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By Goodness Thandi Ntuli

Abstract

This article highlights the intensifying prevalence of sexual violence in South Africa, which affects women including izintombi (virgins, also known as Zulu maidens). Ubuntombi (virginity) traditionally represented a typical identity marker of young-womanhood in the indigenous lives of Zulus. As an aftermath of colonialism and imperialism, the cultural importance of women’s virginity faded into the past with only sporadic survival in some rural areas of South Africa. For some reasons, it was visibly revived together with virginity-testing as public events in the 1980s and 1990s. The practice of virginity-testing was criticized by some scholars, human rights and gender activists, who blamed it for promoting rape of the young women involved. The blame became an undeniably common phenomenon in the early 1990s due to the myth that having sex with a virgin cured HIV infection. However, this empirical study conducted in KwaZulu-Natal through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions found that izintombi (virgins) refuted the claim. Virgins felt that the 1990s myth could not still be the cause of sexual violence against them since South Africans received education concerning that myth. This study used a postcolonial feminist theoretical lens because the group under study were young women from a formerly colonized Zulu ethnic group. Controversies that surrounded the revival of ubuntombi (virginity) accompanied by virginity testing did not deter its rapid embrace by a number of contemporary izintombi (virgins) as their indigenous cultural practice, heritage, and identity. It is in the practice of this intended choice that izintombi face persistent threats of sexual violence against them. This is regardless of the guaranteed South African constitutional rights to equality and security stipulated in the Bill of Rights. Thus, this article also raises the question of who is to blame for the ubiquity of this violence and how it could be addressed without blaming the sufferers. It further underscores the need for intensified activism by African feminists, human rights activists, and gender activists against the pervasiveness of sexual violence that haunts izintombi.

Keywords: Sexual violence, Victim-blaming, African feminism, Human Rights, Gender Activism, Ubuntombi, Virginity, Virginity Testing

Introduction

South Africa is not an exception to the precarities and vulnerabilities suffered by women worldwide. This includes sexual violence that affects women, such as the izintombi (virgins) who practice ubuntombi (virginity) as their Zulu cultural practice, heritage, and identity. For hundreds of years, ubuntombi was a typical indigenous cultural practice amongst the Zulu people. However, due to the colonial influence, it became dormant but intermittently survived in deep rural areas. In the 1980s and 1990s, ubuntombi, together with virginity testing as a strategy of maintenance, was resuscitated within the wider Zulu cultural context. Having

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been re-introduced, *ubuntombi* was embraced by a number of *izintombi* in contemporary South Africa. Ever since, *ubuntombi* has become a deliberate choice to preserve an individual’s virginity as opposed to the generic expectation of the past (Ntuli, 2022). However, research indicates that in the 1990s, there was a myth that when an HIV positive man had sexual intercourse with a virgin, he would be cured, which was also known as “virgin cleansing” (Leclerc-Madlala, 2002; Mokoboto-Zwane, 2016). According to some scholars, this myth led to the increased statistics of rape amongst young women and children (Durojaye, 2016; Mswela, 2009 Leclerc-Madlala, 2002; Mokoboto-Zwane, 2016).

Furthermore, to some scholars and researchers, the communities where *ubuntombi* continued to be observed and celebrated were to be blamed for exposing *izintombi* to sexual violence through the practice of virginity testing (Gupta, 2000; Naidu, 2008). While this may have been true to some extent because virginity testing is a public event in some areas, rape was not limited to such communities only. Virginity testing was considered an inseparable cultural activity through which *ubuntombi* was maintained (Ntuli, 2022). Therefore, to the tested virgins, it automatically became an unquestionable method of *ubuntombi* maintenance. However, to *izintombi* that were not tested, particularly those from some Christian circles, virginity testing was viewed as a separate entity from *ubuntombi* practice.

During this empirical research it was noted that some of the participants who underwent virginity testing repudiated the blame against virginity-preserving communities. Their claim was that South African people have had enough education about the 1990s myth. They claimed, instead, that most South African women run the risk of being sexually assaulted due to the pervasiveness of sexual violence in the country. Thus to them, the real bone of contention was neither virginity nor virginity testing that attracted rape perpetrators; rather it was the country-wide prevalence of sexual violence.

The purpose of this article is, therefore, to accentuate the prevalence of sexual violence while examining the question of who is to blame for its escalation and how it could be addressed. *Izintombi’s* claim was affirmed by research that indicated that sexual violence against women also intensified to the worst levels during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, lockdown restrictions on movement limited women’s access to any immediate assistance (Ndlovu et al., 2022). Research also indicates that femicide in South Africa is five times higher than the global average (Africa Health Organisation (AHO), 2021). Most of the femicide incidents are accompanied by rape or sexual assaults. The prevalence of this violence is hard to ignore as it is listened to, read, and watched in the media almost daily. What exacerbates the situation is that sexual violence increases the risk of HIV infections. Research confirms that South Africa has worldwide leading numbers that are estimated at 7.9 million people living with HIV (Zuma et al., 2022). This is in spite of all the “HIV awareness and education programmes that have been launched in South Africa” (Gow & Desmond, 2022:6).

Additionally, gender inequality, which elevates men and subjugates women, is prevalent in South Africa (Gilbert & Walker, 2002). The triple prevalence of sexual violence, high HIV infections, and gender inequality is a dangerous combination, particularly for women who are mainly at the receiving end of the outcomes. This is because gender disparity involves power dynamics that lead some men to think they have unrestrained sexual power over any woman, which perpetuates rape and sexual assaults. Furthermore, “the most significant biomedical factor driving the epidemic in South Africa is the high prevalence of sexually transmitted infections (STIs)” (Gow & Desmond, 2022:6). This includes HIV infections that “spread primarily through heterosexual sex in South Africa” (The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2008:1). Moreover, recent surveys (2017) indicate that youth of about 15 to 24 years are increasingly getting new HIV infections, with young women as the majority of those infected (Zuma et al., 2022). Therefore, as one of the upshots of sexual violence, HIV- and
AIDS-related deaths are not a thing of the past in South Africa, which underscores the significance of this article.

Therefore, the risk of being infected with HIV is very high; hence most of izintombi live in fear and anxiety due to rape threats. South Africa has competent human rights advocates, feminists, and gender activists who are vocal about virginity testing as a harmful practice. It is condemned as a practice that violates the guaranteed constitutional rights of those young women who are being tested [part of the group of izintombi because some are not tested] (CGE, 2007; SAHRC, 2003). These voices of rights and gender custodians in this regard were recognized by the South African government, which yielded positive results. The Children's Act No. 38 of 2005 that prohibits virginity testing below the age of 16 (Gallagher, 2005) was a direct outcome of their vigorous advocacy. However, the same agents do not seem to be equally vocal when it comes to the most harmful sexual violence against the same young women. This article, therefore, seeks to highlight the vital need to equally strengthen activism for the condemnation of sexual violence against izintombi, which seems to be receiving less – if any – attention. As part of South African youth, izintombi have sacrificed their sexual freedom due to their circumstantial context and personal reasons. Sexual violence towards them represents an intensified form of violence that has the potential for psychological effects, which is unconstitutional in terms of Section 12 of the Bill of Rights (South African Constitution, 1996).

The Disturbing Prevalence of Rape and its Threats in South Africa

The pervasiveness of rape and its threats as a form of sexual violence against women including izintombi is a disturbing risk that South African women have to face every day. The lack of security is exacerbated by the gendered nature of sexual violence that disproportionately affects more women than men (Cooper-White, 2008). Research indicates that as early as 1998, “South Africa had the highest per capita rate of reported rape in the world with estimated assumption that only one in every 20 rape cases are reported” (Gow & Desmond, 2022:7). Similarly, in the 2000s and subsequent years, research confirmed an escalating rape crisis in South Africa with a million rape cases reported annually with the estimation that “one woman [is] raped in every 23 seconds” (Leclerc-Madlala, 2002:2; Haddad, 2003:150). Recent annual police crime statistics also confirm that “rape in South Africa is systemic and endemic” (Gouws, 2022:2). For example, “there were 42,289 rapes reported in 2019/2020, as well as 7,749 sexual assaults. This translates into about 115 rapes a day” (Gouws, 2022:2). Similarly, in 2019/20, SAPS crime statistics indicated that 53,293 sexual offenses had been reported, an average of 146 per day (AHO, 2021). These are only the reported sexual assaults, and there is further evidence of increasing sexual violence. For example, 2022 crime statistics indicate that during the three months of “October to December 2021, about 11,315 rape cases were reported, which translates to 123 cases a day” (Nyoka 2022:4). Overall, research indicates that “South Africa has one of the highest rape statistics in the world, even higher than some countries at war” (Gouws, 2022:2).

African Feminism, Human Rights and Gender Activism in Relation to Sexual Violence against Izintombi

It is within this increasingly violent context that this article stands as a call to reconsider whom to blame for this sexual violence scourge and to solicit vigorous activism against it on behalf of izintombi. The question therefore is: How could activism by African feminists, human rights advocates, and gender activists be made more effective in relation to sexual violence against izintombi? This is not to suggest that they have done nothing to condemn sexual violence in the country. For example, the SAHRC takes it as its mandated function to encourage respect for human rights and culture and to endorse the protection, development, and attainment
of such rights (2003:1). This commission has explored the opinions of both opponents and proponents of virginity testing in relation to the South African constitution. It has stood in solidarity with the tested virgins in an attempt to promote and protect their human rights in relation to virginity testing even though it is still debatable. The commission also pointed out that the “re-emergence of this cultural practice has led to concerns being raised about the potential invasion and violation of guaranteed constitutional rights of the young women who are tested” (SAHRC, 2003:3).

At the same time, the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE) and the SAHRC have voiced concerns and raised the alarm about the harmfulness of virginity testing. This too is still debatable because there may be strong and valid arguments against virginity testing from the side of its opponents, but there are equally strong and valid reasons from the side of its proponents. However, with the conviction that research and studies have provided sufficient information on virginity testing and the debate around it, this article does not aim to debate its right to exist as a practice. *Izintombi* have received more attention within the virginity testing discourse and advocacy. Yet, sexual violence seems to be mainly in the background of this discourse, despite it being even more harmful and life-threatening to the young women involved. There may be evidence that virginity testing is responsible for the perpetuation of the same violence against them. However, there is equally overwhelming research-based evidence that women across the age spectrum experience sexual violence. It therefore does not make much sense to blame virginity practices if other women go through similar experiences even if they may not be virgins. Therefore, the basic argument in this article is that virgins should not be criticized for preserving their virginity as if it is the only cause of rape. Instead rape should be seen for what it is and treated as such, i.e., a crime against women whether they are virgins or not. Otherwise, the virgins and their communities are stigmatized.

In its body of knowledge, African Women Theologians (AWT), one of the African feminist strands, has identified, critiqued, and condemned what they consider to be the root-causes of gender-related violence. Among other generic causes, they have identified patriarchy, cultural, and religious power dynamics perpetuated by gender inequality as deep-seated tendencies. Hence, they produce knowledge that condemns gender inequalities and patriarchal power dynamics. Gender inequality often saturates every social institution and organization and thus becomes a fundamental cause of hostility against women (Dube, 2007; Oduyoye, 2002). In their body of knowledge, AWT upholds that gender inequality is itself violence against women. Systemic gender inequality rationalizes prejudice against women and legitimizes systemic violence against them. AWT further condemns violence against women for its potential to compromise their quality of life through living in anxiety. AWT’s body of knowledge also affirms that most of African women’s talents, aptitudes, hopes, and desires in life are shattered, leaving them intimidated and vulnerable through gender-related violence (Mwaura, 2010; Kanyoro, 2002; Oduyoye 2002; Dube 2007).

AWT has suggested deconstructing and discarding patriarchal inclinations found in most of African cultures. However, AWT members are mainly academics whose knowledge production remains in the world of academia. There is very little if any effectiveness in bringing about social transformation in the plight of grassroots African women, including *izintombi*, through theory alone. While African feminism always carries an element of praxis with it, the regular hostile realities in the form of sexual violence demands proficiency in translating produced knowledge into praxis. This article serves as a contribution to knowledge production by calling for the strengthening of African feminist, human rights, and gender activism that will intentionally go beyond knowledge production. In this way, the struggle for women’s liberation from fears and anxieties mainly caused by gender inequality and sexual violence atrocities, will be upheld.
Methodological Framework and Research Design

This research was designed as an empirical, qualitative study located within an Afrocentric paradigm from feminist and indigenous perspectives. Qualitative and Afrocentric paradigms share similar characteristics of being interpretive and communicative of defined social settings (Mkabela, 2005). Furthermore, the interpretivist paradigm has a fundamental supposition that “the social world is constructed of symbolic meaning observable in human acts, interactions, and language. Reality is subjective and multiple as seen from different perspectives” (Ulin et al., 2005:16). Therefore, research participants described their social world according to their own subjectivity and experiences of that world.

The study’s location was limited to three research sites in the province of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). For the sake of representation of izintombi in a wider context of KZN, the first chosen location was Mthonjaneni at Melmoth, a remote rural area where ubuntombi was still widely observed. The second research site was a semi-urban location known as Nomkhubulwane Institute, a cultural site where most cultural activities are cherished and advanced. The third location was a church site in an urban city, Pietermaritzburg, where izintombi from the church observed and maintained their virginity through abstinence as a scriptural code of holiness. The actual research methods identified and used for data collection were semi-structured interviews in the form of one-on-one in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). These were conducted in different periodic episodes of a week or two per research site depending on the availability of the participants.

Permission to conduct the research was obtained from the gatekeepers of the three research sites. In spite of being an insider of the Zulu cultural milieu, my positionality was more of a learner than an expert in the sense that I had never been a tested virgin, so I hardly knew what it entailed. This was emphatically disclosed to the participants who were also assured that the study depended on the sharing of their knowledge and experiences of how they construe their social world. The research prompted enthusiastic and spontaneous responses, which enriched the collected data. The recruitment of the participants followed the purposeful sampling method (Marshall, 1996) with the help of the gatekeepers who personally knew participants. However, snowball sampling (Qualitative Research Methodology, 2013) also became suitable when most of the church participants declined the invitation to participate on account of the research encroaching on sensitive personal information. The rest of the recruitment process and data analysis are fully explained in (Ntuli, 2022) because it is the methodology of the same research.

Theoretical Lens

The most suitable theoretical lenses were postcolonial African feminist theory and cultural hermeneutics theory as espoused and represented by AWT. This theoretical lens is more relevant because the postcolonial feminist theorist’s identity is derived from the resistance of colonial control combined with patriarchal denigration. In this way the postcolonial feminist theorist is capable of representing women in the postcolonial discourse (Tyagi, 2014). In addition, the group under study were young women from an African ethnic group whose culture is often analogous to male-dominance (Ntuli, 2021). For instance, most African writing is not only chiefly male-centered but also portrays women as domesticated, passive objects that are customarily confined to motherhood (Tyagi, 2014). Furthermore, African literature since the 1960s glorified the past of African cultures to the extent that everything appeared utopian on the surface, yet African women’s struggles under patriarchal structures were disregarded (Tyagi, 2014).

Patriarchal and gender issues are key concepts in any feminist discourse because they disclose the inequality with which men and women are perceived in terms of the power relationship in any given circumstance (Oduyoye, 2007). There are many strands of feminism
even on the African continent itself (Ampofo et al., 2008). However, African feminists are mainly concerned with culture and identity (Ampofo et al., 2008). Therefore, this article focuses on the body of knowledge of African Women Theologians (AWT), who form a theological component of African feminism. Their viewpoint is similar to that of Code found in Ruiz (2017:1) who defines patriarchy as “a system in which females are subordinate to men, in terms of power and status, and which is based on the belief that ‘it is right and proper for men to command and women to obey.’” Like AWT, Gao (2013:928) upholds that the aim of “feminist theory in the final analysis is to achieve gender equality in all humanity.” In their body of knowledge, AWT have identified three components as problematic when it comes to gender equality, namely, culture, religious beliefs, and gender roles. In this case culture becomes the focus, as ubuntombi is a cultural practice. For instance, AWT upholds that African culture perpetuates male dominance and female derision (Kanyoro, 2002).

Furthermore, AWT indicates that “African women have identified culture as a favourite tool for domination” (Oduyoye, 2001:12). It is similarly observed that “African cultures, generally, operate to the advantage of men who are socialized to dominate family relations and structures” (Nyengele, 2004:33). Hence, AWT warns that “culture is a two-edged sword that gives women their identity, integrity, and way of life yet reinforces its patriarchal forms of domination on every woman and girl” (Kanyoro, 2002: 9). It is for this reason that AWT seeks to eliminate cultural idealism and romanticism through the advocacy of African feminist cultural hermeneutics (Kanyoro, 2002). Cultural hermeneutics is defined as a theory “that asserts that we need to be critical of those aspects of African culture which are life-denying [and repressive to women] while reclaiming those aspects, which are life-giving” (Materu, 2011:37). This body of knowledge demonstrates that constructed male superiority and female inferiority are endemic to most African cultures. Hence the advocacy of cultural hermeneutics blends well with an Afrocentric perspective since it also seeks “a critique from within and not an imposition from without” (Oduyoye, 2001:12).

Research Results/Findings

One major theme identified in the study was: “Challenges that militate against ubuntombi in contemporary South Africa.” Amongst such challenges is sexual violence in the form of rape and sexual assaults against izintombi. In the Nomkhubulwane FGD, the majority of izintombi raised their concern that rape is one of the leading causes of their fear and anxiety and an increasing threat to the cultural practice of ubuntombi. They stated that tested girls have to walk in groups and avoid isolated places to be safe from being raped. Thembani, an intombi from this group shared the following incident that heightened their fears:

We can no longer walk by ourselves as individuals especially at night because of the fear that we might be raped or killed. Just recently we had an incident in our neighbourhood in which an intombi (virgin) was captured, sexually assaulted and then brutally killed when she was coming back from a cultural activity one evening. She was later found dead with not only sexual bruises but also some sticks were inserted and left in her vagina.

While nobody could determine the reasons for such a gruesome and cruel attack on that young woman, some participants felt that the issue is about being a woman in a hostile environment where men think that they have unbridled sexual power over women’s bodies. This is unacceptable from the postcolonial feminist theoretical perspective.

The majority of izintombi in the Melmoth FGD also raised similar concerns, pointing out that, for fear of rape threats, they could no longer remain in their traditional attire with half exposed bodies after traditional ceremonies. Further discussions revealed that izintombi
participants were not convinced that it was the exposure of their bodies and their virginity that attracted rape towards them. Instead, they unanimously agreed that this issue of sexual violence relates to a deeper concept of morality and interpersonal relationships characterized by gender inequality. They considered this kind of gender violence to be exposing unprecedented degeneration in the moral fiber of South African society accompanied by lowered ethical responsibility particularly towards women. For instance, Nolwazi, one of the izintombi from this research site remarked: “Our grannies with their own long clothing\(^2\) are raped, little children in their nappies are being raped, this is not about being a virgin but it is about the rotten fibre of our society.”

It was also observed that in spite of expressing their joy at being izintombi, they seem to be so consumed by the fear of being raped that it has psychological effects on them. From the same site, for instance, Zandile, one of the interviewed izintombi from Nomkhubulwane was distraught over these threats as she exclaimed: “[M]y constant fear is about being raped since we are exposed as young people, it almost drives me insane that someone might decide to deprive me of what I value most in my life, my virginity.”

This excerpt reveals that tested virgins place tremendous value on their virginity such that any threat to it seems to be a source of distress. There may be a number of reasons for this as gathered from the interviews and FGD participants. These include but are not limited to the fear of losing the pride of ubuntombi as their cultural heritage and identity. They fear losing their cultural prestige and admirable social status and the incentives that come with the preservation of ubuntombi, such as being considered role models to their peers. There was also fear of premature pregnancy or getting sexually transmitted diseases including HIV infection. For instance, Thobeka, a university student and intombi from the church site articulated this fear as follows:

One of the research findings for instance confirmed that it is teenagers who are vulnerable to HIV and AIDS infections and other STIs because of the decrease of morality in society and so I do not want to be part of that. As far as I am concerned the diminishing tradition of ubuntombi as a cultural practice contributes to the pregnancy crisis in our society and that is another reason that makes me want to preserve myself as intombi.

The additional fear is about the trauma of being raped, the stigma that follows most rape survivors, and the blame for it as if their virginity attracted men to rape them. For instance, izintombi from Nomkhubulwane unanimously contended that it is not necessarily virginity that exposes them to the risk of being raped because it is not only virgins who face sexual assault or rape in South Africa. In their opinion, every woman faces the same risk, which worsens their apprehension daily. In her words, Nontando, another university student from Nomkhubulwane research site reiterated:

Rape is not necessarily about me as a virgin; in South Africa every woman is at a risk of being raped and that is what makes me scared. There was once a mystery that when a HIV positive man has sex with a virgin, he is cured of the virus. But it is no longer applicable now because I believe that people have been educated that it was not true. So my fear is that I am vulnerable to rape just like any other woman. The very high statistics of rape incidents in our country indicate that no woman is safe from rape; it is a matter of trusting God wherever we are, otherwise on our own we cannot make it.

\(^2\) Clothing that does not reveal any part of the body, which is often assumed to induce men to rape girls.
It is worth noting that, according to the participant in this excerpt, rape is not limited to virgins only but is a widespread occurrence that places all women at the same risk. While the participant acknowledges the existence of the myth that having sex with a virgin cures HIV-positive men, she considered it a thing of the past because she believed that people had been educated. What remains an indisputable reality is that rape statistics are on the rise as literature and crime statistics also show.

**Rape Myths**

In response to the existing rape myth that women sometimes attract men to rape them, for example through wearing mini-skirts, tight pants/skirts, bum-shorts, and even being found outdoors at night, the majority of izintombi felt that being raped is not the target’s fault. In their traditional attire izintombi are almost naked, which is culturally essential if intombi (the virgin) has nothing to hide about her body. It is for this reason that most of izintombi expressed their solidarity with those who have become prey to rapists in their cohort. The majority of them unanimously condemned blaming women for sexual violence. This in itself is an indication of deeply ingrained societal notions of women being made responsible for men's sexual violence. The majority of izintombi contested the notion that rape survivors attract rapists or invite sexual violation of their bodies in any way. Consequently, izintombi were of the opinion that rape survivors need not be treated any differently as if they are no longer part of their cohort. In her response that seemed to have summed up the feelings of the group, Welile, a student nurse and intombi from Nomkhubulwane stated:

The rape survivors need to get full support and assurance that it was not their fault that they were raped and they can still continue to consider themselves as unashamedly part of us. Even if she may not want to be tested for as long as she is prepared to preserve herself as intombi and receive Nomkhubulwane teachings, she is entitled to receive our full support as one of us. The person makes a personal decision to give up on being intombi and not through forceful sexual violation. That is why I say they are still full izintombi in spite of the rape incident since they never made a choice for it.

This response indicates a non-judgemental attitude towards rape survivors. Izintombi from the church site shared similar sentiments that even if the young woman might have been robbed of the physical dimension of her virginity, she still maintains her spiritual purity and virginity. They claimed to have learnt this from Mary’s Guild—a group of young women from the Catholic Church consisting of virgins who emulate Mary, the mother of Jesus. One of such teachings was that it was not only Mary’s physical purity that made her a virgin, but also her inner self and spirituality that was pure and virgin. They therefore felt that the rape survivor needs to know that it is not only about the intact hymen examined by the tester, but it is also about her innermost feelings and acceptance of herself as intombi. Having been robbed of that physical evidence through violation of her sexual right against her will, she can never be considered to be anything else but intombi. These were found to be healing responses to the rape survivors who may not be able to bear repressive responses such as being blamed for the rape or attracting it.

The majority of the participants were of the opinion that the rape survivor should not give herself over to becoming a prey to sexual predators just because of one rape incident. For instance, Nduduzo, an intombi from the same site expressed:
They need to be encouraged that the rape incident does not mean that life has come to an end… even though you might have been sexually violated and lost your virginity and it is painful. You can still live a perfect life if you maintain your plans and goals in life and do not allow yourself to lose twice, which is your virginity and the life you have always wanted to live. I would encourage them to forget the past that they can never change but focus on the future, which they can still do something about.

These encouraging words are worth hearing in the circumstance where a young woman might have thought she has lost everything by losing her virginity. As challenging as it might be to live with the rape stigma, with an attitude similar to that shown by izintombi, community members might make a lot of difference in the lives of rape survivors. Izintombi also expressed that they receive full support from their local leaders such as aunties and testing mothers. For instance, after the necessary procedures and the affirmation of the rape case, the young woman concerned would not be excluded from the other izintombi. Instead, legal proceedings would be pursued by their leaders and testers until perpetrators are brought to justice. However, it is not clear how many cases, if any, have been won against the perpetrators.

The Bill of Rights: Who Is to Carry the Blame?

In the Bill of Rights, section 12.1 (c) in particular promotes freedom “from all forms of violence from either public or private sources.” Additionally, section 12.2 (b) declares that “everyone has the right to bodily and psychological integrity, which includes the right to security in and control over their body” (South African Constitution, 1996). As well articulated as they are, these sections of the Bill of Rights of the South African Constitution remain mere lip service on the part of the government. This is because, contrary to these rights, some South African citizens such as women, including izintombi, live in constant apprehension of sexual violence as seen from the findings of this study. Rape perpetrators are often exonerated for the lack of evidence or errors in prosecuting cases in the legal system of South Africa (Phiri, 2000). While it is not clear who is to blame for such anxieties in women—the government or rape perpetrators—some researchers are of the opinion that virgins become main targets of rape and sexual violence in communities where virginity is observed (Gupta, 2000). This suggestion somehow implies that indigenous communities that observe ubuntombi (virginity) as a cultural practice are to blame for such high rape statistics and sexual violence in South Africa.

It also implies that izintombi carry the blame, that their virginity is the cause of the South African sexual violence crisis. However, from time immemorial ubuntombi was an indigenous Zulu practice but there is no convincing evidence that rape was a pervasive phenomenon within the Zulu cultural context as it currently is. Indisputably, literature has confirmed the myth that existed in the 1990s when HIV infections were rapidly growing, as alluded to by izintombi (Bruce, 2003; Leclerc-Madlala, 2002). However, research and observations from the participants’ responses in the findings prove that izintombi are not the only females under the threat of rape in South Africa. This is verified by rape statistics that are escalating across South Africa and not limited to the places where ubuntombi is still a common practice. As specified by some of izintombi in the findings, the very high statistics of rape incidents in South Africa indicate that there is hardly any safety from rape, which deprives women of their constitutional rights to safety and security. It is on these grounds that this article highlights the need for human rights advocates, African feminists, and gender activists to solicit ways and means of being more effective in curbing sexual violence. For justice to prevail for izintombi, the focus should not only be on virginity testing as a harmful practice, but also on vigorous activism to denounce sexual violence. This would alleviate blame against izintombi since it further subjugates them.
Gender Disparity and Power Dynamics as Contributing Factors that Require Activism

As was noted above, the body of knowledge of AWT indicates that gender imbalance and power dynamics between men and women greatly contribute to rendering women vulnerable to sexual violence because of their socially constructed inferiority (Haddad, 2009; Phiri, 2002; Oduoye, 2002; Baloyi 2010; Ntuli, 2021). Unequal power dynamics between perpetrators of sexual violence and *izintombi* is a plausible root cause of the escalating rape and sexual assaults of these young women. It is probably for the same reason that rape perpetrators target any female—including toddlers and elderly women—as cited by one of the participants. Besides being robbed of their virginity, these young women tend to be stigmatized and marginalized. They have to bear both external and internal bruises of rape because breaking the silence and sharing their plight does not eliminate the stigma and fear of reclaiming their identity as *izintombi*. This could be even more devastating in the situation where a rape incident also brought HIV infection to a young woman. It calls for a transformed attitude through love and acceptance towards them, as proposed by *izintombi* in the findings. However, the question remains: How could they hope to be loved and accepted in the community where male hostility against them is the source of their predicament? This calls for introspection and a change of the attitude towards women on the part of South African male cohorts. It is for this reason that serious activism on the part of human rights advocates, African feminists, and gender activists becomes a critical need. As custodians of human rights, they have always vigorously stood with tested virgins against virginit test. Equal engagement against sexual violence might make a difference for these young women, if taken seriously.

Conclusion

Living anxiously, not knowing which young woman is the next rape target and being blamed for it, is an unacceptable violation of the Bill of Rights for any SA citizen. Therefore, rape and sexual violence should be treated for what it is, as a crime against women, instead of exonerating perpetrators by blaming young women and their communities. It calls for a transformed mindset, particularly amongst male members of the community when it comes to treating women with dignity, respect, and life-giving cultural and social aspects. There is a dire need for the elimination and mitigation of gender inequality and imbalanced power dynamics between men and women. As research has shown, these are often fundamental causes of the plight of girl-children and women in the South African context. They need to be exposed, condemned, and discarded with no stone left unturned if a true solution is to be found. The main cause of concern for a postcolonial African feminist theorist is to deconstruct life-denying cultural and social practices against African women. With this deconstruction comes redemption of their humanity and reclamation of their identity as people of worth. Human rights advocates, African feminists, and gender activists have effectively contributed to the discourse on virginity testing. Similar dynamism towards condemning sexual violence against *izintombi* is essential, instead of allowing them to be blamed for practicing their cultural rights. It is thus imperative for these agents, particularly African feminists, to intentionally go beyond knowledge production towards praxis in addressing sexual violence against *izintombi*, particularly *izintombi*. Finding ways of rethinking, mindset-shifting, and redirecting praxis towards social transformation and bringing about gender justice cannot be overemphasized. This could lead to more effectiveness in curbing sexual violence against *izintombi*—a safety and security right for every South African woman citizen.
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