**Call for inputs: Report on colonialism and sexual orientation and gender identity**

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The significance of patriarchy in establishing, maintaining, and promoting queerphobic[[1]](#footnote-1) attitudes is under researched and frequently underplayed.

The sex binary and wider patriarchal structures were established as part of an imperial project to enforce the idea of ‘race’ itself, defining masculinity and femininity as exclusively white characteristics and demarcating colonised women from their white counterparts, thereby leaving them ‘sexually marked as female without the characteristics of femininity’.[[2]](#footnote-2) This was a successful ploy to fortify white supremacy using Victorian gender ideals for white people whilst simultaneously portraying indigenous women and men as genderless and animalistic, with indigenous men in particular depicted as ‘uncontrollably sexual and wild’.[[3]](#footnote-3) It was in this way that whiteness became associated, in Azille Coetzee’s words, with ‘inhabiting a masculine or feminine identity according to the rules of binary heterosexual patriarchy, [whilst] being black mean[t] failing to do so’.[[4]](#footnote-4) Thus, essentially one’s masculinity or femininity became a prerequisite for their humanity and as a result the existence of colonised people outside of this binary justified their degrading treatment in the eyes of imperialists. With such a significant tie forged between the sex and gender binaries and one’s humanity, colonial policies paved the way for discriminatory attitudes against LGBT persons – who often exist outside of the gender binary - and more specifically, Black and Brown LGBT persons, with the belief that anyone existing outside of this binary does not qualify for personhood.

The violent queerphobic act of ‘corrective’ rape – defined as the rape of non-conforming groups in relation to gender identity or sexual orientation with the intention of the perpetrator being to ‘correct’ the individual - has largely misogynistic roots, intending to demonstrate male patriarchal domination, and is one such example of how patriarchal colonial values continue to contribute to institutional queerphobic violence. As Sarah Doan-Minh argues, ‘corrective’ rape is a punishment for ‘violating traditional gender presentation’ and heterosexuality which threatens masculinity and by extension, dominant patriarchal order.[[5]](#footnote-5) This existence outside of the gender binary or heteropatriarchy, therefore, needs to be ‘punished’ in the eyes of perpetrators through an act in which they can personally exert their power and control over victims to ‘correct’ and degrade them, forcing them to essentially conform by demonstrating what happens when they fail to do so. ‘Corrective’ rape, and more widely sexual violence, are endemic in South Africa despite the Equality Clause in the constitution which legally enshrines the rights and legal protection of all no matter their gender identity or sexual orientation. It is a hate crime perpetrated by men trying to maintain their superiority and masculinity in a society that they feel increasingly threatens the ‘natural’ patriarchal order. As with any case of queerphobic violence, those with intersecting identities are more frequently and harshly targeted, with Black lesbians most commonly the main target of ‘corrective’ rape due to the intersection of their gender, sexual orientation, and racial identity. Arguably, given that the gender binary was introduced during colonialism with the intent of dehumanising Black people, ‘traditional’ feminine appearance and broadly conforming to gendered ideals are perceived as even more important in the consideration of the personhood of Black women. When they do not ascribe to these gendered norms created by colonisers, their humanity is degraded far quicker than their white counterparts for this reason. Thus, historical racial oppression intertwines with gender-based violence and queerphobia to make the experience of Black lesbians uniquely more repressive, often stripping them of their humanity when they fail to conform to heteropatriarchy, and as a result of this, in South Africa, Black lesbians are twice as likely to be subject to sexual assault and other instances of sexual violence.[[6]](#footnote-6) Therefore, when given the question “what’s race got to do with rape”, as South African feminist Pumla Gqola answers, unequivocally “everything”.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Furthermore, the prevalence of forced gender reassignment surgeries as a ‘corrective’ treatment for homosexuality historically is an example of how colonially enforced perceptions of gender that revolve around white supremacy and heteropatriarchal norms have caused immense damage and impacted the pervasiveness of harmful ‘conversion’ therapy practices. During apartheid, the South African Defence Force (SADF) subjected homosexual conscripts to torturous treatment including electroshock therapy with the intention of ‘curing’ their homosexuality through the Aversion Project, and when this inevitably failed, they forced conscripts to undergo gender reassignment surgery so that they could at least be seen to fulfil heteropatriarchal standards.[[8]](#footnote-8) The aim of this very extreme measure was therefore to allow homosexual conscripts to ‘fulfil their projected role in the opposite sex’ and to adhere to the rigid heteropatriarchal requirements of apartheid, in which the heavy policing of the body and sexuality were a crucial aspect of the regime.[[9]](#footnote-9) These forced gender-reassignment surgeries were therefore excessively subsidised by the apartheid state as a colonial project of binary control and it has been estimated that within 18 years in South Africa, more than 900 forced gender reassignment surgeries were conducted.[[10]](#footnote-10) It was because of the pervasiveness of this ‘treatment’ during apartheid as well as elsewhere on the continent during colonialism that Africa became a renowned world leader within this surgical field. With apartheid and colonial regimes more generally being a system that leveraged physical differences and controlled bodies to maintain a strict hierarchy, and more generally colonial power, it is not a surprise that barbaric treatments to combat deviations from heteropatriarchy such as these were so pervasive and continue to take place in some places worldwide even today.

To conclude, it is clear that perceptions of sexuality are implicitly gendered with the perceived threat of queer identity to the heteropatriarchy being one of the main reasons why sexual violence and barbaric conversion therapy practises are so pervasive. Fundamentally, whilst patriarchy must be considered as an individual significant factor in the persistence of queerphobic sentiment, this must be seen as a factor that is closely tied to both religion and colonialism, with both responsible for the establishment of patriarchal structures. Crucially, patriarchal structures must be dismantled, and misogynistic attitudes must be combatted before LGBT rights can be truly entrenched legally, publicly supported, and protected in practice.

1. The term queerphobia will be used in replacement of homophobia as a more inclusive alternative. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. M Lugones, Toward a decolonial feminism. *Hypatia* 25(4) (2007) 742-759 cited in Coetzee A, ‘Afrikaner Nationalism and the Light Side of the Colonial/Modern Gender System: Understanding White Patriarchy as Colonial Race Technology’ (2021) 129 Feminist Review 93, 202-03. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Azille Coetzee, ‘Afrikaner Nationalism and the Light Side of the Colonial/Modern Gender System: Understanding White Patriarchy as Colonial Race Technology’ (2021) 129 Feminist Review 93, 96-97. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Sarah Doan-Minh, ‘Corrective Rape: An Extreme Manifestation of Discrimination and the State’s Complicity in Sexual Violence’ (2019) 30(1) Hastings Women’s Law Journal 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Lucy Graham, ‘“Then You Are a Man, My Son”: Kipling and the Zuma Rape Trial’ (2016) 36(2) Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East 263, 271. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Coetzee (n 2) 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Robert M Kaplan, ‘Treatment of Homosexuality During Apartheid: More Investigation Is Needed Into The Shameful Way Homosexuality Was Treated ’(2004) 329(7480) British Medical Association 1415. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid, 1416. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. A Tapalaga, ‘Forced Gender Reassignment Procedures During the Apartheid Era’ (*History of Yesterday*, 7 September 2022) <https://historyofyesterday.com/forced-gender-reassignment-procedures-during-the-apartheid-era/> accessed 2 July 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)