

YOUR BROTHER, MY WIFE

Sex and gender behind bars

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Many of us know that sex, sexual violence and varying levels of sexual coercion occur in our prisons. But the subject of sex in prison remains an uncomfortable one. While recent media reports and revelations on prison corruption have played a role in bringing it more into the public arena, generally not much is understood about the dynamics of sex in men's prisons. This article provides some insight into the relationships of power and vulnerability that underpin much of the sex that is taking place in this context.

It has become imperative that the subject of sex in prison is dealt with openly and publicly. Not only is there a high incidence of sexual violence and coercion behind prison walls, increasing the risk of HIV transmission, but the various sexual experiences in prison may pose potential challenges for offenders when they are released (most after serving relatively short sentences).

A recent CSVr study¹ sheds a disturbing light on an environment in which people are regularly forced into unwanted sex and consistently humiliated as a result. Drawing on in-depth interviews and focus groups conducted in Gauteng with 14 ex-offenders and nine current prisoners, the study aims to understand the social circumstances in which sex takes place in men's prisons, and the meanings and identities attached to these.

Central to the widespread abuse that is taking place are particular understandings of gender. Indeed, the prison environment is one channel through which destructive notions of what it means to be a man or a woman are generated and exacerbated.

'Marriage'

Relationships generally known as prison 'marriages' reportedly provide the most common setting for sexual interactions between male prisoners. These 'marriages' take place between 'husbands' and 'wives', and rigidly guarded rules govern how the individuals in these gendered roles may relate to each other. They are profoundly unequal relationships and are defined by the power that 'husbands' wield over their 'wives', also commonly known as 'wyfies'.² There is very little that 'wives' can do without the permission of their 'husbands'. To differing degrees, 'husbands' will control how their 'wives' relate to the broader prison community of other inmates and warders. These 'marriages' are sanctioned by inmate power structures: they are accepted by dominant inmate culture as the 'right' place for sex to happen.

'Wives' must defer to their men. They are expected to do domestic work, for instance keeping the cell tidy and making their 'man' tea. Most importantly, they are expected to be constantly available to their 'husbands' for sex.

It is the role of the 'husband', on the other hand, to provide materially for his 'wife'. 'Husbands' are involved in the 'business' of the prison, in obtaining and trading goods in the prison economy. Through these activities 'men' are able to provide their 'wives' with goods such as food, cigarettes, dagga and other drugs.

One effect of this arrangement is that the 'husband' role tends to be associated with movement and activity, and the 'wife' role with inactivity and passivity. This dichotomy of active/passive also governs what is done in the actual sex act: 'men' penetrate and 'women' receive.

Certainly, there are variations in how 'marriage' partners relate to each other. Not all marriage-style relationships or sexual interactions will be primarily defined by coercion, and the nature of the relationship may also change over time. But respondents agree that for the most part 'wives' are sex slaves who despise their situations and remain in the 'marriage' only because of fear.

Being a 'woman'

Part of being a prison 'wife' or 'wyfie' is being identified as a 'woman'. According to prevalent inmate culture, being sexually penetrated is associated with being identified as a 'woman'. Most marriages begin with the 'husband' forcing sex with the person he is taking as his 'wife', and thereby initiating 'her' into 'womanhood'. To this end the 'husband' often employs manipulation and trickery.

Being a 'woman' is not a prized position. It usually means that you are a constant target of humiliation and abuse. 'Women' tend to be seen in an entirely sexualised way – the primary purpose of 'women' is to provide 'men' with sex.

One young offender explains:

We are all criminals in here and if I say you are a criminal that means I respect you. But if you have had sex done to you, it's obvious that they will see you differently. Even the criminal in you is now gone and you are now a woman ... There is nothing we can do for you. Some people just look and some want to sleep with you and when you walk past, people want to touch you or they threaten to rape you.

Gangs and 'marriage'

Prison 'marriages' are institutionalised in the structures of the ubiquitous and powerful 'Numbers' gangs.³ While the research sample did not include any identified member of the 28s, the gang most often associated with sex and 'wyfies', respondents make clear that these types of sexual relationships are condoned and protected in all the 'Numbers', even if the gang codes claim to forbid sex.

For example, in several of these gangs at least, hierarchies are divided into feminine or 'wyfie' ranks, and masculine or 'soldier' ranks. New gang members will be classified as either 'women' or 'men', although at the time they will usually have no idea that such classification is taking place.

Gangs organise forced sex in other ways too, and there are intricate rankings, rituals and rules to ensure that the sexual status quo is maintained. It is noteworthy however, that while 'marriages' and 'marriage'-style sex are supported by the gangs, not only gang members participate in these interactions, and not all gang members take part. Gang structures support and organise specific sexual activities, but not all their members endorse these practices. Some strenuously disapprove.

'Ushintsha Ipondo'

One of the ways that gangs and the related dominant inmate culture attempt to maintain the sexual status quo is to outlaw and stigmatise sex that deviates from the power-defined 'marriage' variety.

Another apparently common type of sexual interaction known as *ushintsha ipondo* is one example of sex that is considered deviant. *Ushintsha ipondo* literally means 'to exchange a pound' and, in contrast to 'marriage'-style sex, is marked by mutual agreement between the people involved. Sometimes the people doing *ushintsha ipondo* are also in marriages where they are 'wives' to other inmates.

In *ushintsha ipondo*, neither partner is considered superior or inferior and the interaction is understood as an equal exchange of sex. Participants take turns to penetrate and receive. By both penetrating and receiving, the people doing *ushintsha ipondo* are breaking the rules of prison sex. They are also disrupting the system whereby a gender identity is

allocated in relation to the role performed in sex: where those who penetrate are identified as 'men', and the penetrated as 'women'.

This blurring of gender roles is related to the fact that *ushintsha ipondo* is associated with homosexuality, which is in turn related to the practice being frowned upon. By contrast, the sex that takes place in 'marriages' is distanced culturally from notions of homosexuality by the clearly defined imposed gender roles. For these reasons, people involved in *ushintsha ipondo* need to keep it

secret, or risk punishment. Punishment can take the form of a fine, rape, or gang rape.

Other consensual interactions

While most sex happening in men's prisons reportedly takes place in either 'marriage'-type or *ushintsha ipondo* interactions, respondents also made mention of other types of consensual sexual interactions. Though they have less to say on these, such interactions appear to be defined more by feelings of love that participants have for each other, than sexual norms or particular roles.

Table 1:
Some defining features of three key reported sexual relationship types in prison

| Type of relationship | Role players | Norms operating between participants | Sex norms |
|--|--|---|--|
| Marriage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Entrenched and endorsed by prison gangs and prison culture May involve gang members or non-gang members or both Usually brought about by coerced sex act perpetrated by <i>husband</i> against <i>wife</i> | Husbands <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identified as <i>men</i> Often the older partner | <i>Husbands</i> are the superior partners: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Own and control their <i>wives</i> Must provide for <i>wives</i> (food, drugs and other goods) Involved in the 'business' of prison (smuggling, procuring goods) | <i>Men/husbands</i> penetrate |
| | Wives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identified as <i>women</i> Often the younger partner | <i>Wives</i> are the inferior partners: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Must defer to their <i>men</i> Must maintain the home space and serve their <i>men</i> Must service their <i>men's</i> sexual desires | <i>Women/wives</i> are penetrated |
| Ushintsha ipondo <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Outlawed by gangs May involve gang members or non-gang members or both Consensual | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Protagonists do not occupy distinct roles They tend to hold similar positions in broader inmate culture If in a gang, are of similar gang rankings May both be <i>wives</i> of other prisoners Of similar ages | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Neither partner is considered superior or inferior Relationship/interaction defined in terms of equal sexual exchange Both parties provide sex to the other | Partners take turns to penetrate and receive |
| Other consensual relationships (least information available) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consensual Often understood to involve gay people | Protagonists do not occupy distinct roles | Relationship defined by 'love'-feelings that partners have for each other | Actual sex not discussed |

The three broad relationship types in which sexual interaction takes place, as reported here, can no doubt be expanded upon (Table 1). A potentially vast range of circumstances surround prison sex, which after all, involves numerous and diverse individuals and takes place in different prison contexts. For example, the gang-dominated inmate culture does not necessarily exist in the same intensity in all prisons, prison sections or communal cells. Alternative inmate networks and hierarchies such as those organised around formal education or religions may be stronger in some environments, and militate against sexual activity. Moreover, different ways of relating may be negotiated in the little pockets of privacy that prisoners create for themselves – even when they ostensibly resemble particular types of interaction.

'Marriage'-type relationships, however, tend to be based on a profoundly socially destructive set of gender identities, which are sustained by violence and abuse, and therefore merit special attention.

Who becomes a 'wyfie'?

Where prisoners become 'wyfies' this is usually against their will. Much of the time it is those who are coerced into an initial sex act – an act that is understood to turn them into 'women' – who are consequently taken as 'wives' in the longer term. People who are vulnerable to being sexually subordinated in this way are those who are generally vulnerable within the prison environment.

Lack of prison know-how

Newly arrived, first-time offenders are particularly vulnerable. Newcomers are the focus of intense inmate attention and are looked upon as resources at the disposal of other inmates. They are seen as sources of material goods, as gang members, and sexual subjects, and are, on their arrival, usually confronted with frightening and overwhelming situations. A key factor in their vulnerability is that they do not know how prison works, they do not have prison 'suss', and do not know how to negotiate the numerous and contradictory invitations or threats with which they are presented. Frightened and overwhelmed, they are often easily intimidated, tricked and manipulated – by other inmates who pretend to be friendly and concerned for their

wellbeing. It is not only direct violence that is used to subordinate people sexually. A range of strategies may be employed, some very sophisticated.

One prisoner explained:

In prison they say one thing. If you don't have a mind you are in trouble. We are fighting with the mind you see.

In this context 'having a mind' seems to entail not falling for gestures of supposed friendliness and support, but rather to know that nothing comes free in prison. To be naïve, gullible and trusting is to possess qualities that are dangerous and are perceived as signals of weakness – and therefore of 'womanness'.

A typical path into being sexually violated and made into a 'woman' is for a new prisoner to accept food, drugs or protection from another inmate who pretends to be generous and concerned. This begins a dependency dynamic. At that same time, what is happening is that by eating the food, smoking the cigarette, or accepting the protection offered, an exchange has taken place and a debt has been created. The new, naïve inmate will be expected to pay back this debt by giving sex to the person who gave him the food, cigarette, or protection. When he tries to refuse, it will be made very clear to him that there is no way out.

Economic vulnerability

Because sex is part of the prison economy, prisoners who are poor also tend to be particularly vulnerable. Those who do not receive money and goods from family and friends on the outside are vulnerable to being subordinated through power-defined sexual relationships, according to interviewees. Basic requirements that are every prisoner's right become embroiled in this economy where inmates can be made to pay for beds, for their own food rations, and to move between different parts of the prison. As one respondent put it, 'money makes prison go round'.

Physical weakness

To be physically weak, not prepared to use violence, and/or thought to have committed a 'sissy' crime – meaning a crime not involving violence with weapons – increases the risk of becoming a 'woman'.

Good looks

Those who are considered good-looking are also among the likely targets for sexual coercion, as they are desirable prospective 'wives'. On the basis of interviewee reports 'good looks' include a young, fresh appearance, smooth skin and plumpness:

These young men who look pretty – big thighs and handsome, round, fat and all that – once such a young man comes into prison, Ay yey yey! The excitement! Within the [blink] of an eye, B section, A section, C section will know that, 'There's a young man, something of a queen!'

However, none of these qualities are prerequisites for sexual victimisation. Both poverty and fear can be created to ensure compliance, for example through robbery and assault. If a person has been specifically targeted, those who want him will stop at very little to get him, and this is where blatantly violent rape and gang rape often become part of the picture.

In addition, according to respondents, numerous prison warders are involved in selling sex targets to other inmates, or accepting bribes in exchange for turning a blind eye to abuses. Other allegations against warders are that they do not follow through on complaints that are lodged, and refuse prisoners access to welfare and medical services where they may find more sympathy and support. In other instances correctional officers may not be directly involved in abuses, but appear to be fearful for their own safety or simply apathetic, and resigned to the widespread abuse that they know is happening around them.

Manhood

In the prison context, those who are emotionally closed as well as aggressive and assertive are able to lay claim to the status of 'man' (and are therefore protected from being regarded as 'woman'). Appearing to be emotionally and financially self-sufficient, and being active in smuggling and other aspects of the 'business' of prison, are signals of 'manhood'. Self-sufficiency also means never looking to prison officials for assistance. But perhaps the most important aspect of laying claim to 'manhood' is to demonstrate the potential for violence – to be known to have committed a violent, weapon-assisted crime, and to be physically strong and able to fight for oneself.

Indeed, in order for a person who has been defined as a 'woman' to get rid of the accompanying stigma and sexual abuse, he will usually be required to commit violence in order to prove himself deserving of 'man' status. If he belongs to a gang he will probably be told to stab a specific person (often a non-gang member or warder).

Cycles of violence

The practice of getting promoted from 'woman' to 'man' status is one way in which the dynamics surrounding sex in prison feed cycles of violence: where victims can become perpetrators and where violence is understood as a necessary component of manhood. For a 'woman' to get masculine status, to achieve 'manhood' and respect, and to put an end to repeated sexual violation and humiliation, requires resorting to violence. The violence follows the clear logic laid out by the prevailing inmate culture and the associated ideas around gender that are particularly explicit in prison but certainly not restricted to this environment.

Sexual abuse and subordination also have consequences for the reintegration of offenders into society. Not surprisingly, further violence is reportedly a common phenomenon. The shame of having been raped or turned into a 'woman', for example, is so painful that most victims try by all means to keep what happened to them in prison secret. (The perception that the victim is in some way to blame for the abuse, is a powerful one.)

Respondents explain how some people who were made into 'women' in prison have, upon release, attacked fellow ex-prisoners in order to stop them from giving away these secrets. Some also report attacks to punish people who had already publicised that the person was a 'woman' in prison, and revenge attacks by prison 'wives' on their prison 'husbands', following release. They also link the isolation, shame and loss of self-esteem typically experienced by victims of forced sex and the imposition of a 'woman' identity, to an increased likelihood of re-offence or engagement in other damaging behaviours.

Conclusion

Not only does the prison environment support few opportunities for positive self-expression, but it may

entrench intensely destructive notions of what it means to be a 'man'. It is likely that many exposed to this context, even if not directly involved in abusive sex situations, will continue to act out identities that involve the subjugation, ownership and violation of others. They will also act out the destructive effects of unaddressed trauma. More broadly, prison experiences may be formative in shaping the views of many young offenders on sexuality and gender, impacting on relationships and behaviour following release.

Prevalent sexual practices in prison are at the same time embedded in what goes on outside prison. Prison 'marriages' – the most common setting for sex and where forced sex most frequently happens – are modelled on dominant heterosexual relations that take place outside prison. Interviewees consistently remind us of the connections between inside and outside with statements like 'you can't rape your wife' or 'prison wyfies are treated just like women outside'. Relations between men and women outside are used to explain the sexual status quo behind bars. This is yet another wakeup call to those of us beyond the prison walls in terms of how we relate to each other. Prisoners are not in the business of creating from scratch a whole new society, but rather in drawing on and adapting identities and ways of interacting that they bring with them from outside. In turn, these intensified and adapted social processes will be fed to the outside when prisoners are released.

Tackling this situation requires further research and the implementation and testing of potential solutions. The findings of the CSVr study however suggest a number of initial levels of dedicated engagement if strategies for prevention are to be developed.

Some of the direct services that are required include the provision of efficient and trustworthy complaints channels; the proper functioning of disciplinary processes; and safe spaces where people who dare to report violations (including witnesses and those attempting to escape gangs), and others at increased risk, are protected and supported. In addition, new inmates should be informed of behaviour that may increase their risk when they arrive in prison.

The transformation of warder culture and attitudes is crucial, with questions of appropriate education, recruitment, evaluation and disciplinary measures needing consideration, as well as the provision of staff support services.

Environmental factors that aggravate sexual abuse and other forms of violence require attention. Linked to the issue of warder culture, endemic corruption, theft and smuggling need to be addressed and strategies developed to ensure that all prisoners receive the basic necessities that the Department of Correctional Services is obliged to provide, and are able to access the services offered.

Also relating to the prevention of violence in prison more generally, is the need for management methodologies that ensure that the factors underlying gangsterism and the dominant inmate culture are dealt with differently. Primarily this is about providing opportunities for alternative ways of asserting personal power and identity, which in turn means finding ways to reduce overcrowding and lock-up periods, relieve boredom, enhance people's sense of self-worth, and constructively deal with conflict and frustration.

Underpinning the problem of sexual violence in South African prisons are the broader problems of male violence and the widely experienced attitudes to sex and gender that inform society at large. Ultimately, therefore, the challenge of addressing sexual violence in prisons is part of engaging with these broader societal challenges

Endnotes

- 1 The full report on the study, S Gear & K Ngubeni, *Daai Ding: sex, sexual violence and coercion in men's prisons*, 2002, is available from the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVr) and on the CSVr website: www.csvr.org.za.
- 2 Other terms used to refer to role players in such relationships are also reported; however 'husband', 'wife' and 'wyfie' will be used here.
- 3 The Numbers (the 28s, 27s, 26s, Airforce 3 [23], Airforce 4 [24] and Big 5s) date back to the late 19th century. While they originated outside prison, their present-day significance is restricted to the prison context. They operate along hierarchical lines that mimic colonial, militarised institutions.