

## Teaching Masculinities in a South African Classroom

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### Abstract

In terms of gender equity the first two decades of South African democracy have seen substantial change – at least where legislation is concerned. In terms of daily lived realities however, such change seems to have had little or no impact. South African women continue to take primary responsibility for reproductive work and continue to dominate the ranks of the poor. Levels of gender based violence remain amongst the highest in the world. The last decade or so has seen scholars offer a range of overlapping and intersecting explanations for the slow pace of change, with some pointing to the lack of significant political commitment and the roles of ‘custom’ and ‘tradition’. Others have suggested that change requires working more directly with boys and men. Despite these observations – and concomitant interventions - movement towards gender equity remains slow. In this paper I hope to contribute to the debate around resistance to change by drawing on student engagement with, and understandings of, an introduction to gender studies course between 2013 and 2014 at the University of the Western Cape. In the paper I reflect on ways in which teaching gender through a focus on men and masculinities offers insights into resistance to gender equity as well as possibilities for challenging such resistance.

**Keywords:** feminism, gender equity, higher education, masculinity, men, South Africa.

### Introduction

With respect to legislative change around gender equality much has been achieved in the first two decades of democracy in South Africa. And yet ‘[t]he real test’ as Amanda Gouws and Shireen Hassim have observed, is ‘how strong the various voices of women are in society, and how much progress we are making in reducing inequalities between women and men and between rich and poor women’ (2014: 6). There is, in fact, a great deal of evidence to suggest that these legislative gains have had a relatively limited impact in terms of challenging these

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inequalities. Women continue, for example, to dominate the ranks of the poor and the unemployed, and continue to be marginalised in boardrooms and other decision making fora (Posel and Rogan, 2010). Women also continue to take on the primary responsibility for child rearing, household maintenance and often for providing financially for dependents. Access to reproductive health care and rights over one's fertility remain marginal (Stevens, 2008). Women also remain vulnerable, for example, to enormously high levels of domestic violence with little evidence of any decreases in such violence (Watson, 2014). Indeed, Lisa Vetten (2014: 55) warns that recent policy changes prioritising particular kinds of families and that frame male violence as a 'symptom of moral failure rather than gender inequality' run the risk of facilitating rather than reducing violence, with such strategies running an associated risk of hollowing out the legislative gains of the first two decades. Such a warning should not be taken lightly as the contestation around the Traditional Courts Bill demonstrates (Gouws, 2014; Hassim, 2014). Two decades of democracy have, it seems, done relatively little to achieve gender equity in South Africa.

Over the last few years South African academics and activists have begun to consider why more gender equitable arrangements are proving to be so elusive. Factors that have been suggested as contributing towards resistance to change are the absence of a strong political commitment to implementing legislative changes (Gouws and Hassim, 2014); a similar absence of a strong commitment towards combating male violence (Hassim, 2009; Ratele, 2004, 2006); limitations associated with including women in formal institutions of state (Gouws, 2008; Hassim, 2005); as well as the roles of 'custom' and 'tradition' (Ratele, 2013a, 2014). Activists and academics alike have increasingly foregrounded the importance of working with boys and men (see Shefer, Stevens and Clowes, 2010 for an overview), with such work also highlighting ways in which their gender also makes men vulnerable (see Clowes, 2013; Ratele, 2013b). The last decade has seen the establishment of a number of organisations and interventions, such as Sonke Gender Justice, One Man Can, Men Engage, that have increasingly involved boys and men (Greig and Edstrom, 2012; Morrell et al., 2012; Stern, Peacock and Alexander, 2009).

These organisational and institutional interventions, informed by and informing of research, have made and continue to make important contributions in the lives of individuals and communities. At the same time, as suggested above, patriarchal inequalities continue to shape the opportunities and prospects of men, women and children in profoundly important ways across the country. In evaluating the work aimed at understanding, informing, and contributing to developing more nurturing and equitable behaviours by South African men,

Kopano Ratele concludes that it has ‘underachieved’ (2014) and ‘gone down a blind alley’ requiring more careful reflection both about why this is so and how to challenge it.

In reflecting on the challenge outlined by Ratele (2014) this paper draws on the teaching and learning undertaken in an undergraduate ‘Introduction to Gender Studies’ course offered between 2012 and 2014 at the University of the Western Cape. In 2011, for the first time, this course introduced students to feminist theorising on gender through a focus on men and masculinities and ways in which South African performances of masculinity are as much a performance of gender as femininity. It was a surprise when, at the end of the course in 2011, students were largely lost for words when asked to consider ways in which gender equity might benefit South African men. They found themselves speechless, largely unable to imagine that men might stand to benefit in any way at all from gender equity (Clowes, 2013).

The discussion in this paper reflects on the learning undertaken between 2012 and 2014, after the focus on men and masculinities was deepened and extended. Employing a feminist qualitative approach to reflect on the views, opinions and insights articulated by a number of these students in classroom-based surveys and focus groups, the discussion in this paper suggests that discourses around gender and gender equity that are characterised by a focus on women and change in South African women’s lives are interpreted by both male and female students in ways that essentialise masculinity. For these students gender equity is understood as requiring men to give up privileges they have held since time immemorial. In essentialising masculinity (but not femininity) students thus imagine movement by men towards gender equity to be extremely unlikely in that it ‘goes against’ both god and nature. Where the removal of ‘natural’ privileges is perceived as threatening, those who stand to lose such privileges may be increasingly obstructive and resistant. I suggest that teaching considering the intersection of privilege and oppression through a focus on local performances of masculinities has the potential to disrupt these dominant discourses and that developing understandings of the price men pay for unearned privileges presents opportunities for challenging resistance to gender equity.

### **Background and context**

The pedagogical approach underpinning all the teaching undertaken in the Women’s and Gender Studies Department at the University of the Western Cape is strongly shaped by a

feminist focus on power, inequality and hierarchy, and ways in which these shape knowledge production both outside and inside the classroom (see Choules, 2007; Crick, 2009; Maher et al., 2001). In exploring the social construction of gendered identities (and the ways in which gender intersects with race, class, sexuality and other salient subject locations), our teaching aims to place the student at the centre of her or his own learning, and to contribute to social change and the promotion of social justice through educating graduates who are critical citizens.

Because the Department offers no first year courses and because there are also no pre-requisites for the course under discussion here, a number, (if not the majority) of students are likely to be engaging with key concepts emerging out of feminist theory for the first time. Because the teaching and learning undertaken in the course aspires to be student-centred, an exploration and acknowledgment of the prior knowledges brought by students has been central to the design of the course since 2012. The pedagogical underpinnings for such an approach were foregrounded by Ausubel over 50 years ago, when he declared that ‘[t]he most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows; ascertain this and teach him/her accordingly’ (cited in Hay, Kinchin and Lygo-Baker, 2008: 302).

Establishing the sorts of knowledges and understandings students bring to the classroom has been reaffirmed as important by more recent theorists who observe that prior knowledge is the ‘baseline from which learning can be calculated and its quality assessed (Hay, Kinchin and Lygo-Baker 2008: 300). Awareness and understanding of the ‘baseline’ knowledges students bring to class is also important because identifying misunderstandings and misconceptions early on helps facilitate meaningful learning. It is also useful because an awareness of what students already know can be used to frame and inform the debates, discussion and theorising that are central to the course. It is the knowledges and understandings gleaned from student participation in the course between 2013 and 2014 that are the focus of this paper.

Drawing on the teaching and learning undertaken in the classroom to conduct research begs a range of ethical questions. On the one hand, the knowledges students bring to and share in the class are elicited for teaching purposes, and generally used in the following class. At the same time, students are informed that their responses may be used to shape the design of the course the following year, as well as for research purposes. Students are then further advised that their participation in the brief surveys aimed at establishing prior knowledges that have begun each class in the first six weeks of the course over the last three years is voluntary, anonymous and counts for no marks. These ‘brief surveys’ pose simple questions,

with no right or wrong answers. In addition, there is no transparent way of establishing who has or has not responded, or of connecting individuals to specific answers. In any one lecture generally about three quarters of the students present submit an answer. The question posed in the first lecture -- to write down the first 3 words that come into your head when you hear the word 'gender' -- has been the same each year since 2012. Every year students overwhelmingly select similar sets of words, choosing 'women', 'female', 'equality', 'stereotypes', 'inequality', 'oppression', and 'discrimination' far more frequently than words such as 'male' or 'men'. 'Whose lives have changed the most over the last couple of hundred years? Men's or women's or both? In what ways?' were the questions asked at the beginning of the second lecture in 2014. In 2015 this question was asked only in the third lecture, with the second lecture requesting students asked to list the first 3 words that came into their heads when they heard the word 'feminist'. Part of the data presented below emerges out of these brief surveys. The paper also offers observations made by students in response to two anonymous online surveys (course evaluations) exploring learning experiences conducted halfway through the course and again at the end of the course between 2013 and 2014.

Another aspect to the feminist pedagogies employed in the course is the emphasis on student ownership of the learning process. There are three different ways of earning marks in this course. Students may choose between submitting online worksheets, participating in an online discussion forum, or joining small group tutorials, or any mix of these three activities to make up the continuous assessment component of their coursework mark. Students are also advised that extracts from the online discussion forum may be used for teaching purposes – for instance all the exam questions were drawn from the debates on this forum in 2014 – as well as for research purposes. In addition, towards the end of 2013 two focus group discussions aimed at exploring student experiences and understandings of the focus on masculinities were held with a group of three male students and a group of five female students respectively. Participation in these discussions was voluntary, confidential and students advised that they were free to withdraw at any time. The ensuing discussion was facilitated and transcribed by a postgraduate student who also changed all the names to protect confidentiality and anonymity. Where extracts from some of the conversations that took place on the online discussion forum are presented below, names have been changed to guarantee anonymity.



women as more empowered, more independent, with better access to decision making jobs, with futures where they can be, in reference to Figure 1 above, more ‘equal’. Equally significant, I suggest, is the dominant understanding that what women have gained, men have lost, and that change in men’s lives has largely been disadvantageous. This matters, as Spoor and Schmitt (2011) have observed, because understanding their prospects to have diminished is likely to be perceived as threatening by high status groups – in this case men – and they may therefore ‘mobilize against further change’ (2011: 34).

**Figure 2: Responses to in class survey 2014**

<b>Women’s lives have changed the most</b>	<b>Men’s lives have changed the most</b>	<b>Both men and women’s lives have changed</b>
45 students (2014 answers)	5 students (2014 answers)	4 students (2014 answers)
<p>Women are more empowered nowadays and are taking on the roles of men in terms of the economy</p> <p>Women are more independent have more power, are leaders, managers and heads of the household</p> <p>Women are not merely seen as housewives anymore but as equals able to work</p> <p>Women have become more liberal and less oppressed</p> <p>Women are now allowed to dress in any fashion they desire ...can occupy the same jobs as men</p> <p>Women have made phenomenal progress with regards to freedom from oppression</p> <p>Women have earned more respect, more independence, can study to be someone</p>	<p>Men still hold top positions but women are moving into these jobs. This striving for equality affects men who are expected to be powerful main sources of income</p> <p>Men, with women gaining more rights and being able to have more dominant roles in society, men’s lives changed because they only then realised who is really in control</p> <p>Men because it seems they had much more power, they were more advantaged</p> <p>Men, in terms of power relations and the amount of opportunities they get in relation to women</p>	<p>Both, if either’s lives have changed then the other is naturally affected</p> <p>Both, men have become less dominant and women have become less submissive</p>

It is in response to similar understandings articulated in earlier years, and with the aim of disrupting these prior knowledges, that the course has, since 2011, foregrounded the social construction of masculinities. This has raised a number of concerns. Is there a risk of depoliticising or diluting the political agenda central to feminist theory and praxis? What does it mean that a space designed to foreground women's narratives and voices focuses on masculinities and men's experiences of doing gender? There can be no doubt that these are important considerations. And yet at the same time it is my view that meaningful teaching and learning involves thinking critically, and that given the kinds of dominant understandings and normative discourses brought to class a *critical* focus on masculinities is both legitimate and desirable.

Since 2012, the first half of the course has introduced students to key concepts and ideas, and the second half of the course has focused on deepening understandings of these ideas and debates through a critical analysis of South African performances of masculinity. Topics for debate shift and change from year to year, partly in response to issues raised by students themselves, partly in response to contemporary events in local communities or regional contexts, and partly in response to new research. At the same time, there is a consistent attempt to foreground ways in which, drawing on the work of bell hooks (2004), dominant understandings of what it means to be a man in contemporary South Africa are open to critique in the ways they limit or stunt men's opportunities for psychological emotional and personal growth. Employing a pedagogy that enhances students' ability to connect with course materials, students are asked to consider ways in which privilege and oppression intersect (Kannen, 2014) through texts that speak in some way to their *own* lives.

All these young people have fathers (either absent or present) in their lives, for example. Some of them are fathers themselves, or hope to become fathers. Those who are or want to become mothers will have intimate relationships with the fathers of their children. What insights into fathers, fatherhood and fathering does feminist theory have to offer these students? What (if anything), for example, does the work of Malose Langa (2010b) suggest might be gained or lost by young men who challenge or reinforce dominant understandings of masculinity in South African schools, and how do these understandings underpin the expansion or constriction of opportunities for these young men as fathers in the future? What does the work of Sharlene Swartz and Arvin Bhana (2009; see also Langa, 2010a) show us about the tensions between the physical and emotional presence of fathers in the lives of their sons and the imperatives of breadwinning? How do normative expectations of the male provider mitigate against the building of warm and supportive relationships between fathers

and sons (and other family members)? What does the work of Elaine Salo (2007) suggest about men's life expectancies emerging out of normative expectations of men as providers in contexts where resources and opportunities to earn are severely restricted? And, of course, in what ways do these questions matter for the young men and women in my classroom?

Despite this focus on men and masculinities, the 'Introduction to Gender Studies' course attracts very few young men, with women students making up around 90% of the 80 to 120 students who enrol each year, a demographic pattern replicated in similar courses in other parts of the globe (Berila et al., 2005). Most of the students who register are South African, and would have been classified as 'black' or 'coloured' under the apartheid regime. A few come from other parts of Africa and perhaps five or more from Europe or America on a semester abroad programme. Some of those who sign up are doing the course because they have run out of alternative possibilities, while the majority have chosen the course out of interest. The tiny number of men who register for this course is linked, in part, to the dominant understandings outlined earlier, that gender means women and change in women's lives:

I thought that gender was going to be about women because it's Women and Gender Studies. (Thabo, Focus Group 2)

I've identified as a feminist for a long time, but I really had not given much thought into masculinity as a gender, as much as I had given femininity as a gender... I thought that it was about women reaching equality with men. (Ntombi, Focus Group 1)

It is also connected to normative expectations of masculinity as was revealed during a brainstorming discussion about what students might do in an assignment that required them to break a gender norm. In focus groups and in open class discussion, male students reported that simply signing up for a course in the Women's and Gender Studies Department class had elicited comments and questions about their masculinity and their sexuality. In addition, stereotypical understandings that men were to blame for women's subordination also meant that some male students felt a little defensive:

It was like, you know, *you males, you males* are doing this. And then we guys sort of try to defend ourselves... Sometimes it was hard in class being a guy and making a comment (Arnold Focus Group 2)

You'd be afraid to say something because of the reaction. (Thabo, Focus Group 2)

Educators in other parts of the world have had similar encounters whereby students express their discomfort of teaching and learning that makes privilege more visible (see Boler, 2013; Boler and Zembylas, 2003; Farr, 2013; Guckenheimer and Schmidt, 2013; Kannen, 2014; Lemons and Neumeister, 2013). Such experiences of discomfort are complicated in post-colonial societies generally, and Southern Africa in particular, by understandings of feminist theory and the gender equity it promotes as a Western import, as 'unAfrican'. In contemporary South Africa long histories that foreground 'race' as the dominant explanatory narrative are interwoven with these stereotypes of 'Western' feminism to produce powerful discourses around what counts as 'authentically' African. In these discourses it tends to be those behaviours which are more (rather than less) patriarchal that are legitimised and validated as authentic (see Christiansen, 2009). Emerging from this, and contributing to an explanation for the dearth of young men in my classroom, is a popular understanding of South African feminism as not simply unAfrican or anti-men, but as both, as anti-*African* men. Teaching and theorising emerging out of feminist scholarship is thus easily dismissed in the South African context as irrelevant or extremist, as racist and unpatriotic.

Consequently the majority of the students in my classroom each year are young women who, as suggested earlier in the paper, are expecting a course to focus on women and femininities. While many are surprised by the focus on performances of masculinity, and the ways in which privilege and oppression intersect, they also suggest that such a focus is valued for the insights it generated:

My perspective has changed a lot about men, and that men are not all that bad even if I disagree with some of their actions. (Online discussion forum)

...helped me to know more things about men. Also knowing that there are men feminists and how important it is for men to be feminist. (Online discussion forum)

I doubt that I can ever forget or discard what I learned... about masculinities and how this patriarchal society that we live in is detrimental to men's health. (Online discussion forum)

It also helped me understand the advantages the white male had (and still has) in society and the history of inequality between men and women. It helped me see gender from a different point of view. (Online discussion forum)

The multiple ways that patriarchy hurts men! That masculinity too is a gender, in every way that femininity is. (Online discussion forum)

I enjoyed immensely the visit from the Sonke Gender Justice people where they came and talked to us about the work that men are doing to embrace gender equality and teaching other men and boys the value that would come out of that. That patriarchy is not all rosy for men, that patriarchy hurts men in many ways. So I loved that, I feel like it has strengthened my own conviction in why I believe in gender equality... now it's, it's everyone stands to benefit from it. (Pumla, Focus Group 1)

Along with these women students there are always a few young men who sign up for the course and who are willing to engage in critical thinking. The evidence offered below from interactions with male students suggests that at least some develop a new consciousness of themselves as human beings gendered as men:

When I grew up I said ok, I want to work, I want to have more money than my wife you know, it was still – how you grew up, you must provide for your wife...but you know these critical thoughts you get during the course ...Yes I was [surprised]. Masculinity and umm, patriarchy, I was - you know it's always been there but you've never actually noticed that that's how society works ... it was an eye opener. (Thabo, Focus Group 2 )

You're conditioned in a certain way when you are brought up...like your family's norms and morals...you tend to overlook things...until someone opens your eyes to it... same as this, you didn't realize that you know men are allowed to do so many things which you take for granted because that's supposedly how it is, especially because a lot of religions and cultures dictate it like that. So when it's actually put in front of you and say listen but look at this you know ...I think it opens your eyes to it. (Arno, Focus Group 2)

It opened my eyes a lot ...what the course says about masculinity and how it structured our lives. (Arnold, Focus Group 2)

The focus on the ways in which privilege and oppression intersect provides a lens with which these young men are more able to confront a privileged identity, one that has been largely rendered invisible, and that goes unchallenged within our collective consciousness (Kannen, 2014). Learning (and teaching) that focuses on ways in which masculine privileges simultaneously make young South African men vulnerable to harm (and to self-harm) provides a route through feelings of defensiveness, and the possibility of seeing patriarchy (rather than men) as a problem for everyone (hooks, 2004). Those who do face the discomfort (Boler, 2013) of exploring theory in relation to their own practices and relationships are more able to develop new ways of conceptualising themselves in relation to the theory they are encountering.

## **Conclusion**

As noted earlier in this paper, change (or lack of it) in the direction of gender equity in South Africa has been linked to a range of factors including lack of political will, debates about culture and tradition, the weakness of the gender machinery, and so on. While all these are important, the findings of this paper raise broader questions of the dominant understandings held by political and economic decision-makers as well as ordinary people at every level in society. It is not simply circumstantial that there have been no serious systematic studies of attitudinal changes with regard to gender equality (Hassim, 2014); the continued economic, political and social marginalisation of women two decades after the ending of apartheid points towards dominant attitudes in which such change is either not valued or is consciously or unconsciously resisted.

The understandings brought to the first classes of an 'Introduction to Gender Studies' course over the last few years offer some insight into the kinds of dominant understandings that are circulating in the communities from which the students are drawn – although it should be noted that it can't be assumed that these understandings are entirely representative of these communities. When students join the course the vast majority are in broad agreement that gender refers to women and to changes in women's lives that have seen women's lives become more like men's lives. Men are generally not understood to be gendered. Consequently they are perceived to be disadvantaged by change in gender relationships; what women gain men are understood to have lost.

Teaching that disrupts these dominant understandings, and that foregrounds ways in which men, as well as women, may gain through movement towards gender equity is important. Teaching that draws on local research focusing on the intersections of privilege

and oppression as experienced by some South African boys and men offers opportunities to challenge powerful and essentialising discourses around masculinity and offers young people alternative understandings. Young women are able to imagine masculinity as a performance of gender rather than an expression of an essential self, and a performance that can be harmful to young men, thus opening the possibility that men can become allies (rather than enemies) in the struggle for gender equality. Taking such an approach also provides space within which young men are able to start conceptualising themselves differently, to start understanding themselves as gendered beings to whom patriarchal privileges accrue while simultaneously exploring ways in which these privileges are deeply harmful and in need of change.

But while it seems, therefore, that young men's engagement with the insights emerging out of feminist theory may be helpful in challenging patriarchal hierarchies, evidence from this classroom and others around the world also suggests that young men's access to the spaces where such engagement takes place is constrained and problematic. Yet the stereotypes produced by and perpetuated through men's absence in such classrooms are precisely those that need to be challenged if movement towards more equitable gender relationships is to gain traction. It is deeply ironic, given the urgency of the constitutional and ethical commitment to gender equity in South Africa, that stereotypes of feminist theory and feminist politics as anti-African men limit the opportunities for young men to be exposed to learning through which to develop such insights, and that their absence from such classrooms further reinforces understandings that feminist theory and feminist political agendas are by and for women. Teaching that considers the intersection of privilege and oppression through a critical focus on local performances of masculinities is important precisely because it has the potential to disrupt dominant discourses in ways that make it possible to imagine gender equity as something through which everyone might benefit.

### **Author Biosketch**

Winner of a 2014 Heltasa Excellence in Teaching and Learning awards, **Lindsay Clowes** is an NRF-rated historian based in the Women's and Gender Studies Department in the Faculty of Arts at the University of the Western Cape. Her current research explores ways in which subject locations structured around biological sex, gender, sexuality, race and class mediate and shape the possibilities for both teaching and learning. She has published in the *African Education Review* and in *Teaching in Higher Education* with earlier work appearing in a

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