

SA ought to look at power when it comes to prejudice about gender and sexuality

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IT IS HIGH time South Africa overhauled its rigid and prejudiced stereotyping of gender and sexuality.

We remain a deeply divided and prejudiced society. Growing poverty and structural inequality, coupled with a violent intolerance of difference, is a lethal cocktail for all those perceived as Other.

The “othering” of divergent genders and sexualities plays out in homes, institutions, the media and in the fabric of society. Gender and sexuality are primarily constructed in dichotomies: male-female, man-woman and gay-straight.

These powerful constructs of how to be “man”, “woman”, “gay/lesbian” or ‘straight’ come with socially prescribed roles and expectations which provide us with “socially appropriate” ways of feeling, thinking and doing. But these “conditions of gender” are not fixed; they are shaped by history, culture and language.

Heterosexuality, more specifically, is presented as part of the natural “fit” between male and female bodies. But sex is only a relatively recent theory about human beings which divides them into two biologically based categories. The outcry over athlete Caster Semenya shows how heavily invested people are in this male-female binary. Sociologist Melissa Steyn reminds us, however, that “nature does not come in binaries”.

The notion of inherent differences between the sexes loads up physiological difference as a signifier that is far greater than what the body looks like or how it functions. It is fundamental to the functioning of power - social, economic or sexual. This system of power is called heteronormativity, which is the social prescription that renders heterosexuality as the only “normal” form of sexuality. It hinges on notions of men as “masculine” and women as “feminine”. In this way, heterosexuality is seen as “good, mature sexuality” and homosexuality as “bad, primitive sexuality”.

Heteronormativity, like whiteness, middle-classness and able-bodiedness, acts as an invisible insidious power so deeply embedded that we do its bidding without question, always thinking it to be “normal”. People whose sexualities or gender behaviours contradict patriarchal gender and sexual roles are silenced, undermined, and at times attacked. About half of all South African women murdered are killed by their intimate partners - one every six hours. A woman was assaulted at Noord Street taxi rank in Johannesburg for wearing a skirt that was “too short”. Another’s house was burnt down in KwaZulu-Natal because she wore trousers. Lesbians are raped because they choose not to assume the prescribed sexual role or feminine stereotype.

Gays are punished through violence for not conforming to patriarchal masculinities. This “violence of gendering” is a mechanism of social regulation to ensure adherence to strict gender and sexual codes. It has a social purpose. It reminds us of what “real men” and “real women” should be, and what happens if we are not. Through gender policing in the family, church and kinship relations, expressions of gender and sexual difference are often punished.

We should be worried about the budding alliance between ANC reactionaries and Christian conservatives in the newly formed “god squad”. Unsurprisingly, the god squad has its eyes on the repeal of laws that enable same-sex couples to marry and that uphold women’s reproductive rights. Religious and cultural dogmas are foundational pillars of the gender normative paradigm. However progressive, non-discriminatory religious voices hold up a contradiction to this and challenge the hegemony of mainstream religious discourses.

Progressive law reform in post-apartheid South Africa has pried open the public space for nonconforming genders and sexualities. Yet gender policing continues to threaten these hard-earned gains. The treatment of Semenya’s body by the media and the sporting fraternity is a case in point.

Civil society organisations have a role - to contest the ideological normalisation of oppressive sexualities and genders. This requires disrupting gender norms and rendering legitimate sexual and gender diversity visible. If we really want to address women’s structural discrimination we must confront male entitlement.

If we aim to challenge sexual violence against lesbians and gays and women, we must “out” the oppressive nature of heteronormativity. This means changing the way power operates in our society. To do this our personal practice of power must change. Some of us will have to relinquish our privileges if they are premised on the marginalisation of others. Others must learn to assume power in shared and affirming ways. It is a mighty task.

Semenya illustrates that the test to be faced has nothing to do with chromosomes, genes or genitals. That is just a prejudiced deflection. Rather, the test before us has everything to do with the extent to which all of us can bear genders and sexualities that are exclusively defined by the very, bodies and minds we inhabit.

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