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## Constructions and representations of masculinity in South Africa's tabloid press: Reflections on discursive tensions in the Sunday Sun

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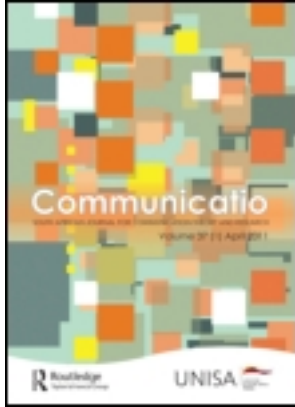


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# Constructions and representations of masculinity in South Africa's tabloid press: Reflections on discursive tensions in the *Sunday Sun*

Denise Buiten and Kammila Naidoo\*

## Abstract

The South African print news media have witnessed a sharp rise in tabloidised news forms and newspapers in recent years. While tabloidisation offers interesting possibilities in terms of contesting and transforming traditional masculinised news forms, it also raises serious questions with regard to the appropriation of these forms of news towards reinforcing and naturalising constructions of gender. This article explores the ways in which a South African tabloid newspaper, the *Sunday Sun*, represents and constructs masculinity. It is argued that the performance of masculinity, especially through the performance of (hetero)sexuality, is central to the way in which the 'project' of masculinity is constructed within the *Sunday Sun*. In addition, violent masculinities are largely normalised and framed as part of the performance and legitimisation of masculinities. While alternative discourses around masculinity also emerge, recasting 'manhood' in a way that challenges violence, these voices are still comparatively limited. The implications of these representations are reflected on in relation to the ongoing 'project' of masculinity within South Africa.

**Keywords:** constructions of masculinity, gender analysis, media studies, performance of masculinity, South African tabloids, *Sunday Sun*

## INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, gender and the media have received intensified scrutiny, both in terms of the ways in which gender shapes newsroom politics and culture, and the ways in which gendered meanings are embedded, reproduced and contested through media representations. Within a post-apartheid context and its project of constitutionalism and democracy, the politics of representation are central to both the understanding of the gendered status quo and urgings to social change. In this regard, however, it is becoming apparent to researchers and activists within the field that progress made in terms of gender transformation and the media in South Africa has been both limited and highly irregular (Geertsema 2010). Moreover, while the significance of exploring and problematising representations of women and femininities in South Africa is patent, rarer work in relation to the construction of masculinities in the media has also been identified as essential in addressing patriarchy, and as such has been expanding (Viljoen 2008). Work on masculinities also needs to attend to the ways in which representations of femininities and masculinities manifest in dialogue with and in relation to each other (Hearn 1999).

Wider contextual developments in the South African media industry have implications for the politics of gender representation, and exploring these developments is important when situating representations. One such development is the sharp rise in tabloidised news forms, or what Berger

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(2005) dismisses as 'junk journalism', that has become evident in South Africa in recent years (Glenn and Knaggs et al. 2008; Jones et al. 2008; Wasserman 2006). The unprecedented early success of the *Daily Sun* and the *Sunday Sun*, especially amongst a South African demographic that had previously been less inclined to purchase or read print news in the past (AMPS 2007), represents a shift in the South African news media landscape. While tabloid news forms offer interesting possibilities in terms of challenging and changing traditional masculinised news forms, opening up spaces for new kinds of representations, it also raises possibilities of anti-feminist, patriarchal appropriations of such news forms.

This article examines the ways in which the *Sunday Sun* represents and constructs masculinity through its tabloid news forms. The way in which the politics of gender shapes meanings of masculinity within tabloid news is interrogated in respect of its place within what Viljoen (2008) has called the ongoing 'project' of masculinity in South Africa. Thus, this article considers the ways in which masculinities are constructed in relation to the ongoing and contested project of meaning-making with respect to masculinity in South Africa, and reflects on the role of tabloidised news forms within these ongoing processes of meaning-making.

## CHALLENGING GENDERED NEWS? THE RISE OF TABLOID NEWS FORMS

South Africa is, in many ways, increasingly being absorbed into the global market and patterns of consumption. With this has come a shift in the 'shape' of the media industry, and one of the noticeable ways in which national and international media trends have converged is in relation to the rise of tabloid news. The growing popularity and prevalence of the tabloid press in South Africa are evidenced in both the rapid success of newer tabloid newspapers such as the *Sunday Sun*, and in the incorporation of 'tabloidised' news styles in more traditional newspapers such as the *Sunday Times* (Buiten 2010).

Connell (1998, 12, emphasis in the original) views the term 'tabloidisation' as signifying 'a series of processes that are transforming supposedly rationalist discourses into sensationalist discourses'. He asserts that a number of related processes are involved in tabloidisation, including a shift from a principally 'reporting discourse' to a 'narrative discourse' and the 'conversationalising' of news (ibid, 12–13). Traditional conventions and values around news reporting have been transformed to follow a more personal, story-telling-oriented approach, as is evident in 'human-interest' news pieces (ibid.).

Critiques against tabloidisation are numerous (see Berger 2005; Rabe 2005), but a substantive body of literature has cautioned against the wholesale dismissal of tabloids as a debasement of journalistic integrity (see, for example, Barnett 1998; Brookes 2000; Jacobs 2004). In fact, Glenn and Knaggs (2008) argue that there is a dearth of media theorising in relation to tabloids which needs to be balanced with the intense debate it generates. Nuanced considerations of tabloids are rarely articulated. What often surfaces is polarisation – either moralising against tabloid news or uncritically championing tabloids as representing the democratisation of the media.

Tabloidisation can be regarded as a departure from conventional news forms that represent elitist values, issues and writing styles (Jones et al. 2008). Many have argued that, in writing about issues that relate more closely to the personal lives and preferences of audiences, tabloids shirk their traditional alignment with elite interests and pursuits, and attend to more localised and relatable news events. In many respects tabloids challenge assumptions about what constitutes news, what is worthy and authoritative, by placing 'soft' (local, personalised) news at the forefront. They also challenge the dichotomy between the 'knower' and the 'known', by integrating the voices of their readers to a greater extent within news formats (for example, by dedicating more space to readers' letters and jokes, or to columns by non-journalists) (ibid.). In catering to the everyday desires and curiosities of readers (rather than to what have traditionally been considered 'higher' pursuits), it is argued that tabloids can validate reader experiences and voices (ibid.). Through colloquial language and the use of diverse vernaculars (especially within a multicultural context such as South Africa), the tabloids are deemed to democratise not only content but also modes of speech (ibid.).

In some senses, then, tabloids have the potential to destabilise the power status quo and add pluralistic voices to meaning-making projects. In terms of gender, they can also contribute to creating spaces for issues that have traditionally been associated with (lesser) 'feminine' or soft news. Creating public spaces through the media, in which citizens can more actively engage (Glenn and Knaggs 2008), is also potentially valuable in stimulating discussions around gender, including those that pertain to more intimate, private and personal spaces than the narrow ambit of party politics and business. This represents the notion that, indeed, the private is political.

At the same time, catering to the demands of audiences can also reproduce the status quo (Anderson and Kian 2012). The range of voices emerging in the tabloids still reflects entrenched power relations and assumptions, while existing social, cultural and structural determinants of gender inform the ways in which such voicing and democratisation take place, along with whose voices and what kinds of values are given a platform in this context. As much as emotionalism, sensationalism and simplification (key features of tabloids) are not automatically harmful, these very features can, in conjunction with existing social forces, transform into hate speech, the loose handling of information, as well as trivialisation. As such, tabloids have been criticised for placing demand before ethics, and for trivialising social issues (Glenn and Knaggs 2008; Jones et al. 2008). As will be discussed in relation to the *Sunday Sun*, tabloidised news forms should be neither snubbed as empty and inherently harmful, nor regarded benignly and uncritically in terms of their relationship with contemporary social structures.

## MASCULINITIES AND POPULAR CULTURE IN SOUTH AFRICA

The social construction of masculinities in South Africa is a subject that has gained increasing attention within feminist and gender studies (see Morrell 1998; Morrell et al. 2012; Ratele 2006). The expansion of masculinities research in South Africa has been driven, in part, by the recognition

that constructions of femininities cannot be fully understood without considering their interlocking relationship with constructions of masculinities (Silberschmidt 2011). The field has also been energised by a growing appreciation for the historical significance of masculinities within South Africa (Morrell 2001; Xaba 2001), and the way in which historically situated masculinities are connected with some of the most pressing social issues facing the country today, including gender-based violence and HIV (Abrahams et al. 2009). Importantly, what research to date has underscored is that masculinities in South Africa are not monolithic or static, but diverse and socially situated. In addition, the construction of masculinities represents an active *doing* rather than just *being*; masculinities are constructed in process, constituting an ongoing project of meaning-making as competing visions of masculinity are reproduced and revised (Viljoen 2008). It is within this context that popular culture and the media play significant roles: they offer public cultural spaces in which these contested processes of meaning-making take place. As such, some key themes in masculinities studies and in regard to the project of masculinity in South Africa are highlighted here as a way of contextualising the construction of masculinities in the *Sunday Sun*.

A key theme in contemporary South African literature on masculinities is the perceived 'crisis of masculinity' and its impact on male identity and action (Campbell 2001; Mager 1998). This more broadly references the ways in which masculinities respond to wider social processes, including responses to the ways in which historical patriarchies are upset and challenged through social change. In particular, one key argument is that men are 'in trouble' (Viljoen 2008; Walker 2005), responding with difficulty to contemporary social change, as evidenced in health-related, psychological and work-related problems (Walker 2005). This, it is argued, has created confusion and growing ambivalence among men (*ibid.*). The idea that masculinities are responding to social change, and that established and hegemonic forms of masculinity are being contested, is an important insight. It recognises the variability of masculinity, its complex hierarchies and the possibilities for its revisioning (see Morrell 2001).

The 'crisis of masculinity' thesis is highly problematic. The phrase conjures up an image of a stable conventional masculinity disrupted by social change, implicitly assuming a time when men were not 'in trouble'. As such, historical masculinities are, to some extent, de-problematized. The destabilisation of masculine identities – an ongoing social process – is also cast as problematic, particularly when it challenges patriarchal power. The masculinity-in-crisis argument has also been strongly appropriated by anti-feminist discourses that imply the victimhood of men in the face of feminist advancements, and undermine the ways in which women have been 'in trouble' and 'in crisis' for some time – and still are. As Whitehead (in Walker 2002) notes, this discourse of crisis has 'assumed common-sense proportions'. It has been embraced by proponents of the feminist backlash, including within the media (Faludi 1991). In the context of examining masculinities in the media, it is important to consider both dimensions of the debate: the complex ways in which masculinities are responding to wider social processes of change, and the ways in which backlashes against feminist advancements have appropriated feminist analyses of the impact of social change on masculinities.

The connection between violence and masculinities has been extensively explored. In South Africa in particular, researchers have found a link between contemporary violent masculinities, and extremely high rates of rape and violence in relationships (Gqola 2007; Moffett 2006; Vogelmann 1990). Researchers have also identified a link between violent masculinities and the historical racial and economic forces that disallow the expression of traditional norms of masculinity, especially among poor black men (Salo 2005; Walker 2005).

The attention given to the racialised historical underpinnings of violent and aggressive masculinities in South Africa raises questions about the ways in which it sidesteps violent and aggressive white masculinities while demonising black men (Moffett 2006). In addition, it has been argued that seeing violence primarily as a reaction to poverty and marginalisation in some respect allows patriarchy to escape closer scrutiny. As Moffett (*ibid.*, 129) argues, 'narratives about rape continue to be rewritten as stories about race, not gender'. As such, the literature points to both the significance of interrogating gender-based violence through a gender lens and examining constructions of masculinity born out of patriarchy, while at the same time recognising the historicity of male violence in South Africa (Salo 2005).

In terms of the media, the treatment of gender-based violence and the question of violent masculinities show an apparent contradiction. In one respect, a grim picture of the extent of sexual violence has emerged in the media post-1994 (Posel 2004). At the same time, the normalisation of rape in the media is well documented (Gouws 2005; Omarjee 2001). Rape myths continue to be perpetuated through the South African media, with a tacit acceptance of the abuse of power by men (Gouws 2005) and assumptions of inherent male violence, for example, with rape normalised as a crime of 'opportunity' or 'passion' (Buiten and Salo 2007), problematising women's self-protection over male violence. Studies on the discourses of violent men, such as Vogelmann's (1990) study of rapists in South Africa, suggest a strong link between discourse and behaviour, and writers such as Gqola (2007) connect violence with everyday ways of thinking. This underscores the significance of media representations in constructing discourse.

In the context of both gender-based violence and HIV, the relationship between masculinities and sexualities in South Africa has received significant attention. Male sexualities have been problematised as violent and irresponsible, with advocacy targeted at constructing a more equitable and responsible vision of sexuality (Posel 2004). At the same time, sexual liberalisation post-apartheid has led to an explosion of sexual imagery and the prominence of sexuality, even more so as sexuality became politicised in the wake of HIV (*ibid.*), throwing 'private' sexuality into the public arena.

On the one hand, liberalised and increasingly public discourses of sexuality in South Africa reflect an emerging rights-based understanding of sexuality. The national project of constitutionalism has promoted the notion of sexual rights, freedoms and choices (*ibid.*). At the same time, discourses of sexuality show an intensified link between public consumption and sexuality. 'Sex is consumed, at the same time as consumption is sexualised, in ways which mark the engagement of popular

culture in South Africa with more global cultural repertoires of sex' (ibid, 56). This association between consumption and sexuality is inflected by race and class. The liberalisation of sexuality has, for instance, been associated with the break from the apartheid regime, which sought to restrict and confine sexuality in numerous, often racialised, ways (ibid.). In addition, class aspirations post-apartheid have merged with sexual imagery to create an erotic association with consumption in popular culture. 'Popular magazines targeting the aspirant black elite, and advertising campaigns aimed at black consumers, craft the message that blackness is sexy; consumption is replete with desire' (ibid.). These discourses of erotic consumption are also inflected by gender, with masculine sexual prowess associated with consumption, and the proliferation of sexualised images of women in media products released into (and generated within) the South African media market post-apartheid.

This section has aimed to highlight several key themes to emerge in literature on masculinities in South Africa, including debates surrounding the perceived crisis in masculinity, the issue of violent masculinities and the ways in which liberalised discourses of sexuality (and, by extension, masculinities) have reflected rights-based discourses of sexualised consumption. As will be discussed in relation to the research, these themes intersect powerfully with the representations found in the *Sunday Sun*.

## METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

The research study on which this article draws, aimed to investigate the ways in which 'gender' and 'gender transformation' are understood and approached within South African news media institutions. The study involved a critical, thematic discourse analysis of newspaper texts from three South African weekly print news publications: the *Sunday Sun*, *Sunday Times* and *Mail & Guardian*.<sup>1</sup> The analysis of newspaper texts explored constructions of gender and the ways in which gender transformation was conceptualised within media texts. In the original research study (Buiten 2010), four consecutive issues of each newspaper were qualitatively analysed; a follow-up reading and analysis of an additional four consecutive issues was conducted in 2012. All sections of the newspaper were included, such as jokes and letters pages, with the exception of advertisements.

Some striking discourses with regard to masculinities emerged from the *Sunday Sun* newspaper texts. The centrality of notions of masculinity, and the ways in which they were 'performed' within the more tabloidised news forms under study, raised interesting questions about the gendered role of emerging tabloids in South Africa. This article therefore focuses on the *Sunday Sun*, drawing on illustrative examples to explore the ways in which masculinities have been constructed within its texts.



## THE SUNDAY SUN

The *Sunday Sun*, launched in 2001, is owned by Media24. Its first publisher, Deon du Plessis, saw the tabloid as potentially serving the local news needs of a largely black mass audience – an audience that was being defined as somewhat alienated and disconnected from the mainstream media. With copies selling at only R1 each, the newspaper became an overnight success. Readership figures rose steeply during its first few years on the market, and within five years it was the fastest-growing newspaper in the country, with readership figures just shy of three million (AMPS 2007; Wasserman 2006).

Today, the *Sunday Sun*'s readership remains concentrated on the black South African market, and a majority of readers speak an African language as a first language. The newspaper also has a concentration of readers in the lower LSM groups 1–6, with many first-time newspaper readers, and a high number of readers sharing and reading a single issue. In many respects, the newspaper's readership reflects an appeal to market groups not catered for by popular print news, particularly in terms of class, language and urban/rural location.

The newspaper's style can be described as 'tabloid' (a label supported by its editors and journalists), with a concentration on celebrity and entertainment news. Local celebrity scandal and human-interest pieces are the 'heart' of the news in the paper. In particular, local black entertainment and sports celebrities (singers, television actors, soccer players etc.) form the main focus of celebrity news. Human-interest stories, on the other hand, centre largely on working-class black South Africans, particularly those living in urban centres and townships.

A large proportion of the newspaper is dedicated to spaces beyond those for news, including weekly sections for jokes, letters, the 'Sun Babe' (or 'page-three girl', more recently page-six girl), opinion columns, sport, cars, careers/labour, consumer issues, the role model of the week and local churches. These spaces convey an 'aspirational' discourse; while the readership discursively implied in the newspaper is that of working-class black South Africans, the spaces created and the discourses employed promote and support the achievement of middle and 'upper' class status.

The various spaces created in the *Sunday Sun*, including significant input from columnists and readers, give the sense that interaction with readers is an important element of the newspaper's identity and appeal. The discourse is colloquial and shaped by the local readership of the newspaper (for example, using 'Jozi' for Johannesburg). In many ways this resonates with the notion of tabloid newspapers as democratised (especially in terms of class and local vernacular), reader-oriented and incorporating plural voices.

In terms of gender, the newspaper reflects a variety of often contradictory discourses, from those promoting gender equality on the one hand, to those objectifying women and representing an anti-feminist backlash on the other. In some respects, the newspaper appears to promote emancipatory spaces for women to be embraced as leaders and career persons (thus, promoting liberal democratic gendered discourses), but in other respects powerful constructions of hegemonic masculinity are explicitly and implicitly embedded in various news spaces.

## THE MASCULINITY PROJECT: PERFORMING MASCULINITY

The performance of masculinity is achieved through everyday language and practice. This performance extends to the represented format, which forms part of the 'project' of masculinity (Viljoen 2008). The idea of masculinity as performance and project resonated strongly with the research findings. The performance of masculinity played out within various spaces in the newspaper, from its jokes pages to columns and celebrity news pieces, through the deployment of discourse.

The research showed that masculinity was framed through discourse as necessarily requiring continuous and patent performance; in other words, newspaper representations implied that masculinity is something that needs to be demonstrated and verified, played out to an audience. In particular, heterosexual performance and prowess, and the negation of femininity, were central to establishing and performing a legitimate masculinity, and emerged in the sample within columns (both religious and secular), jokes and news articles. Representations of masculinity had both homophobic and misogynistic undertones, and foregrounded the ways in which masculinity was constructed not in and of itself, but in a hierarchical relationship to both femininity and other non-hegemonic forms of masculinity.

The performance of masculinity was also linked to notions of tradition and class. This was effected through stories invoking working-class identities and aspirational discourses of wealth and consumption, and an appeal to tradition and the 'good old days', in some cases religious (via religious columns), in others cultural (via a column portraying stories of rural life). Stories that implied consumption as a way of enhancing masculine self-actualisation were seen especially in relation to celebrity news pieces showing the simultaneous material consumption of the 'high life' and the sexual consumption of women. The performance of masculinity was also undertaken through stories that affirmed specific religious and cultural constructs of manhood. In some respects this recalled arguments surrounding the ways in which masculinities have responded to the debasement of traditional cultural narratives within South Africa. As certain select examples will show, an appeal to particular (masculinised) notions of African culture and tradition is often employed in order to cast certain visions of masculinity as reasserting cultural identity as well as gender identity in a post-apartheid context.

### Performing sexuality

One of the key ways in which masculinity was performed, was through discourses around sex and sexuality. The performance of masculinity was linked to sexuality through the conflation of masculinity with demonstrable maleness.

### *Illustration 1*

An article titled 'Theo insists he's got balls' (*Sunday Sun*, 12 August 2007) is an example of the kind of performative discourse of heterosexual masculinity that emerged in both the news and

in various columns and jokes. In the opening line, it emerges that the male music celebrity has ‘spoken out about the trauma of being labelled gay, when he says he is in fact straight’. Next, it indicates that the ‘hunky’ celebrity was hospitalised and nearly attempted suicide due to ‘nagging questions about his sexuality’. The article conveys his assertion that he can ‘prove’ he is straight and quotes him as saying: ‘I would pull my pants down to show my manhood when people asked if I was a girl or boy or both.’

That the celebrity was not assumed to be heterosexual is framed as a tragic and unjust incident, a hurtful and demeaning implication that he is not a man. The mere selection of this as news is both heteronormative and representative of a strong politics of gender performance; he is overtly stating and performing a particular understanding of masculinity. The celebrity employs the term ‘manhood’ to represent his penis, making sex synonymous with masculinity, and articulates sexual orientation as evidenced through physical sex (‘when people asked if I was a girl or boy or both’). The images selected for the article, one of which is of the celebrity surrounded by slender young women, reinforces the performative quality of this news piece, with the celebrity demonstrating his heterosexual masculinity through the use of women as props.

## **Illustration 2**

Another way in which masculinity was performed through representations of sexuality was by employing representations of women as sexual objects through which men actualise their (heterosexual) masculine identity. Masculinity was represented as highly sexualised, with a lack of control/mediation of the sex drive, and (hetero)sexual displays figured as central to masculinity. As in the preceding example, this was often articulated through physical sex, with regular references – in a news article as well as a column and joke – to the size and functioning of male genitalia acting as metaphors for hegemonic masculinity (‘balls’, ‘manhood’). Male genitalia were also figured as ‘tools’ through which to perform and prove masculinity with women.

Pudikabeka started going on about how his wife always complained that his manhood had shrunk over the years .... Themba, the bloody rascal, even went as far as coaxing poor Pudikabeka to lay his tools on the table so that the men could decide if the wife had a fair case or not. (*Sunday Sun*, 13/01/07)

Hahaa, it was Christmas time again, and the miners were heading home to empty their balls after a long year away from wives, girlfriends, concubines, lovers and *heeeiii*, everybody. (*Sunday Sun*, 2/12/07)

While women only play secondary roles in the stories portrayed, the ways in which feminine sexuality is constructed serves to symbolically accentuate and legitimate constructions of masculinity. In particular, women are often portrayed as sexual objects, both in the stories told and in the weekly ‘Sun Babe’ features which figure women as static and pliant objects of desire. As objects, they are not always represented in an entirely passive way, but sometimes as sexually demanding and in an almost constant state of craving for the male sex. Despite a kind of agency depicted with regard to women’s sexuality, it does not emerge as an empowering discourse for

women. Instead, the discursive implication is that women exist primarily as sexual objects through which men actualise their masculine identity. Furthermore, women's sexuality in these stories is framed as something that can only be actualised through heterosexual sex, as illustrated in the following extracts.

Years later he fled to *Jozi* when a neighbour found him helping himself to her donkey. The old lady, a widow, got so jealous that the fit young man was wasting energy on a donkey that she hauled him into her hut and bonked him to a pulp. (*Sunday Sun*, 9/12/07)

And that's how, they say, he got his Ndebele name, because one lady from the tribe got such a good service from Mahlangu that she bestowed the name on the man. (*Sunday Sun*, 9/12/07)

Overall, the sexual interactions between men and women were figured, particularly within these story columns, as narcissistic gender *performances* rather than as part of a broader and more intricate set of relations.

### **Illustration 3**

Even an account of what appears to be coercive sex is depicted with nonchalance as an instance of the performance of masculinity in the following extract.

Anyway, Mahlangu had this naughty habit of helping himself to the old mamas who sell stuff at the train station. You see, [they] were not allowed to sleep at the station, so they had to keep Mahlangu warm. Hey, that Mahlangu, they say was popular with the old mamas. (*Sunday Sun*, 9/12/07)

This disturbingly portrays coercive sexual encounters, implied as a form of blackmail. Yet the women are framed as being grateful for, or sexually benefiting from, these experiences, with the reference to the man as 'popular with the old mamas'. In this way, not only are women objectified and implicitly urged to accept a patriarchal sexual dynamic, but their own sexuality is rendered not as autonomous, but shaped largely by male displays of heterosexuality. The meaning, value and function of their sexuality lie in serving to demonstrate and applaud male heterosexuality. The story is told in a way that lauds the male's ability to perform sexually and to demonstrate his masculinity to the women. It also normalises sexual violence by trivialising it as humorous, and framing coercive sex as an opportunity for masculine performance. This column is an example of prevailing discursive orientations that centralise masculinity (and the demonstration thereof) as natural, sexual and essential.

These extracts also show how constructions of masculinity are shaped by intersecting and historicised discourses of culture. They appeal to a 'memory' of days gone by ('those were the days'), and do this via a kind of cultural expression laced through with gender. These columns appear to invoke, imply or appeal to 'cultural' foundations for the gender values depicted in the narrative, and the tales themselves are very much permeated with a sense of shared history and identity, located in colonial and apartheid migration and labour, among other things.

## Normalising and deflecting from violent masculinities

The *Sunday Sun* editorial, during one week of the sample dedicated to highlighting and critically confronting gender-based violence, as well as news stories covering rape cases and national statistics highlighting the extent of the issue of gender violence, framed gender violence as part of a wider social problem and appropriated human rights discourses in addressing the issue. At the same time, however, in the more ‘informal’ spaces of the newspaper (such as columns and jokes pages), discourses normalising violent masculinities, trivialising gender-based violence and framing women and feminism as responsible for gender violence, were prolific.

### *Illustration 4*

Some of the most powerful discourses pertaining to gender and violence came from the religious columns in the *Sunday Sun*. In one of the weekly columns by Bishop Sibiya, feminist ideals are fingered as the cause of gender violence. In terms of this discourse a natural, rightful gender order exists which, if challenged, debases both men and women. A return to this ‘natural gender order’ is presented as benefiting women, whose defiance of it is claimed to underlie their own contemporary gender problems and the gender-based violence they face.

Violence against women flared up when women, through movements like ‘women’s liberation’, chose the aggressive route rather than submission. Our grandmothers were far wiser than the women of today. They knew how to keep a home warm and their men content. They knew how to channel man’s aggression towards protecting them and their family rather than harm them. Today’s women seem to be skilled in bringing out the worst in men. No wonder there is so much violence and abuse against women and girls ... If they assert their feminine rights instead of applying wisdom, they will live to regret it. (*Sunday Sun*, 12/08/07)

This caveat, delivered to women through the vector of religion, and appealing to an essentialised, romanticised and timeless past, frames masculinity and femininity as inherently oppositional, and contemporary masculinities (and femininities) as a debasement of the natural gender order. In addition, it both normalises and naturalises violent masculinities and constructs femininities as the agents in preventing gender-based violence.

Another column by Sibiya, entitled ‘Many abused men suffer in silence’ worked to locate women as accountable for gender violence and infidelity, thereby normalising male violence. The women’s liberation movement is fingered as the catalyst for skewed gender relations, and women are cast as manipulative and abusive through their wielding of sexual power. While the column explicitly states that gender-based violence is unacceptable, it proceeds to embark on a tirade against women, in which they are framed as ultimately responsible for men’s behaviour. In this case, discourses challenging gender-based violence are re-appropriated to reframe women as violent abusers and men as victims, equating instances in which women ‘deny’ their husbands sex as instances of ‘diabolical’ cruelty and ‘spousal abuse’.

Some women can be cruel and evil beyond any description. They can be so abusive that it would make Idi Amin look like a saint .... Somehow, through the ages, it has appeared as if such afflictions by women on men are trivial and of no consequence. One of the weapons women have used to punish men is denying them sex .... The scars suffered by men because of such afflictions are countless. (*Sunday Sun*, 19/08/07)

### Illustration 5

Normalised gender violence also emerged within other spaces in the newspaper. The joke below is an example of the ways in which – despite an editorial and various news pieces highlighting and at times advocating an end to gender-based violence – the trivialisation of rape was perpetuated through more conversational, tabloidised news spaces.

A rape suspect went to a sangoma<sup>2</sup> to help him win the case. The sangoma made his penis vanish. He went to court and won the case because how can he rape if he doesn't have a penis to penetrate? He went back to the sangoma happy and full of joy and wanted his penis restored, but when he arrived the sangoma was dead! (*Sunday Sun*, 12/08/07)

The joke does not convey an interest in whether or not the rape 'suspect' perpetrated the crime; the rape itself is treated as immaterial and is therefore normalised. The victim remains invisible while the rapist is humanised – and made humorous. The perpetrator's emasculation, as in a number of the texts already discussed as discursively equated with physical sex, becomes of central concern. His inability to perform sexually is a focal point and becomes the punch-line of a joke about the rape. Ironically, this joke appeared in the same issue in which a news article on rape law pointed to the fact that rape need *not* be perpetrated by penetration with a penis. Most striking, however, is the extent to which male violence is normalised through humour and 'play', invoking Gqola's (2007) observation of the 'various ways in which what is "normal" heterosexual "play" contains codes that inscribe feminine passivity and masculine aggression' – codes she connects with the concrete manifestation of gender-based violence.

### Alternative discourses of masculinity

After reviewing a series of gendered discourses perceived as being problematic, it is important to point out that the newspaper also printed interesting examples of alternative discourses and visions of masculinity.

In two 'Men 2 men talk' columns, by Mbuyiselo Botha, challenges to constructions of hegemonic masculinity are evident. In 'Local business has blood on its hands', Botha attacks business entities for not doing more to fight gender-based violence. The second column, titled 'These men are in the stone age', offers perhaps the most patent challenge to certain dominant constructions of masculinity which are reproduced through other columns reviewed in the *Sunday Sun*. Botha expresses outrage at an incident in which women were forced by men to wear skirts, rather than

pants. He accuses these men of being backward, and of representing a form of masculinity with which he will not associate himself. He also indicates that such displays of masculinity are counter to the goals and ideals of democracy. Botha encourages anger and action against gender injustice – a significant discursive counter to the ‘traditional’ submission called for in Bishop Sibiya’s column. That this column is included in the same edition in which Bishop Sibiya argues that women are the abusers in relationships is a significant instance of discursive diversity and contestation. It is also a sign that conversational news styles can manifest a range of different voices and perspectives on masculinity.

It is perhaps important to note that these discourses are in the minority. Most of the advocacy around women’s rights appeared in ‘hard news’ sections and an editorial, while a wide range of spaces within the newspaper (including jokes, news pieces, letters to the editor and columns) drew on the kinds of constructions of masculinities discussed here. As such, while the newspaper advocated for gender equality, limited space was provided for the expression of alternative masculinities. In this way, discourse is reflected not only in individual newspaper items, but in the overall balance of the selection and coverage of particular kinds of voices which constitutes a special discourse in and of itself – one that tells us something about the state of gender politics within the *Sunday Sun*.

## CONCLUSION

The mainstream media have struggled to come to terms with the popularity of the tabloid press in South Africa, underestimating its resilience, versatility and sway over its readership. In leaving the *Sunday Sun* at the end of May 2012, Themba Khumalo reflected on the extraordinary success of the newspaper since its launch a decade ago. He wrote: ‘When this journey started 10 winters ago, we were told by some who thought of themselves as the sole custodians of newspapering that we would not make it beyond the first three months. They were wrong’ (*Sunday Sun*, 27/05/12). He attributed the success of the newspaper to the ways in which it had created vibrant forums through which ordinary men and women could ‘tell their stories and express their dreams’ (ibid.). It is precisely in these kinds of news spaces where the expression of deep and intimate stories receives primacy, where localised narratives of everyday gender politics are unravelled, and where problematic gender discourses – such as the ones referred to here – emerge. By adopting conversational and sensational styles, the *Sunday Sun* has created numerous spaces for overt performances of masculinity to be publicised as part of projects of gendered meaning-making.

Contemporary research signifies that a wider trend in South Africa is gaining recognition: the simultaneous public empowerment and private oppression of women. Motsei (2007), for example, considered this paradox in relation to the Zuma rape trial (2005–2006), which drew attention to deep-seated patriarchal ideas surrounding women and their sexuality, at a time when successes in the public representation of women in politics and formal women’s rights were being celebrated. As regards the media in particular, a focus on quantifying women’s representation in public roles as media producers or political voices in the media over more qualitative questions of gender relations

has been linked to the limited scope and impact of gender and media activism in South Africa (Bosch 2011; Geertsema 2010). Local rape statistics – the highest in non-conflict areas in the world (Moffett 2006) – offer another stark reminder of the private oppression of women in this country, especially when considered in relation to the number of women represented in parliament – also among the highest in the world.

These contradictions have been viewed in relation to the ways in which disrupted masculinities are responding to changes in the gender status quo (Salo 2005; Walker 2005). This resonates with the literature on the crisis of masculinity, not in terms of arguing that men are 'in trouble' due to feminism, but in terms of the need to recognise that the project of masculinity, like the project of gender transformation, shows unevenness, contradiction and ambivalence as social changes take place. These reflections resonate with Gqola (2007, 146) who argues that the current empowerment debate 'only really applies to women while they are in the official "public space": in the workplace'. A different set of rules applies in relation to 'private spaces' such as homes and spaces in-between, such as the streets or public transport, etc. The post-apartheid experience is one in which women are still expected to adhere to a 'cult of femininity' and men to the constructs of dominant and violent masculinities, which exist alongside 'public' empowerment. To engage such contradictions that manifest as discursive tensions, concerted intervention and lobbying are required. Here, as Gqola (ibid, 117) suggests, 'gender-transformative work requires that masculinities – black, white, straight, queer – be radically revisited and transformed in the interest of a country that is not just gender-equitable on paper'.

## NOTES

- 1 For the full original study, see Buiten (2010).
- 2 'Traditional Zulu healer and respected elder' (see <http://wordnet.princeton.edu/>).

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