans persons suggest that many spheres of society, including healthcare and the economy, continue to fail to uphold the freedoms of gender diverse individuals (Hafejee & Wiebesiek, 2021).

### **Black trans women and violence in post-apartheid South Africa**

On the 5<sup>th</sup> of January 2020, trans woman and human rights champion, Nare Mphela (24), was found brutally murdered in her rented room in rural Mokopane after she was repeatedly stabbed and burned (Ubisi, 2021). *Iranti*, a media advocacy organisation, posits that hate crimes like the fatal violence committed against Nare are an ordinary, undocumented reality in post-apartheid South Africa (Maphanga, 2021). Nare Mphela's brutal murder was hardly reported in the mainstream South African media, reflecting the invisibility of trans women in society and the violent injustices which they are often subjected to. In their letter to South African Authorities in January 2020 regarding the rampant murders and assaults of LGBTI persons, Human Rights Watch (HRW) noted that at least 20 LGBTI individuals were killed across South Africa between February and October 2021 (HRW, 2022). Whilst it is not clear in the media reporting how many of the victims were trans women, victims were beaten or stabbed to death and were targeted because of their gender identity and perceived sexual orientation.

Researchers have brought to the fore that trans persons lead lives threatened by multiple forms of violence that exist at the level of the interpersonal and structural (Graaff, 2021; Kritz, 2021). A recent South African study on the mental health of LGBTQ persons found that 80% of trans women in the study had encountered verbal harassment due to their gender identity. 67% of trans women had experienced sexual violence, and 63% had experienced physical violence (Muller et al., 2021). Without undermining the importance of these investigations which point to the extent of the problem, research on trans communities that is grounded on positivist study designs have, however, been limited in their ability to critically unpack and challenge the intricate gendered power dynamics that characterise GBV among the trans community. Across the globe, trans people remain marginalised within a context of rising transphobic hatred, trans exclusionary discourses as well as violence towards trans persons.

In 2017, Patel wrote a paper on anti-trans violence that was theoretically nuanced and exemplary in its extraordinary politicisation of trans people's experiences through a strongly critical and intersectional lens. This work explored black trans people's struggle to access safe spaces in post-apartheid South Africa, making specific reference to Cape Town and the historical colonial gendering of bathroom spaces that make

trans people vulnerable to violence (Patel, 2017). Patel's (2017) study revealed that trans people face three types of violence within the bathroom space, which include physical violence, visual and verbal violence, and spatial violence (Patel, 2017). Participants in the research narrated experiences of "heads turning, followed by long stares" and being forcefully excluded by authorities from using public bathrooms (Patel, 2017: 6). These aggressive acts of cissexist policing were accompanied by value-laden narrative statements such as "you are not allowed to go in there, that is a woman's toilet!" Patel (2017: 6) meaningfully addresses this gendered violence as layered upon colonial processes that imposed sex-segregated European-style toilets on the Global South. Patel's study arouses interest in the invisible gendered, racialised and classed socio-historical intricacies that shape black trans lives in the post-apartheid South African context. The research amplified the challenges and negotiation of multiple violent systems that involve daily living for trans young people. Pitcher and Boonzaier (2023) further investigated the multiple physical and symbolic barriers that trans youth navigate in their lives, highlighting the complexity of what it means to live as a trans person in Cape Town, South Africa. Patel captures systems as a binarised gendered system that privileges cisgender people and marginalises trans people.

To this end, the use of intersectionality – in addition to narratives – as a lens by third-wave feminists over the years has been helpful in the course of advancing feminist research that captures the complexities and heterogeneity of women's experience of violence under patriarchal systems (Presser, 2005; Bilge, 2010). Intersectionality, as both a theoretical and methodological framework for gender analysis, has provided possibilities and continues to empower analytical capabilities for examining the mutually reinforcing ways that gender colludes with structures such as race, disability, sexuality, class, age and other societal configurations, reproducing shifting relations of power and oppression (Hobbs & Rice, 2018). This thinking has allowed for a recognition of the suffering of women as originating from a variety of nuanced factors, while narrative approaches have shown potential for facilitating the development of understandings of how the institution of gender is experienced through storytelling, providing a productive critical space for "connecting the everyday to larger political and economic questions" (Mumby, 2014, 252)

In this paper, we explore black trans women's experiences of violence as they navigate the intersections of being women, trans and black in the post-apartheid South African context. In this, we ask what kind of narratives black trans women living in South Africa tell about their experiences of violence, and we question the ways in which structural interactions of and between gender, race and class systems shape black trans women's experiences of violence and their vulnerability to it in South Africa. It is believed that advancing research that centres black trans women in GBV scholarship is essential for the

disruption of normative ciscentric ideas about gender and violence that have tended to exclude trans women's liberation interests.

The aim of the research was to qualitatively explore black trans women's experiences of violence in post-apartheid South Africa. The premise of the inquiry was to build knowledge around their subjectivity through the narratives they share about themselves as women who stand in opposition to societal normative constructions of gender. Over and above this, the inquiry hoped to gain insights about GBV from the perspectives of those whose truths have historically been neglected and marginalised in feminist scholarship.

## **Methodology**

This study utilised qualitative research methodologies underpinned by a narrative inquiry approach. The inquiry was guided by and grounded in a critical transfeminist methodological framework.

### ***Transfeminist methodology***

As a methodology, transfeminism is a scientific approach concerned with resolving the marginalisation of trans people in social studies (Johnson, 2015). The approach posits that the stories and voices of trans people are central to the development of trans epistemologies within an inclusive gender liberation (Francis & Jaksch, 2019; Radi, 2019). A content analysis conducted by Johnson (2015) problematised the ciscentricity and the double standards of cissexism found in feminist research, conceptualising ciscentricity as the tendency for social reality to be (re)constructed from hegemonic cisgender perspectives. In light of the aforementioned critiques of traditional feminism, transfeminism functions outside of dominant feminist methodologies. However, it operates in unison with certain fundamental aspects of it, such as reflexivity, autonomy and transparency, as key values of the co-constructive research process.

Pino Gavidia and Adu (2022) argued that reflexivity is a meaningful act of being authentic with oneself, the research and the audience. In the process of this study, reflexivity and transparency were upheld by constructively exploring and addressing our subjectivities and bias, exploring our positionalities in light of the factors that have driven us to the study. In respect of autonomy, our study observed the perspectives and truths shared by participants as inherently valid in their own right—bearing the liberatory potential to create new, disruptive gendered knowledges. Within the frameworks of transfeminist methodology (Arfini, 2020), we operationalised critical reflection as a tool that guided us into paying extraordinary attention to particularity (as embedded in participants' narratives). Taking up reflexivity and critical reflection as a methodological stance enabled us to pay adequate respect to the aspects of trans subjectivity – revealed through our data – that disrupted socially situated, taken-for-

granted and overgeneralised notions of being as a ‘woman’ in the world. Lindsay and Schwind (2016) stated that when researchers are involved in a methodology guided by a narrative approach, they become co-participants, co-constructing knowledge alongside the research participants. In view of this, we recognise our role as active meaning-making analysts. By employing a critical qualitative methodology of listening to stories, making interpretations and revealing the meaning behind these stories, we position ourselves as intermediaries (Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022) in the knowledge co-construction process.

### ***Narrative approach***

The study followed a narrative approach in its transfeminist methodological procedures. By definition, a narrative study is an inquiry into the manner in which people live through and construct meaning of the world (Fraser, 2004), building its frame on the assumption that human lives are storied and stories serve as constructed models of human experiences. In building knowledge, these models of human experiences are systematically organised by collecting stories, getting rich textured descriptions of the stories and subsequently writing them as a themed narrative (Fraser, 2004). Particularly, deepened attention is paid to the broader contextual and institutional narratives that the stories are located in (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). The narrative inquirer approaches the process of storytelling, the telling of an *interpreted* version of one’s reality, as legitimate means of producing knowledge (Pinnegar, & Daynes, 2007). In this sense, this methodological approach was found to more suitably support the aims and objectives of our transfeminist enquiry. Principally, the inquiry sought to legitimise the voices of subjects whose stories and truths have historically experienced marginalisation within ciscentric epistemic power structures.

### ***Sample***

This study sampled eight trans women who identified as black and were living in South Africa. They were between the ages of 18 and 35. Two of the participants were based in the Free State province, one in Gauteng, two in the Eastern Cape and three in KwaZulu-Natal. Sociogeographically, with relevance to their socioeconomic statuses, the study sample variably captured women located in rural, township, urban and peri-urban areas. Likewise, the sample diversely included women who were employed while others were unemployed and seeking employment. Given this multiplicity of the contextual dynamics of the participants within the sample, the utilisation of intersectionality became useful – and critical – as a supportive frame for analysis within a transfeminist methodological framework. Through intersectionality, we provided nuance to the narratives of black trans women living in South Africa, meaningfully accounting for the differences found across their stories and histories and reflecting on these differences from a lens that addresses discrimination and violence against women as tending to emanate from multiple, colluding systems of violence.



### **Sampling techniques**

The study utilised a purposive sampling technique deliberately seeking participants who would contribute towards garnering an enriched understanding of the phenomenon of violence the study was examining (Gentles et al., 2015). The selection criteria required that the potential participant must be over the age of eighteen, identifying as woman, trans, black, and live in South Africa. In this study, black is related to ‘political blackness’ – grounded in black consciousness philosophy. It refers to the black experience of all persons who have historically experienced racialised systematic disadvantage under colonial and apartheid systems and continue to live experiences of shared racial oppression and economic deprivation. The sampling technique did not have a theoretically informed set number of participants required, besides the concept of saturation that guided our data collection process (Gentles et. Al, 2015).

Access to participants was achieved digitally through social networking platforms. A poster was created and published on social media platforms (i.e. Facebook, Instagram and Twitter), inviting persons who meet the criteria to participate. A request was made for the poster to be shared widely. In addition, digital invitations were extended to Facebook groups *Trans Support South Africa* and *Trans SOFFA's South Africa/Africa*. Furthermore, digital invitations were also sent to *Gender Dynamix* and *Trans Intersex Africa*, both of which are trans public-benefit organisations. Interested participants reached out by directly messaging the first author on their social media platforms and through email, as prescribed by the poster.

### **Data collection**

Data was gathered by way of unstructured narrative interviews, which are broadly described as a process in which the researcher asks broad, open-ended questions with the intention to elicit responses that are not strictly guided and that offer narratives as a way of theorising experience. All the interviews were conducted by the first author. Since the research was completed during the Covid-19 pandemic when South Africa was on lockdown, interviews were conducted via telephonic voice calls and on Zoom—a digital video communications software. The zoom interviews were recorded via a record function, while the telephonic voice calls were recorded via a Microsoft PowerPoint recording function. We concede that face-to-face interaction may have been preferable for the kinds of data we aimed to elicit – given the opportunity it provides for physical presence, bodily cues and non-verbal communications to amplify the ways in which narratives are co-constructed. However, we find that the data elicited through the online communications was rich and varied. It allowed for ease of access and, for a group of persons for which corporeal hypervisibility may already be problematic (Pitcher & Boonzaier, 2023), online communication may well have been preferable. WiFi data was provided for and/or reimbursed to participants.

Interviews began by broadly inquiring about the socio-geographical and cultural environment that participants find themselves in, as trans women. Informed by the

content that emerges in a participant-led process, we collaboratively zoned into the structures and institutions that organise their daily living where they have 'experienced violence', such as home, work and religious institutions. Within a transfeminist framework, the utilisation of interviews allowed for the legitimisation of the voices of 'ordinary' people, particularly those who sit at the margins of society (Fraser, 2004). An unstructured approach was particularly valuable in this project as our inquiry were not seeking for particular 'correct' truths or 'the truth'. The inquiry was oriented towards a focus on specificity and 'complicating' normative assumptions of womanhood (Johnson, 2015). Interviews were conducted primarily in English, and both the interviews and data transcription was done by the first author.

### ***Ethics***

Ethical approval for this research was obtained by the Department of Psychology's Research Ethics Committee at the University of Cape Town (UCT). This research forms part of a larger project, the Unsettling Knowledge Production on Gendered and Sexual Violence, located within the Hub for Decolonial Feminist Psychologies in Africa, in which the larger project has also received ethical approval from the same committee. Informed consent was obtained verbally for some interviewees, while it was written consent for others, depending on feasibility. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, it was recognised that the interviews did pose the risk of causing emotional distress. As a forewarning, the participants were made aware of this risk to ensure that their participation was guided by an informed decision. To mitigate risk, the interviews were especially facilitated in an emotionally-containing manner. After each interview had ended, participants were debriefed. This gave room for the interviewer to be able to identify and manage any participant anxieties that might have arisen as a result of the interview process. Where necessary and requested, researchers made referrals for online counselling services, and to safeguard the privacy of participants, pseudo-names were used when reporting research findings.

### ***Data Analysis***

Following a narrative approach as a way to understand experience, our analytical process was grounded on the knowledge that narratives cannot be understood outside of their context. According to Caine et al., (2018), stories are told and better understood within larger structural and institutional narratives. However, the theoretical framework of the study took on a more sceptical approach in how it connected the stories to broader narratives, ensuring that the study does not perpetuate the legacies of cisnormative frameworks that epistemologically favour cisgender viewpoints of the world. Thus, the analytical process was fundamentally inductive.

The study drew upon the works of Fraser (2004) who proposed an overlapping phased narrative approach that is open to the flexibility of the analysis process. As actively engaged enquirers, the process of analysis began as the stories were being told in the

interviews (Fraser, 2004). As the stories were heard, we were afforded the opportunity to intimately get close to the narratives shared as far as possible, and subsequently through the process of transcription. To avoid the error of gazing at the stories through a singular lens, we examined the experiences along different dimensions—the intrapersonal, interpersonal, cultural and structural (Fraser, 2004). In alignment with transfeminist frameworks, this phase involved connecting the themes to larger structures and systems (Fraser, 2004), whereby the personal was explicitly linked to the political. Following this, the stories were contrasted by critically examining the content, type and tone of the stories shared across participants (Fraser, 2004). The final step then involved a written interpretive analysis of the stories (Fraser, 2004). Importantly, this process was undertaken with an understanding that there are no ‘correct’ truths to tell.

All authors were involved in the analysis at different analytic phases. Following Riessman (1993), we thought about the trustworthiness of the research with regard to questions of persuasiveness (relating to the plausibility and reasonableness of our interpretations) and coherence (relating to ‘thick’ description at the local, global and thematic levels and correspondence to the aims, theory and method of the research). This involved the iterative process of data analysis and checking our interpretations with each other through the collaborative process of working and writing together.

## **Findings: Narratives of Violence**

In this paper, addressing the stories told by black trans women in the study, we discuss five narratives, namely: invisibility and the violence of exclusion; hypervisibility and the vulnerability of othered women; sexual violence as gender disciplining; the violence of bureaucracy on gender autonomy; and gendered violence as a multi-edged sword in the intersection of race, class and gender.

### ***Invisibility and the violence of exclusion: “They told me about school policy.”***

As it emerged in the study, also discussed by Lewis and Simpson (2012), visibility is as a fundamentally political construct. Settles et al. (2019), who explored the phenomenon of invisibility and hypervisibility within the context of black people in university systems, described invisibility as being particularly associated with the denial of the authority of subordinated groups by privileged groups. Across the stories, experiences and perspectives the women in this study shared, stories of being unrecognised, delegitimised and undermined by post-apartheid South African society emerged as a potent notion. Inga<sup>2</sup> expressed:

*It’s very difficult to get statistics on cases of trans women in South Africa. It’s hard. We exist, but there is no data on us.*

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<sup>2</sup> In this presentation of the findings, all the names used are pseudonyms.

Inga continued to speak on particularly the ciscentrism of socio-political discourse on GBV that often centres cisgender women and excludes trans women. Inga conveyed:

*Any topic, even like gender-based violence... Trans women are not part of that conversation because we are not seen in society... People are like, "Oh my God! Women and children!" But I don't see myself as being part of that conversation.*

Inga states that she does not see herself as part of the conversation on GBV that includes women and children. Her comments raise the question of why trans women do not see themselves in certain conversations. This is linked to a neglect, lack of representation and exclusion of trans women's experiences in such conversations. While black trans women are also victims of various forms of gendered plights as any other (cis) black women, anti-GBV feminist discourse and the interventions geared towards combating GBV tend to ignore or discount the experiences of black trans women. This narrative is, to an extent, consistent with the tenets of trans-exclusionary radical feminism (TERF) that excludes trans women from feminist politics and practices. This is a contested brand of feminism that supports gender-essentialist views that reject the legitimacy of trans womanhood (Hines, 2019). Inga, alongside other women in the study, whose gender identity differs substantially from that socially ascribed to their biological sex at birth (Bilodeau, 2005), shared narratives that revealed the manner in which the public and social institutions at large have a conservative view on gender that renders trans women invisible and delegitimises her gender identity. As a substantiation of this invisibility, Senzi below described how trans women are often socially and culturally construed as 'gay' (men), not as women.

*To some, I represent a gay person as someone who sleeps with 'other' men, and I am not a man. You get people who say, "You big gay, you went and implanted a vagina!"*

Senzi is assumed to have an 'implanted' vagina. The disapproval of her womanhood is based on her lack of 'real' sex-based biological features perceived relevant to her gender self-identification. Her experience illuminates trans women's societal invisibilisation as embedded upon a dominant ideological framework of cisnormativity that categorically assigns the identity of womanhood only to bodies socially ascribed female at birth. It reveals the invisibilisation of trans womanhood as patently premised on normative gender essentialist standpoints that consider biological sex the primary factor in determining gender (Campbell & l'Anson, 2007). Senzi's experiences also suggest a potential ignorance about the differences between sex, gender and sexual orientation at a societal level – of which a similar interpretation may be made of formal structures and academic discourse that tends to explore the experiences of LGBTQIA+ persons as an homogenous group as illustrated in our review<sup>3</sup>. As a function of this ideological bias, the trans participants, thus,

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<sup>3</sup> We are grateful to the anonymous reviewer of our paper for offering this insight.

have reported stories of being routinely disregarded and excluded in public structures like schools, police stations, clinics, hospitals and general social life. Lebo's remarks, in this regard, called attention to the exclusionary systemic dynamics of healthcare in South Africa:

*You go to a hospital now, and the first thing they look at is your ID, right? If you haven't changed your gender marker. You are a male, so you will go to a male ward.*

Violence against trans women proves to be institutionalised on the grounds of cishnormative policies and systematic regulations that do not appreciate the diversity of gender. Senzi spoke about her experience with the education system:

*I asked someone to go on my mother's behalf... So that they would allow me to wear who I am as a woman. They told me about school policy: "This is how a 'boy' is meant to wear."*

Lebo and Senzi's narrative portrayals of healthcare and the education system in present-day South Africa highlight the invisibility of trans women within these public systems. Their accounts shine light on how institutional structures are ideologically cishnormative and operate to neglect, exclude and discriminate against trans persons. This structural display of cissexism is a form of sexism that privileges cisgender people over trans people, who experience systematic disadvantage due to their rejection of historical norms of gender/sex boundaries (Hibbs, 2014). This invisibility and the simultaneous societal hypervisibility of black trans women, yet to be discussed below, emerge as grounded on a matrix of gendered power that represents trans women as devalued others in a cishnormative heteropatriarchal society.

***Hypervisibility and the vulnerability of othered women: "They treat me like I'm a different kind of person."***

The women's narratives in the study brought to light the hypervisibility of black trans women in South Africa, invoking tension between the hypervisibility and simultaneous invisibility of black trans subjectivity in post-apartheid South Africa. Hypervisibility was explained by Settlers et al., (2019) to be associated with acute surveillance, involving hyperscrutiny for one's perceived difference and deviance to the hegemonic social order. While black trans women's invisibility is deeply interwoven with their articulated experiences of structural exclusion and erasure, their hypervisibility is strongly associated with increased vulnerability to policing, antagonism and discrimination. Participants articulated lived experiences that showed how their visible deviance to cisgender norms invites excessive, unwelcomed social attention, subduing them to a violent cissexist gaze. For example, Nothando narrated a threatening experience in the city centre of Cape Town:

*There was a point where I was in Cape Town. They followed us, me and my friend. The*

*taxi guys, they literally followed us till we got to the taxi to Khayelitsha, where we were going to. They were shouting at us; they were calling us names.*

Likewise, Lebo talked about being vulnerable to street violence while doing ordinary tasks like going to the store. She said:

*Just going to the store is a problem because you always get transphobic slurs hurled at you. People are looking at you and looking like they want to beat you up.*

On the other hand, Lesego spoke about being routinely scrutinised, ostracised, and alienated in her rural community. Lesego reported:

*Some people go around talking about you. Saying bad things, looking at you, pointing at you. They treat me like I'm a different kind of person... They say, "We don't want to talk with you."*

In her narrative, Lesego specifically mentioned being treated like *a different kind of person*. This statement is significant for illustrating how the hypervisibility of black trans women and their vulnerability to violence is directly connected to their perceived otherness under a cisnormative social order that positions trans women as deviant, immoral and unhealthy. Over and above public social structures like clinics, even intimate communal spaces, like kitchens and bathrooms, materialised in the narratives of the women as structures that are dynamically gendered and systematised, whereby the hypersurveillance and policing of othered bodies is violently enacted. Lebo narrated about her experience of living in a student residence:

*I couldn't go shower because people were peeping on my shower doors, checking if I have a penis or a vagina. I couldn't go to the communal kitchen to cook because people would give me dead stares... I was initially placed at female corridors... That's the division that's there. Women in that corridor were like they don't want to stay with me. I was forcefully moved to a male corridor.*

As seen in the case of Lebo, a communal student residence systematically divided according to the gender binary becomes a mechanism for surveillance. The gendering of space facilitated the enactment of cisgender disciplinary power (Bender-Baird, 2016) is seen here where Lebo is ostracised, punished, and debarred for using a space symbolically marked 'for women only'. Equally tied to the oppressive gendering of space and people, Nina cited a unique configuration of hyper-surveillance and policing when talking about being socially held to an exceptionally high standard of (hyper) femininity that she needs to maintain at her workplace in exchange for validity as a 'real' woman. Nina relayed that,

*I come to work and sometimes with no make-up. And she said, "You know what, you cannot be one thing one day then the next thing the other day. You need to be consistent." She said, "Choose one side." Ironically, up until that day, I stuck to that rule.*

Nina was reprimanded by a corporate cisgender bureaucracy for performing her gender in ways that did not neatly fit into the gender binary. Ultimately, as it emerges, trans women's hypervisibility exists within a cissexist framework that makes the hypervisibility of black trans women a mechanism to control, police, and subjugate. These findings mirror a feminist narrative that has been pointed to for decades: public space is not a neutral space, rather it is where power is enacted (Bender-Baird, 2016).

### ***Sexual violence as gender disciplining: "They wanted to correct me."***

Sexual violence was a common experience across the stories told by women in the study. Alongside multiple accounts of violating sexual incidents of harassment, assault, and rape, the participants also shared stories centred on hypersexualisation and objectification. Women in the study particularly spoke of the collective tendency for the cisgender gaze to reduce trans identities to their body parts and sexual functioning. Inga's sexual assault, which she experienced on the school property, was described as driven by the boys' curiosity about her body parts. Inga recounted:

*They said, "Come here and let us show you something." Dave is the one pulling me... I remember Adam saying, "I want to see if you are a boy." And then he grabs my (crotch).*

The perpetrators' invasive questioning of Inga's genitalia is motivated by an attempt to decipher her "real" gender identity. This incident seems to be informed by a larger narrative of the gender binary that characteristically reduces gender identity to body parts, routinely conflating gender identity with physical anatomy, as pointed to by Flores and colleagues (2018). Senzi challenged and shared frustrations regarding cisgender people's sexual curiosities about the genitalia of trans bodies. Senzi protested:

*So, now everybody would come to me and say, "Can we see it?" How can you ask to see someone's private part? Is that allowed or is it because I'm trans, you can take advantage? You are cis and you have power over trans bodies?*

In her contention, Senzi invokes issues of gendered power. She challenges cisgender people's exercise of their social power over trans identities through their entitlement to trans bodies. Senzi's perspective reveals the extent of cisgender privilege within a cisgender matrix of power, where black trans women are treated as sexual curiosities as opposed to whole human beings. This is the essence of objectification, a narrative congruent to the findings of Flores et al. (2018). The study of Flores et al. (2018) revealed that trans women commonly experience prototypical forms of

sexual objectification, involving unwanted touching, sexualised gazes and bodily objectification. As Lebo highlighted:

*They sexualise us so much to a point where it turns into violence. And they feel like if you don't give me sex, then I'm going to violate you.*

In its extreme form, the socially sanctioned sexual objectification and hypersexualisation trans women experience threatens and leads to ideologically motivated aggressive violations of their bodies. This is distinctly seen in Senzi's case, where she was gang raped by, supposedly *curious* cisgender men. Senzi reports:

*They gang-raped me and left me with a scar on my face... the reason why they did is because some believed I had a vagina. They were curious and wanted to know how it happens.*

Nothando, who was also gang-raped, reveals a particularly distinctive perspective to the sexual injustices subjected to black trans women. Nothando stated:

*They wanted to rape me... Saying things like, "You are disrespectful, boy! This thing of yours of wearing revealing clothes!" And so, so... They wanted to correct me sexually.*

Nothando's experience reveals her experience of sexual victimisation as intended punishment. She cited punitive and policing discourse that accompanied the sexual violence perpetrated against her. In this case, sexual violence is utilised as a weapon to control and discipline her transgression of the patriarchal norms of gender. Sexual violations against black trans women, thus, arise as taking shape at the intersection of misogyny and cissexism (in addition to the violence that race and class engender in the post-apartheid South African context). As Flores et al. (2018) wrote, black trans women's experiences of sexual violence are shaped by an intersection of sexism, racism, and cissexism, highlighting how multiple systems of power and oppression interconnect to produce experiences of injustice (Crenshaw, 1990). Therefore, while the bodies of cisgender black women are also normatively sexualised, objectified and violated under a doubly oppressive colonial and sexist gaze (Donovan & Williams, 2002), the objectification and hypersexualisation of black women of the trans experience have notable particularity and distinctiveness.

***The violence of bureaucracy on gender autonomy: "You need to have a letter from a healthcare provider."***

While South Africa is a post-apartheid democratic country that constitutionally regards and protects the human freedoms of sexual and gender minorities (Croucher, 2002), the state also possesses particularly strict legalities that vigorously regulate trans people's



gender self-determination. Nina's experience of seeking gender-affirming surgery bears this out:

*She told me that you need to change your name and gender marker. It's one of the things that strengthen your case for surgery. I thought, let me do it.*

Nina's narrative shows how the process of self-determination in South Africa is systematically procedural and bureaucratic. The idea that she needs to *strengthen her case* for surgery suggests that gender affirmative medical procedures are not afforded to trans service users simply at their will. They need to be approved and legitimated by cisgender medical and psychological authorities with a violent colonial history of pathologizing trans and gender diverse identities (Jones, 2008). There are vigorous processes that need to be undertaken and stages to be 'passed' in order for trans women to be legally acknowledged in post-apartheid South African democracy. Resultingly, not everyone who undertakes the process to self-identify legally will necessarily have a successful outcome (Wilson et al., 2014). Hinting at the violence inherent in the process, Nothando described the process as a war zone:

*It's a process that takes forever. In South Africa, as much as it is meant to be a democratic country, it's not. It's a war zone.*

Lebo explained that to alter her identity gender marker at the Department of Home Affairs, she needs the authority of a medical and psychological professional to validate and approve the fact that she is, indeed, a woman. Lebo reported:

*For you to change your gender marker, you need to have a letter from a healthcare provider or a doctor or a psychologist or something.*

Whilst the women in the study did not necessarily speak of unsuccessful personal outcomes, they did speak of experiences of being brutally scrutinised during the process. As Nina shared:

*When I started transitioning, I was around about 26. I went to hospital.. I had done my screening with the therapy team. They tore me apart..... Just the questions. They ask you and dig in every corner of your mind to figure out where you are at.*

Nina shared an experience of being emotionally violated under the care of medical practitioners. She was invasively examined and scrutinised before she was authoritatively qualified as a woman. Within a gendered healthcare system, this trans experience can be viewed from the lens of medical pathologisation (Schulz, 2018). While clinical frameworks and policies are evolving, for women of the trans experience

to be deemed 'eligible' for gender transition services, traditionally, they have been required to meet diagnostic criteria for a psychiatric diagnosis of "gender dysphoria" as described in the DSM-5. The diagnosis of gender dysphoria has played a central role in the recommendation for gender affirmative hormonal and surgical treatment (Schulz, 2018). Laila's story illuminates how the legitimacy of her identity rested in the hands of cisgender bureaucracy and the western tools and instruments used to qualify her. It's a violent and political process that fundamentally removes power from the trans individual and places it on bureaucracy.

***Violence as a multi-edged sword in the intersection of race, class and gender:  
"It's not going to be as rife as when you are uneducated."***

In addition to gender, stories and perspectives of the women in the study strongly implicated factors of race and class that significantly shape their experiences of interpersonal and structural violence in the post-apartheid South African context. For example, Lebo spoke about economic resourcefulness and education status as critical social dynamics of class that provide a systematic advantage, granting protections against the vulnerabilities of anti-trans violence. Lebo explained:

*That's when things started being okay... If you are trans and you're not a provider or a breadwinner, you experience extreme violence. But if you are trans and you are a breadwinner, when the family is dependent on you, there is going to be some violence but it's not going to be as rife as when you are not educated.*

Lebo's narrative of social class mobility, where she changed positions from being working class and financially dependent to becoming an educated and economically resourceful woman in her family structure, highlights the dynamics of class status that shape the social experiences of black trans women in South Africa. Particularly, her narrative arises as emblematic of capitalist systems of organising the world that grants social and political power to people according to their hierarchical economic class rankings, as amplified by Eisenstein (1979), who wrote about power or powerlessness as deriving from a person's class position.

A majority of the women in the study could not undergo gender-affirming procedures. This included the legal alteration of their gender marker with the Department of Home Affairs as well as gender-affirming medical practices—i.e., hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and sex reassignment surgery—with the Department of Health. Participants cited several social problems that concerned their economic barriers surrounding inaccessibility. Lesego mentioned that she does not have the needed financial resources to embark on the journey of changing her gender marker. She lives on a farm, geographically isolated from the Department of Home Affairs offices. Lesego's issue with economic disempowerment invokes structural factors of classed and racialised struggles

that constrain her self-actualisation and freedoms as a black trans woman living in rural South Africa. Her narrative brings to light the harsh impact of economic marginalisation as a woman in post-apartheid South Africa who is not only trans but also black and poor.

Nina talked about being placed on long waiting lists at the Department of Health for surgery. She said:

*You need to prove yourself. You know that we need to wait for 25 years to get a free boob job or to have a sex change? They only do one person one year at hospital.*

Generally, gender-affirming procedures are not easily accessible for black trans women in South Africa who are dependent on the public service. Wilson and colleagues (2014) writes that the health sector is not doing nearly enough to meet the healthcare needs of trans women. In the private sector, as seen in Lebo's case, these procedures are commodified. They are considerably more expensive and unaffordable in a capitalist state experiencing high levels of racialised and gendered economic instability.

## **Concluding Remarks**

As illuminated by the findings of this study, GBV in the everyday lives of black trans women reflects a violent cissexist social order deep-rooted in South African society - privileging those who conform to societal gender norms associated with their birth sex while vehemently challenging the legitimacy and humanity of those who do *not* conform to the norms of the gender binary. In this study, black trans women in post-apartheid South Africa are revealed to be routinely denied the right to exist in a binaried cultural landscape – consistently problematised, policed and punished for troubling entrenched gender and sex boundaries of what it means to be human. The subjection of trans life to the violence of cisgender power in cis-hetero-patriarchal South Africa is manifest as coexistent alongside racialised economic disenfranchisement that black trans women simultaneously find themselves in contention with in the post-apartheid dispensation. The findings of this study complicate as well as disrupt normative ciscentric social representations of GBV in post-apartheid South Africa, where the social construction of the scourge of GBV has been historically framed from a hegemonic cisgender perspective that excludes the LGBTQIA+ community (Graaf, 2021), including trans women.

In exploring black trans life in relation to violence and power in South African democracy, a strong narrative of invisibility manifested in the stories and experiences the trans women shared. This narrative unmasked the intricate ways in which cisgender identities and experiences are situated as an unspoken, assumed norm in the organisation of their world, while they, as trans women, are positioned as a marked category – “subordinate, marginal and extraordinary” (Johnson, 2015: 27). The invisibility of trans women was observed to be ideologically empowered, centred

on a weaponised system of patriarchal virtues that delegitimise their womanhood. A political position of invisibility translated to and materialised itself through forms of structural exclusion that are discursively symbolic of the systematic denial of their authority as women. As McNay (2004: 175) argues, abstract forces are likely to reveal themselves in the “lived reality of social relations.” By this means, the violence of the denial of trans women’s freedom to self-determine and right to exercise their human constitutional freedoms was observed to be inscribed in institutional policies and practices as well as pervasive social and cultural discourses that systematically arrange their lives. In a post-apartheid society perseveringly structured around a limiting gender binary system (Vincent & Camminga, 2009), the women in the study reported being prohibited from wearing school uniforms and using public restrooms that reflect and affirm their self-defined gender identity. They detailed stories of being allocated to ‘male’ residences in their learning institutions and forcibly placed in ‘male’ medical wards when receiving healthcare. By maintaining the erasure and silencing of – from a cisgender gaze – disruptively deviant trans bodies in this way, these trans exclusionary social practices can be construed as aggressive structural means of protecting the stability and integrity of a cis-hetero-patriarchal order in South Africa.

Paradoxically, a narrative of hypervisibility was demonstrated by patterns of social hypersurveillance and hyperscrutinisation that trans women experience on ideological grounds of their perceived difference from the dominant social order (Settles et al., 2019). This political configuration emerged through the stories the women unveiled concerning being policed and harshly punished for their social rejection of gender norms. In this construction, cisgender power is seen to exercise its disciplinary authority on “deviant” gendered bodies by way of gendered modes of repetitive exposure to street harassment, workplace bullying and other mechanisms of interpersonal and structural violence in their day-to-day existence. Women in the study were also subjected to sexual violence, such as harassment, assault, and rape. This sexual violence was found to be used as a weapon to control and discipline their transgression of value-laden societal norms of gender. This is supported by Gqola’s (2015) work that posits that sexual violence against women is a social act marked by gendered power, whereby rape is constructed as “not a moment, but a language” (Gqola, 2015: 22).

South Africa’s historical colonial regulation of gender (Currier, 2011) was brought to light by talks of the women in the study on their gender transitioning experiences. Their stories and perspectives on this social process discursively represented the Department of Health and the Department of Home Affairs as state institutions that have - traditionally - bureaucratically utilised repressive regulatory frameworks to vigilantly police “the brutal boundaries” (Langley, 2006: 101) of access to legalised and medicalised social categories of woman/man and female/male. Accounts of the women’s social, medical and legal gender transition processes, described as a ‘war

zone', exposed the manner in which trans women's freedom to self-determine and self-identify is systematically governed, and at times restricted, by cisgender medical and legal power systems wielding the power to designate gender. Within the paradigm of traditional gender fundamentalist governmental legalities (Langley, 2006), the self-determination of some of the women in the study was found to be not simply afforded at one's free will. Their identities and womanhood needed to be approved and legitimated by cisgender medical, psychological and legal authorities (often through pathologizing psychiatric diagnoses). While guidelines have recently evolved to no longer necessitate mental health evaluations as a prerequisite for trans individuals to access hormone therapy for gender affirmation (Tomson et al., 2021), the Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status Act No. 49 of 2003 continues to impose a requirement for gender-affirming hormonal or surgical intervention as a condition for trans individuals to achieve legal gender recognition in South Africa. This legal regulation concretizes a structure of gender essentialism (Gelman, 2003; Smiler & Gelman, 2008) ingrained in a gendered state that alludes to the existence of particular fixed physical characteristics as essentially defining what it means to be a particular gender. The unbending demand to medically transition (induce physical changes to align oneself with one's self-identified gender identity) in order to obtain legal recognition fails to acknowledge the broad expressions of gender that transcend rigid and confining biological definitions (Johnson, 2015; Johnson, 2016), and contributes to a culture that places trans women under the systemic threat of experiencing delegitimization of their womanhood based on the lack of normative sex-based biological features culturally perceived relevant to being a woman. The adoption of such an essentialist framework in the contemporary South African state infringes on gender autonomy and undermines the varied and open ways womanhood can be physically embodied and recognised.

Black trans women's experiences of violence in post-apartheid South Africa are unambiguously structural. The interpersonal is also observed to be mediated by structural ideological forces. The violence in black trans women's lives undeniably exists as both an instrument for and simultaneously a product of cissexism, a system of beliefs, practices and social relations that discriminate against trans people (Pucket et al., 2021; Sumerau & Grollman, 2018; Hibbs, 2014). This violence extends itself as a form of gendered injustice that has its roots in cis-hetero-patriarchal essentialist ideologies of gender that reduce women to their body parts and relegate women to positions of inferiority (Fassinger & Arseneau, 2017). These narratives of structural violence show that historical discriminatory structures of gender, sex, and sexuality continue to prevail in South Africa after close to three decades of its transition into a democratic nation (Livermon, 2020). It shows that despite achieved constitutional post-apartheid protections against discrimination based on a person's race, gender, and sexuality, black trans women are still positioned as inferior outsiders within the borders of a democracy that marginalises them.

Having said that, the narratives shared by the women in the study reveal that the violence enacted against black trans women is gender-based. It is systematically premised on the putting into operation patriarchal cissexist prejudices – based on rigid socially sanctioned assumptions about gender and sex – that violently marginalise trans persons. However, this violence also emerges as informed by factors of race and class power dynamics at play in the post-apartheid South African context. Apartheid racialised legacies are seen to conspire with historical powers of capitalist heteropatriarchy, bearing a strong mediating role in shaping black trans women’s vulnerability to gendered violence. The women in the study were black trans women who were mostly unemployed and geographically located in townships and rural areas, socio-geographical locale primarily characterised by racialised socioeconomic underdevelopment (Noble & Wright, 2013). A woman in the study reported that living in a rural area has made it financially challenging for her to access legal gender alteration services due to the Department of Home Affairs office being geographically too far. Other similarly economically deprived and working-class women reported being unable to afford commodified gender-affirmative medical procedures in largely racialised capitalist South African healthcare. Their economic narratives emerge as a consequence of post-apartheid spatial segregation and of slow-to-change historical racialised geographies that have pushed black people to the financial margins of society (Newton et al., 2013; Noble & Wright, 2013).

### **Implications—a move toward a trans inclusive feminism**

This paper offers a scholarly contribution to a growing move toward expanding the definition of GBV, where, within an intersectional view, GBV is a structural phenomenon rooted in patriarchal norms and ideals of the gender binary that systematically value men over women, masculinity over femininity, heterosexuality over homosexuality and cisgender people over trans people (Caribbean Vulnerable Communities Coalition, 2016). The findings of the study subvert ciscentricism in feminism by way of centring and privileging narratives of gendered violence from the viewpoint of trans women, whose voices have been, in many ways, rendered inaudible in feminist practice. The findings brought to light patriarchal assumptions of the binariness of gender that drive violence meted against black trans women in South Africa, entrenched by systems of cisgendered power in everyday black trans life that give order to who has the right to live and be free. Within this political contextuality of anti-trans violence, as per the study findings, what is evidenced to remain at the centre of black trans women’s sustained vulnerability to violence in post-apartheid South Africa are fundamentally structural social phenomena: gender regulatory medico-legal structures that restrict trans women’s right to self-determination, dominant gender fundamentalist socio-cultural discourses that delegitimize the womanhood of trans woman, brutalising cissexist social practices that regulate the bodies of institutionally othered trans women, as well as the racialised economic marginalisation of blackness in post-apartheid South Africa. Importantly,

at the heart of this institutionally maintained status quo is also the dearth of feminist research, advocacy and programming that is radically intersectional and trans inclusive (Wirtz et al., 2020).

This paper has shown that although the fight against GBV has gained growing attention in recent years, the invisible contours of 'gender' in ciscentric anti-GBV activism require collaborative undoing in order to facilitate a feminist liberation from the violence of heteropatriarchy that involves and engages the sociopolitical interests of trans people (Wirtz et al., 2020). To this end, this study is significant for its prioritisation of the voices of historically marginalised women in feminist praxis, enabling nuanced and inclusive constructions of how gendered violence expresses itself in the lives of black women living in South Africa. As Arfini (2020: 161) proposes, an inclusion of the positions, histories and stories of trans women in feminist practice should not be "merely a matter of assimilation." The basis for trans inclusion in feminism should be meaningfully grounded on an appreciation of the shared emancipatory benefits that promise to emanate from collaborative feminist alliances, seeking to dismantle the violent shackles of patriarchy (Arfini, 2020). These assertions point us toward an exercise of trans inclusion that is held together by a feminist recognition of overlapping axes of structural violence that black women – as gendered and racialised persons from either the cisgender or trans experience – face under historical patriarchal structures of oppression that overarchingly work to limit women's freedom to self-determine.

Moving forward, in expanding the definition of GBV, challenging the construction of violent injustices against women from a limiting cisgender perspective and learning to engage gender within feminism in more fluid, equitable and intersectional ways, we are of the view that a collaborative trans inclusive feminist orientation takes a serious stance toward disorganising patriarchal gender essentialist frameworks that restrict women's capabilities of who they can and cannot be, restricting the varied "forms of life" (Arfini, 2020: 161) womanhood and its gendered contextualities can take shape and be approached in scholarship and practice.

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