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Masculinity, sex and survival in Zambian prisons

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Introduction

Sexual relations between men in prisons occur all over the world, also in African prisons. Sex between men is considered deviant in Zambian society, yet for some prisoners it is a way to cope with the stress of incarceration. Prisoners have to cope with extreme challenges in terms of insufficient food, overcrowding and health challenges. For some entering into sexual relationships becomes a strategy of survival.

With an emphasis on the link between deprivation and psychological, social and physical death, this article explores prison governance with the aim of documenting how sex becomes a strategy for survival.

Prisoners are one of the most vulnerable, yet overlooked risk groups in terms of HIV infection.¹ HIV prevalence in Zambian prisons is estimated to be 27 per cent whereas the general population rate is 14 per cent.² In some urban and semi-urban prisons the infection rates are up to 40 per cent.

Many prisoners have contracted the HIV virus prior to entering the prison, but a recent study found a high association between male-to-male sex and HIV in prisons, where 46.4 per cent of those engaging or having engaged in sexual relations were HIV positive. Sexual practices are not isolated from the reality in which they take place, and they play into the power structures between inmates.³

The African prison remains under-studied in social science, particularly in relation to sexuality. Based on a qualitative life story study in Zambian prisons (2011-13) this article will shed light on how

sex becomes part of a struggle for survival and masculine identity, where the heteronormativity from outside society is reproduced through a translation of gender roles in an environment without women. A study such as this is important, because not only are the experiences and effects of incarceration in Zambia under-studied, but the high HIV prevalence rates in prison remain insufficiently addressed in research and in prevention programs. The lack of prevention programmes cause unnecessary suffering and deaths in and outside prison. Based on my research I propose an understanding of male-to-male sex in ways that move beyond characterizing it as risky or deviant behaviour.

Methodology

During the period January 2011 to May 2013 I interviewed — with a team of trained research assistants — 82 inmates in urban and semi-urban prisons in Zambia, and 18 ex-prisoners from all over the country. The interviewing methodology used was narrative life story interviewing combined with interviewing techniques used for torture survivors. Informants were encouraged to tell their personal life story, including life prior to incarceration and their experience of imprisonment. The aim was to learn about the prison experience and coping strategies through the informants' life stories with an emphasis on sexuality, when informants were open and willing to speak about it.

Only inmates in urban and semi-urban prisons were interviewed, so the conclusions drawn are not necessarily generalisable to rural prisons, where inmates are incarcerated for shorter periods.

1. UNAIDS, UNODC and World Bank: 'HIV and Prisons in sub-Saharan Africa – Opportunities for Action' (UNAIDS 2008).
2. O. Simooya et al, 'Behind walls': A study of HIV Risk Behaviours and Seroprevalence in Prisons in Zambia', AIDS. Volume 15, Issue 13 (7 September 2001), p. 1741-1744. O. Simooya, and Sanjobo, Nawa: 'In But free' – an HIV/AIDS intervention in an African prison', Culture, Health and Sexuality (2001), 3: 2, pp. 241-251.
3. Hensley et al., 'Introduction: The history of prison sex research', The Prison Journal, Vol 80 No. 4 (2000); S Gear, 'Manhood, Violence and Coercive Sexualities in Men's Prisons: Dynamics and Consequences Behind Bars and Beyond', Association of Concerned African Scholars, 16 September, 2009; S Gear and K Ngubeni, 'Your brother, my wife – sex and gender behind bars', SA Crime Quarterly No. 4, June 2003; Laurene French: 'Prison Sexualization: Inmate adaptations to psycho-social stress', Corrective and Social Psychiatry and Journal of Behaviour Technology Methods and Therapy, 1979, vol/hft 25yrs, p 64-69; Ewoame H: 'Wedding behind bars: the emic perspectives of male prisoners on same sex sexual practices in Ghana'. Amsterdam Master's in Medical Anthropology, University of Amsterdam, august 2011; Bosworth M and Carrabine E, 'Reassessing Resistance – race, gender and sexuality in prison', Punishment and Society, vol 3 (4): 501-515, 2001, London and New Delhi; S. Gear and K. Ngubeni: Daai Ding: Sex, Sexual Violence and Coercion in Men's Prisons', Research paper written for the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation. 2002; O Simooya and N Sanjobo: 'In But Free' – an HIV/AIDS intervention in an African Prison', Culture Health and Sexuality, 3: 2, 241-251, 2001.

The relationship between homosexuality and male-to-male sex in prisons

Homosexuality is illegal and punishable in Zambia. Sex in prison, whether voluntary or forced, is seen as deviant behaviour,⁴ unnatural, and as risk behaviour in terms of HIV/AIDS and other diseases.⁵ In an African context (as elsewhere) sex in prisons is a practice often ignored, and at other times punished severely.⁶

The general public, administrators and politicians condemn sex between men in prison, generally from a religious or 'cultural' stand point.⁷ In the general public's opinion, homosexuality is not easily reconciled with the image of the masculine African man, as homosexuality is widely considered a Western import and 'Un-African'.⁸ Notwithstanding the desire to think otherwise (in general public and amongst many prisoners), individuals continue to have an interest in sexual expression.⁹

There is little doubt that the majority of men in prison, who have sex with men do not consider their sexual practices an expression of a 'homosexual' identity. Studies suggest the identity politics of the West are found less in an African context, where many men are less likely to identify as homosexuals, but some may still enter into sexual relationships with men, perhaps alongside relationships with women.¹⁰ The practice of man-to-man sexual relationships is, according to these studies not necessarily associated with a sexual identity as homosexual, but it is rather to be understood as a practice.¹¹ Even if scholars have documented this sexual flexibility elsewhere, my research rather suggests that

the prisoners who enter into sexual relationships are severely stigmatised, also by the narrative of being 'converted to homosexuality', suggesting a different take on homosexuality than these studies claim.

My research explored the possibility of various forms of sexual activity ranging from outright violent rape to less violent forms of abuse. There is little evidence of consensual sex based on mutual affection or sexual gratification¹², even if it does exist. Generally what takes place is transactional sex of a more or less abusive nature. The picture however is complex; for instance some prisoners who would place themselves in the category of being abused, may still have felt sexual pleasure.¹³

Imprisonment as a threat to masculine identity

According to Bourdieu masculinity and sexuality are social constructions. He claims there is no set of universal definitions of masculinity and femininity, yet there are some pervasive features, which continue to persist. Crudely depicted, femininity is associated with passivity, the private sphere and subordination to men, and masculinity is associated with agency, authority and dominance.¹⁴ Notions of masculinity, are often associated with male virility, control (over women as well as in sexual relations with them) and sexual performance. Masculinity must be fiercely guarded.¹⁵ Connel's concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' emphasizes that the 'dominant' version of values and attributes ascribed to masculinity are closely linked to the specific context in which they are exercised.¹⁶ The traits of masculinity and femininity are reproduced by inmates.

4. For a discussion of deviance please see: H S Becker, 'Outsiders – Studies in the sociology of Deviance' (The Free Press, NY, 1963, 1991).
5. Hensley et al.: 'Introduction: The history of prison sex research'. The Prison Journal, Vol 80 No. 4, December 2000: 360-367; UNAIDS, UNODC and World Bank 2008, 'HIV and Prisons in sub-Saharan Africa – Opportunities for Action', (UNAIDS, Geneva, 2008).
6. Todrys, 'Unjust and Unhealthy', p 44-47, A M Jefferson, 'Confronted by Practice –Towards a critical Psychology of prison practice in Nigeria' (PhD thesis, Copenhagen University, July 2004), own data.
7. Same sex sexual activity is often considered a Western import, 'Un-African' and not part of 'African Culture' amongst many Africans. More on this in M Epprecht, 'Heterosexual Africa? The History of an Idea from the Age of Exploration to the Age of AIDS', University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, Scottsville, 2008; Chenier, Elise 'Segregating sexualities – The prison 'sex problem' in Twentieth Century Canada and the United States' in Strange and Bashford (Ed), 'Isolation – Places and Practices of Exclusion', Routledge, 2007; A N Moster and E L Jeglic, 'Prison Warden Attitudes Toward Prison Rape and Sexual Assault: Findings Since the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA)', The Prison Journal 89: 65, 14 January 2009.
8. M Epprecht, 'Heterosexual Africa? The history of an idea from the Age of Exploration to the Age of AIDS', Ohio University Press, Athens, Ohio, US/University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, Scottsville, South Africa, 2008; M Epprecht, 'Hungochani – The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa', McGill-Queen's University Press, Qubec, 2004.
9. B V Smith: 'Rethinking prison sex: Self-expression and safety', p 204, 15 Colum J. Gender and Law 185 2006; Own interviews with inmates in Mukobeko Maximum and Medium, Lusaka Central and ex-prisoners.
10. Lorway R, Beyond the New Geography of Dissident Gender-Sexual Identity Categories: Masculinities, homosexualities, and Intimate Partner Violence in Namibia' (Working paper, UNESCO, SSR)
11. M Epprecht, 'Heterosexual Africa? The history of an idea from the Age of Exploration to the Age of AIDS' (Ohio University Press, Athens, Ohio, US/University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, Scottsville, South Africa, 2008); M Epprecht, 'Hungochani – The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa' (McGill-Queen's University Press, Qubec, 2004).
12. D'Alessio et al.: The effect of Conjugal Visitation on Sexual Violence in Prisons, 15. Jan 2012. Southern Criminal Association 2012.
13. This is however outside the scope of this article. Sexual pleasure is a major theme, but this article focuses on the gendered aspect of sex in prisons.
14. Bourdieu P, 'Masculine Domination', Polity Press, Cambridge, 2001.
15. Silberschmidt M, 'Masculinities, Sexuality and Socio-economic Change in Rural and Urban East Africa' in Arnfred S (Ed), 'Re-thinking Sexualities in Africa', Almqvist and Wiksell Tryckeri AB, 2004; Dover P, 'A Man of Power: Gender and HIV/AIDS in Zambia' (PhD thesis, Uppsala University, Uppsala, 2001).
16. Connel, R W 1995, 'Masculinities'. Berkely and Los Angeles, University of California Press.

In the Zambian prisons, the masculine identity comes under threat:

our tradition stipulates that as a man I am supposed to be providing for (my family). I am a man and I am not supposed to be kept by a sister ('being kept' refers to being provided for) and that is difficult for me to take.

In this way, prisoners express deep distress at losing the possibility of taking care of their families, compounded by having to watch their families suffer because of their absence, whilst at the same time being a burden to them.

Already at the police cells a double-bind process begins: Around the world an important prisoner code centers on 'being tough', 'being a man', 'being strong' and 'doing your time' on the one side.¹⁷ On the other side, the tough prison environment does the exact opposite to the confined — it puts masculine identity under stress. Inmates in Zambia often describe a process of humiliation and 'humbling' upon being incarcerated. Many come from the police cells having been beaten and tortured by police officer and inmates in over-crowded cells, where no food is provided. Victims of trauma will make assumptions about themselves, about their identities, based on their response to trauma.¹⁸ One ex-prisoner explained of his time in the police cells:

No matter what, you will surrender. If you try to refuse they will beat you. I used to humble myself so I could keep myself (alive). They beat to kill, and there is nowhere you can run to, really. If I humbled myself I would be ignored, and they would say things like this one, you! is useless we don't need to beat him.

So, the threat to identity may come in various forms. The prisoners in this study expressed how the social and physical violence of incarceration would have severe consequences for how they were able to perceive themselves as men performing the expected masculine roles. As one prisoner put it: 'It's a struggle for identity'.

Lack of basic necessities, the experience of psychological and social death, and the fear of physical death

The prisoners in this study expressed how the social and physical violence of incarceration would have severe consequences for how they were able to perceive themselves as men performing the expected masculine roles.

Scholars such as Cohen, Sykes, Goffman and Honneth speak of incarceration as posing a threat to identity.¹⁹ Building on that and on the basis on my empirical data, I propose a connection between the experience of imprisonment being death as described by many prisoners and engagement in sexual relationships. Many prisoners often refer to those who engage in sex as people who have 'lost hope'. It is death on several levels — death due to the poor conditions of imprisonment, social death and/or threat to the individual's identity.

Prisoners systematically describe the shock of entering prison as traumatic. John²⁰ explains: 'I thought it was the end of my life. I believed it was death'. John is representative of many inmates, fearing literal death due to the lack of food, overcrowding and general health issues, but also the psychological and social death in terms of losing family, the role of provider and in this way a sense of identity. John is desperate to find a solution to his problems, particularly in terms of food. He explains: 'I failed to contain the suffering. Prison pushes you against the wall, which forces you to do something'.

17. Sykes, G: *The Society of Captives: A Study of a Maximum Security Prison*, Princeton University Press and copyrighted, 2007; Liebling, A: 'Prisons and their Moral Performance', Clarendon Studies in Criminology, 2004; Liebling A and Maruna S (Ed): 'The Effects of Imprisonment', Willan Publishing, Devon, 2005.

18. Denborough, David: 'Trauma: Narrative responses to traumatic experiences', Psykologisk Forlag 2008 (Foreword to Danish version by Annette Holmgren).

19. Goffman E, 'Asylums – Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates', Penguin Books, London, 1961, 1991, Honneth, A, 'The Struggle for Recognition – the moral grammar of social conflicts', The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1995. Taylor, L. & Cohen, S. *Psychological Survival, 'The Experience of Long Term Imprisonment'*, Penguin Harmondsworth, 1972; Sykes, G, 'The Society of Captives: A Study of a Maximum Security Prison', Princeton University Press, 2007.

20. Not his real name.

John is no longer who he was, and a new or different identity has to be constructed in a harsh environment with very limited options. The long sentences, the conditions of lack of food, material necessities, the fear of psychological, social and physical death — and the lack of heterosexual relationships cause a feeling of hopelessness. As one inmate explained:

Many of them have no hope to say they will come out, and for them to relieve their sexual desires, what they had to do was to give an impression to the other man to say we are never going out and we are going to die from here.

These factors make it possible for men, who would not otherwise engage in sex with other men to enter into sexual relationships.

The sexual relationship and gender roles

Prison scholars make claims about prison subculture being oppositional to general society, for instance when it may give social recognition (even if reluctantly so) to be a murderer in prison.²¹ It would be tempting to interpret sexual relationships in Zambian prisons as oppositional to general society as well. I would however argue that the understanding of sex is a translation of gender roles from the outside, even if the physical practice of sex is oppositional to the values of general society. Butler's heterosexual matrix²², that is the male/female dichotomy is maintained by the constructions of 'husbands', the 'wives', 'men and women'. In this way, male-to-male sex cannot be understood as oppositional, but rather as a reinterpretation of gender roles and sexuality in an environment without women. Sexuality in prison, I would argue is a reflection of the general society's hetero-normativity.

As mentioned, the typical form of sexual relationship is transactional, where the one who is penetrated receives food or other necessities as payment. The inmates call it entering into 'marriages'. There is a 'husband' and a 'wife'. As on the outside of prison, the husband is the man and the provider, and the one who penetrates in the sexual act. As the provider, he has to take care of his 'wife'. The

construction of gendered identities, are strikingly similar to those on the outside in general society.

New, inexperienced or young prisoners are typically targets for sexual abuse/favours by more senior inmates, who may be responsible for the everyday governing of the prison. Those with authority, power and access to material goods may feign concern and provide them with privileges and gifts, while not letting them know that the gifts come at a price of providing sexual favours. New inmates suddenly have unpayable debts (in terms of food etc), and are forced into sex.

Other times inmates are drugged in order to get them to surrender to sex. A cocktail of benzodiazepine, marijuana or whatever else is available (though rarely so-called hard drugs) is used. Drugs are added to food or tea, and the victim is tricked into taking it:

You know there are those tablets for psychiatric patients those small tablets. Those people used to take those tablets I have a small flask they open that flask and in the evening they went to my cell and took about six or seven tablets and they put in my tea.

Another inmate described how he had been reported to the prison authorities for engaging in sex, when he in fact had not (yet) engaged. He had been locked up in the penal block for punishment, sitting in knee-high water for days. This false reporting was done to 'soften him up' to make him surrender to having sex with one of the powerful inmates, who wanted him as his 'wife'.

The construction of the 'woman' — sex as emasculation

Based on the significant amount of data collected for this study, entering into sexual relationships is for those constructed as women, a reflection of the lack of options they have. Becoming a 'woman' is a strategy of survival. Sex gives access to certain privileges, such as food, improved sleeping conditions or access to other necessities. Concerns about the psychological, social and physical effects of agreeing to be 'sodomised' are pushed aside for the sake of survival — at least in the short term. Ironically, engaging in sex puts your life in

21. Morash M et al, 'An Exploratory Study of the Characteristics of Men Known to Commit Prisoner-on-Prisoner sexual Violence', *The Prison Journal* 90: 161, February 23 2010, p 161-178.

22. Butler, J, 'Gender Trouble – Feminism and the Subversion of Identity', 1990, Routledge. New York.

literal danger in the longer term due to HIV infection in conditions of less than optimal health care.²³

The men penetrated are also constructed as 'women' in the social life of the prison beyond the sexual act. They perform 'female' duties, such as sweeping. There are men who perform the role of women by appearing feminised in clothing and mannerism. An ex-prisoner explained how even if he enjoyed the privileges awarded as a 'woman' he felt he had to perform an act: 'You have to act like a woman, you have to pretend that you love the man, you are very restricted in every way'. This performance as women obviously entails consequences for their identity as men, but also shows how the roles of a loving relationship from outside is mimicked through the act of 'showing love'.

The construction of the 'man' — sex as affirmation of masculinity

The construction of the 'man' is based on his penetrative role in the sexual act. The 'man' receives a sense of recognition through sex, where he shows he is the dominant, and this — in spite of the general homophobia — affirms his masculinity, because he is not penetrated, and therefore he is not a woman. The 'men' the research team spoke to clearly expressed how they viewed the men penetrated as 'women'. Words such as 'she', 'girl' and 'wife' would flow naturally during these interviews.

An inmate, who was not involved in sex talked of 'men' and 'women':

They (the 'women') will approach this one (a 'man') and say I don't have this (food, soap etc), and of course they know that he a lion he is going to devour them. They go where they feel there is honey and bees always go there.

The euphemisms of lions devouring women, and the bees and honey are sexualised and shows how a certain hyper-masculinity emerges from engaging as a 'man' in the sexual relationship, even from those who are not involved themselves.

At times so-called 'women' can climb the hierarchy and become 'men', through for instance promotion to a higher rank in the prisoner hierarchy. An ex-prisoner having previously performed the role of 'woman', was elevated to cell captain, a position of significant power and control. He now wishes to become a 'man' in the sexual relationship and through this act, he is compensated for the emasculation of imprisonment and the pain of having been a 'woman'. He explains that he is no longer a 'victim', but instead 'powerful'. His experience of being powerful is emphasized when he describes his satisfaction with his choice of sexual partner: 'There was no problem as I got to do what I wanted to do with her'.

He may have lost his role as the provider of the family, as well as the role of the man in the sexual relationship with his wife on the outside, but he has created a new sense of masculine identity. By having penetrative sex in prison, he is once again a man — but then a man with a distinct 'hyper-masculinity' based on being powerful and in control.

Conclusion

In Zambian culture (as many other places) sex is socially constructed to take place between a man and a woman. However, in the absence of women, under extreme conditions and deprivation and in an environment where male identities come under threat, a way out is constructed: the young inexperienced or weaker inmates are turned into 'women' with the pain, privileges and consequences that follow. The men, the ones who penetrate in the sexual act, regain a sense of power associated with masculine identity through sex. The imaginary of the heterosexual relationship is maintained.

Even if perceived deviant and thereby a threat to normality by society, administrators and fellow inmates, hetero-normativity is in fact maintained, because sex in prisons is an interpretation of gender roles from outside society into an environment without women. These dynamics should be further researched and addressed in practical HIV prevention work.

23. Lindegaard, M. and Gear, S. (forthcoming): 'Violence Makes Safe in South African Prisons: Prison Gangs, Violent Acts and Victimization among Inmates'. *Focaal: Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*.